

This life



A kitchen in a house in west Cork. The clock is stopped at 12.21, and next to it is an Irish Hospitals Sweepstakes ticket that could have changed someone's life forever



Boots in an abandoned kitchen in Co Kerry. A horseshoe has been nailed to the heel of the one of the boots to prevent wear

# The departed

Emigration has been a constant in Ireland since the Famine. Those left behind suffered hardship and passed away, their homes monuments to a bygone age. In his book of pictures from his acclaimed exhibition, *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed*, photographer David Creedon wakes the dead of these unoccupied homes

I was never really sure whether I found the *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* or if, in fact, they found me, but a few years ago I was sitting in the back seat of my friend's car as we drove through the back roads of Co Sligo. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of an old house and for no reason I asked my friend to stop the car.

As I walked back up the road I could see the house was deserted: the front door was open and it looked dilapidated. On entering the house, I could see that it was quite bare, the back door was also

open and the house was obviously being used by sheep as a shelter, as was evident by droppings on the floor.

I looked around, although there was not much to see and, out of curiosity, I ventured upstairs and, when I walked into one of the bedrooms, 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. Months later, I was driving on an isolated road in Co Kerry. In the distance I could see a house, which had the same look as the one in Sligo.

As I drove closer, I saw there were no windows or door. When I walked in to the house, I could see it was also being used by animals as a shelter and, like the house in Sligo, it was practically bare of furniture.

In one of the rooms, I found an old piano and on a chair next to it was a picture of the Sacred Heart. A couple of days later when I showed the photographs of both houses to a friend in West Cork, he declared that there was a house up the road 'just like those' and so began a journey that would take me more than two years to complete. Photographing these houses I

felt there was a story behind each one. I remember at one time listening to a radio interview with a politician who was advocating that the government give more financial aid to those Irish citizens living in Britain who were in need.

These young men and women of de Valera's Ireland had no option but to emigrate. Leaving home at 16 or 17 they travelled on cattle boats and lived in doss-houses. They worked as navvies on the roads and the building sites, sending money home when they could so that their families could survive and, by doing so, took a burden off the state.

Some became the vanishing Irish and today they are old, living alone, forgotten and in poverty.

"We forced and starved our young people out of this Republic with nothing except cardboard suitcases. Now we are leaving them old, homeless and alone to be buried as paupers in cardboard coffins," said Labour politician Emmet Stagg in 2004.

It was not always possible to find stories from all the houses I visited, but from time to time, I was able to piece together people's lives from letters that were scattered around, and from examining the Census records and the Ellis Island immigrants' database.

I also came across research by Dr Breda Gray of University College Cork in a project she had conducted, titled 'Breaking the Silence - staying at home in an emigrant society'. Dr Gray had compiled an oral archive of interviews with people who had stayed in Ireland in the 1950s and shared their experiences with her.

As I listened to the interviews, it was clear to me that, individually, the people had stories that were unique to them, but overall they had a common thread that bound them all together.

*Ghosts of the Faithful Departed*, by David Creedon, is published by the Collins Press, [www.collinspress.ie](http://www.collinspress.ie), priced €19.99

Above left: Two photographs of this room were taken 12 months apart; in that short space of time the house had greatly deteriorated

Right: this home has connections with America. Upstairs on the landing was a Star Spangled Banner with 48 stars - this dates the flag to somewhere between 1912 and 1959. The flag, fixed at an angle of 45 degrees, reminds Creedon of a mirror-image of Joe Rosenthal's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima

