

Ireland's broken homes

IT COULD be argued that the Ireland recalled in the photographs of David Creedon does not exist anymore. This was a rural and highly-religious Ireland, one in which money was sparse and was therefore only spent with the greatest of caution. People saved hard for such luxuries as a dresser, a bicycle, a good suit, or a sewing machine.

His new book of photographs, *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed*, does not record this Ireland, as such, but rather its memory. The interiors he has captured on film are those of dwellings long abandoned, old homes whose contents have been left to moulder and decay. Creedon himself describes this Ireland as that of the 1950s and 1960s; in reality, it survived a lot longer, and in places it still exists, albeit on the edge of expiry, today.

It is an Ireland one can all too easily romanticise. In the light of our recent difficulties, it is tempting to speak of frugality and self-sufficiency as conditions to aspire to; but to previous generations, these were just other words for poverty.

Any of the houses recorded in Creedon's photographs might well have resounded to the clamour of 10 or 12 children in one generation, and then fallen silent as a solitary bachelor or spinster eked out their existence in the next.

One might be forgiven for believing that Creedon's is a bleak or dreary vision. Not so. Thankfully, he has eschewed the medium of black-and-white in favour of colour film. And as it happens, his images are full of the most extraordinary hues.

Beginning in 2005, Creedon devoted over two years to the *Faithful Departed* project, which began entirely by accident when he and a friend were driving in Sligo and Creedon asked that they stop so he could investigate an old house. Both doors were open, and it was clearly being used as a shelter by sheep. Creedon ventured upstairs and walked into one of the bedrooms. And then, he writes: "The hair on my neck stood up at the sight in front of me: the room was painted a bright blue and, in the corner, there was an open wardrobe that contained a pink dress."

The pink dress in the wardrobe in the bright blue room is just one of many extraordinary images in Creedon's book. Our forebears, it seems, were more in love with colour than we might usually imagine. They painted their parlours and bedrooms in startling shades of blue and green and pink and red — as far from the cliché of the white-washed cabin as one can imagine.

But they clung to tradition too. Certainly, they were religious. The image of Jesus Christ, with his sacred heart exposed on his chest, was a presence in almost every household. One can safely speculate that these were people who said the Rosary, attended mass and made

David Creedon's photographs of old country houses evoke the lives of their departed owners, writes **Carl Dixon**

their confessions monthly or weekly. Such was the rhythm of life in the Irish countryside; it was part of the glue that kept communities together.

There are other religious images in Creedon's photographs, pictures of popes and the Virgin Mary, and a number of statues of the Child of Prague — most of them headless, of course. There are few other ornaments in these houses, and no objets d'art. If people had books, Creedon has not photographed them. The only hint at a cultural life are the pianos falling apart in a couple of dilapidated parlours.

But there are many radios. Or wirelasses, as they were more likely called. Before the advent of television in 1965, and its spread across the countryside in the decades that followed, people tuned in almost exclusively to Radio Eireann, to hear the news or football matches or the light entertainment, drama and documentary programmes the station excelled at. Creedon recalls the catchphrase of Leo Maguire on the Walton's Programme: "If you feel like singing, do sing an Irish song."

There were other comforts too. Creedon includes a series of photographs of teapots, one decorated with flowers, another with shamrocks. And in another image, a naggin of Paddy whiskey and a blue cup sit side by side before a picture of Our Lady of Fatima. Then there are the old wood-burning stoves and the wooden chairs pulled up beside them. If there are ghosts in these houses, this is surely where one would find them, taking their ease



by the hearth. If Creedon came across photographs of the inhabitants of these houses, he does not include them here. But much of their memorabilia corresponds with that of the elderly. It seems likely that most of them simply saw out their lives in these houses, which then fell empty on their deaths.

But others, driven by frustration at their lives here, or the promise of better elsewhere, must have simply packed up and departed. Where did these people go? There are poignant clues in one photograph; a letter from the Internal Revenue Service, dated 1967, and a timetable for liner sailings for the Holland America Line in New York.

Elsewhere, Creedon includes a number of photographs of the possessions of one Mary Sullivan, who emigrated to America in

David Creedon is a Cork-born photographer. In Ireland, his works have been shown at the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Royal Hibernian Academy. Abroad, he has shown in national galleries and museums in New York, London, Chicago and Sarajevo, among other cities. Next month, his work will be shown at the National Portrait Gallery London as part of the Taylor Wessing Portrait Prize. www.davidcreedon.com



A selection of pictures from *Ghosts Of The Faithful Departed*, a new book by Cork-born photographer David Creedon, inset. The pictures were taken over two years in abandoned houses Creedon found around the countryside.



1930, boarding the White Star Liner RMS Cedric for New York. She travelled third class. When she returned 19 years later, she was prosperous enough to travel cabin class, where the menu offered caviar and wild Irish smoked salmon.

In the epilogue to *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed*, Creedon reminds us of the so-called prosperity of the Celtic Tiger years, observing wryly that it was "built on sand". Of our infamous empty estates, he remarks that "the new ghost houses are as silent as the ones I photographed, but at least the houses in this book were once homes."

■ David Creedon: *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* (The Collins Press) €19.99