

The Traveller Ethnicity Quilt: An Interview with Missie Collins

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Abstract

Missie Collins is an Irish Traveller. She is a Pavee Point Primary Healthcare for Travellers worker. Missie and a group of Traveller women designed and handmade the Traveller Ethnicity Quilt to mark the official recognition of the ethnicity of Travellers by the Irish Government in March 2017. This interview took place on Friday 19th November 2017.

MON: *Missie, were you involved in the bid to get ethnic recognition?*

MC: I suppose every Traveller in Ireland has been involved in it. This campaign has been going on for thirty years. I have been lobbying for thirty years myself for ethnicity. My role has been to raise it everywhere, in meetings with Ministers or whoever. I would always be talking about how ethnicity is so important for Travellers to give us our respect. One day in particular when the last Taoiseach (sic, Enda Kenny) was in, I had a few words with him about our ethnicity. He said, "We're working on it". I said hold on, Taoiseach, you're working on it. We've been working on it for thirty years! So a photograph was published all over with me saying this and pointing at him! I have always been campaigning for ethnicity since I started at Pavee Point and I'm here for over 25 years. My brother took a case in England for ethnicity there and he won it.¹ Irish travellers were granted legal protection under the Race Relations Act. In Pat's case, the court held that the Travellers met the two essential conditions, (i) possessing a long shared history which distinguished them from other groups, and (ii) having a distinct cultural tradition of their own. Pat phoned me recently and asked, "Missie did you get your respect over there yet?" That is what the recognition of ethnicity is to us. When I meet other Travellers around the country, they ask, "Missie, what is this ethnicity and will it make any difference to

¹ P. O'Leary and others v Allied Domecq and others (unreported), 29 August 2000 (Case No CL 950275-79)

important and in between the spokes, everyone came up with their own idea and we hand sewed it, stuck on to it, and things like that. One of the spokes mentions language. We have our own language, Cant, which is very important to us, especially to the older people. When I was growing up, it was the everyday language for families. It is not used as much today because the young people don't use it as much. My generation spoke it when we were going around with or mothers on farms and that. I use it with my grandchildren when they come in. My five year old granddaughter knows the odd word. That's what keeps the language alive. My brother Pat, over in England, is very active in keeping the language alive. Pat went to school here in Ireland years ago and he won a scholarship. He was the best in the school which was very unusual for a Traveller before the 1960s. He is the father of ten and has loads of grandchildren and great grandchildren all over England.

Religion is represented on the wheel by a holy well. Religion is very important to us. I have statues around me in my own home. We go on pilgrimages and we'll cross the country to visit blessed wells. We have great beliefs in cures. If any of my grandchildren are sick, my family will come in to me and ask me to talk to the priests that I know. If I was going for an operation, I would let them know. We would never go under an operation without telling the priests. We talk to the nuns as well. There was an old nun called Sister Carmel in Gardiner Street where we go to mass. She was ninety-six years of age and we would consider her a saint. When she died last year, we went over to her wake. I was in Medugorje three times and Lourdes three times. I was in Father Pio's place. The religious beliefs are very strong among the young people too, first communion and confirmation are very important to us. Marriage is very important to the girls. They have to be over eighteen to get married now. It does happen that girls live with boys without getting married but it is rare.

The symbol on the quilt for family is the fire. Years ago, Travellers would all sit around the fire and the women would make their own big aprons with embroidery on them. That's a potent symbol.

MON: *Where does the Quilt hang?*

MC: The Quilt at the moment is hanging in Pavee Point in the main hall. When you come in the door, it's in the main hall on the right. Loads of bodies have seen it up to now. Anyone who comes in from abroad or any other place will see it and if I'm not around to explain it, someone else will explain it.

JB: *It is a beautiful piece of work and one which will go down in history. It will end up hanging in the museum because of what it is celebrating.*

MC: If that happens, and the more political things get, it would be great because Travellers have been kept down. We have been kept under the doormat for too long. And we're not included in everything, you know. If you look at the discrimination: education, accommodation, unemployment, health; all those things. We want equality. I don't just want it for me. I want it for my grandchildren or my great grandchildren. My young grandson is looking for work and it is hard for him to get an interview because of his address. There is a lot of unemployment among the young people. We have had a doctor and a barrister but these are the rare stories. We all put a big emphasis on education and being accepted now but if there is a negative news story in the media about something a Traveller has done, Travellers all over the country suffer for it.

JB: *How do the Travellers feel about the DNA research by Dr Gianpiero Cavalleri of the Royal College of Surgeons that puts the date of separation of the settled community as back some 420 years and not from the Famine as had been thought?*

MC: Going back, there was never any history kept by the Travellers but the Travellers all knew this anyway. My brother always says that we should have a written history. We've been around from long, long before twelve by sixty years so at least twelve generations back. They always used to say that we were drop outs from the famine but Travellers have been here going back centuries and centuries.

MON: *Did you see the documentary that John Connor made about the Irish Travellers?*

MC: Going around the country? Sure I was involved in it! I went with one of the lads from Pavee Point, Michael, and my grandson. I had a cap on my head as it was a very cold day. I brought them down to the holy well and showed two camps belonging to us.

MON: *How did you feel about that documentary?*

MC: I felt grand. I was very proud and I have to get a tape of that because my brother will want it in England. It brought back a lot of memories, especially because now all my family are in England and my father and mother are dead. I was reared up that way with my brothers and sisters. The relationship that was there between the Traveller and the settled population was very poor. If you remember, the first camp I showed had a notice, "No Dumping and No Travellers". We saw a lot of that when I was growing up. It shows you what we had to put up with for years.

MON: *Missie, now that you have recognition as an ethnic minority, what are the next steps?*

MC: Well I'm hoping that a lot will come out of it. It's very early and we only had the launch in March. It will give us more respect. At the moment there are a lot of things and they're not going our way either. We're campaigning all the time. All the time we have to keep struggling even for funding here in Pavee Point, but there is a lot more to build on now.



Traveller Ethnicity Pin