

Drumshanbo's An Tóstal A legend in its own time

Eamonn Daly

WHEN NELSON MANDELA was released from Robbin Island in 1990, having spent twenty seven years in prison there, it became a common practice for people to surmise on the first questions that he might have asked on his release. Two of the more humorous but unlikely questions that he might have posed were—"Did Tipp (hurlers) get out of Munster yet?" and "Are they still holding *An Tóstal* in Drumshanbo?" Ah, yes, Drumshanbo and *An Tóstal* have the same enduring relationship as the lyrics have with the music of a much loved song.

Drumshanbo was, until 2011, the last outpost and beacon of *An Tóstal*, a national festival that was developed, promoted and eventually launched by Bord Fáilte in April 1953. Its purposes were to extend the tourist season and thus attract more foreign visitors to the country. It was also hoped that *An Tóstal* would promote public interest in tourism as an industry. In 1953, the festival period covered three weeks (April 5th-26th).

It is difficult nowadays to comprehend just how big *An Tóstal* was in its early years. On 6th April 1953, almost 150,000 people filled the length of O'Connell St, Dublin to witness "The national ceremonial

opening" by President Sean T Kelly, and the "memorable display of pageantry and spectacle that followed". Couriers, in a fleet of new cars and escort cars equipped with public address systems, set out from Dublin to spread the Tóstal tidings to the four provinces. The Post Office issued 45,000 *An Tóstal* commemorative stamps. Gateaux (Dublin) produced 'Tóstal Hostess Cake' and 'Tóstal Log'. Lairds of Drumshanbo produced special pots of 'An Tóstal Marmalade'. The Irish Independent published a free 48 page supplement to mark the inauguration of *An Tóstal* and declared that, "No matter where one travels, *An Tóstal* spirit is abroad". Almost every sporting body organised a Tóstal event. The Tóstal spirit was not confined to organising events. *The Leitrim Observer's* Drumshanbo correspondent remarked, "If *An Tóstal* has done nothing else, it certainly has given Drumshanbo a new look. Virtually every business house and private residence has got a coat of paint, and most of them are displaying window boxes. That



the festival has aroused our civic pride and spirit is self-evident. The cherry blossom trees, kindly donated by Messrs C S Laird and R A Laird, were planted this week and have added much to the general appearance of the town”.

The Leitrim Observer reflected in its editorial of 2 May 1953 that “Throughout Leitrim, the Tóstal movement spread like a prairie fire, and every town and village put on its own special programme”. Drumshanbo, Carrick, and Mohill presented full programmes. Drumshanbo, not for the first time, featured “Ireland’s own Ballad Singer”, Delia Murphy, in concert for two nights, while Carrick had Michael O’Duffy (tenor) as its star performer.

In 1954, the national organisers presented a monumental ‘Pageant of St Patrick’ that spanned two days and four locations, Drogheda, Navan, Slane, and Tara. 50,000 spectators attended the pageant in Tara. After 1954, An Tóstal, as a national festival, went into decline. By 1956, only fifty “centres” throughout the country participated. A committee was convened in July 1958 to discuss the future of *An Tóstal*.

This group concluded that An Tóstal had not been successful in extending the tourist season and, therefore, did not justify the considerable expense involved. From there on, Bord Fáilte’s policy was that Ireland was a land

of festivals. And it was a claim that was not a groundless one, because apart from presenting a more positive image of the Irish people and improving community spirit and civic pride, An Tóstal left us with a legacy of festivals that were spawned still during the 1950s, some of which play a notable part in the social and cultural life of the country: All-Ireland Drama Festival in Athlone (1953), The Tour of Ireland (Cycle Race) 1953, Cork Film Festival (1956), Dublin Theatre Festival (1957), National Tidy Towns Competition (1958), Rose of Tralee Festival (1959).

With the proliferation of local and regional festivals, *An Tóstal* as a festival brand name had disappeared by 1965, except, of course, in Drumshanbo. Its survival in Drumshanbo was largely due to Joe Mooney. If the word ‘resilient’ had not already entered common usage, it would have been coined to describe Joe. He devoted much of his time to working for Drumshanbo. He was a prototype of what is now

called a community activist or community worker. Some prototypes are never bettered. Joe was one of those. Few causes fired his enthusiasm and resilience more than his love for An Tóstal.

Well-known newspaper columnists such as Des Rushe and George Burrows came to admire Joe’s fighting spirit, and in their columns they included his many press releases on the state of Drumshanbo, An Tóstal, angling, etc. On one occasion, an Irish Times editorial praised its “Drumshanbo correspondent”, Joe Mooney, for his work with An Tóstal. He had a sure sense



BORDERING THE AN TÓSTAL CENTRES WHO PARTICIPATED UNDER THE NAME 50 YEARS AT THE 50th Celebrations in 2002



and touch about what people would like to see at a festival. In 1955, he introduced 'An Tóstal All Ireland Ballad Singing Competition' to the programme of events, followed by 'An Tóstal All Ireland Céilí Band Competition' in 1957. Mr J E Greevy (Bord Fáilte) said that "Drumshanbo's Céilí Band Competition ranks with the Cork Film Festival as one of the major Tóstal attractions in the Provinces". Underpinning the whirlwind of activity that surrounded much of Joe's life was his wife Eva who was a brilliant, astute organiser. Joe passed away in 1988. Any doubts that may have lurked about the future of An Tóstal were quickly dispelled when a new committee came on board. Eva and her son, Paschal, continued to be involved. Sadly, Eva died in 2008.

Successive committees have been inspired by the solid tradition carved out by Joe Mooney as Secretary, M J Kiernan as Chairman and others in the early Tóstal Councils. They have used this tradition as a guidepost to frame their response to the economic seasons and feisty trends that have prevailed during their time in office. But a guidepost is not a formula, and each committee has had to be innovative and adventurous, not only in its choice of programme but also in the implementation of it. Successive committees have trumped this challenge, none more so than the present dynamic committee which obviously thrives on teamwork and its core-belief—"a job worth doing

is worth doing together".

Even if one is to use attendances as the only benchmark, *An Tóstal* in Drumshanbo is still as relevant and as popular as it has ever been. The official opening, the parade, the fireworks display, the open-air concerts during the June Bank Holiday Weekend, continue to attract huge crowds to the town. The Art Exhibition, An Tóstal Feis and the rest of the festival programme offer a variety of activities that find a ready response amongst people in our community and further afield who appreciate what is provided and who commend the generous, voluntary work of the committee members who make it possible.

The committee's excellent website www.antostalfestival.ie gives us an evocative record of past An Tóstals, informs us of the present *An Tóstal* and its fund—raising events and offers a well—considered preview of next year's programme.

The sixtieth anniversary hovers invitingly in 2013. Already the committee is planning a commemorative booklet to honour the sixtieth An Tóstal in June 2012. The booklet may even become a book, because, after sixty years in anyone's life there is a long story to tell, and An Tóstal or 'Ann'—as we affectionately call her in Drumshanbo—is no exception.

An Tóstal Committee 2011

Hon. President: *Paschal Mooney*
 Chairperson: *Kathleen McManus*
 Assistant Chairperson:

Hubert McCormack

Secretary: *Ciara O'Connell*

Assistant Secretary: *Mary Ruedel*

Treasurer: *Raymond Gilmartin*

Assistant Treasurer: *Sean Nolan*

PRO: *Paul Gibbons*

Assistant PRO: *Annie McManus*

Feis Co-ordinators:

Ann O'Donnell, Odette Lynch:

Committee members:

Sean McLoughlin,

Henry Sorohan, Joe Gunning,

Brian Foley, Thomas Scollan,

Jim Scollan, Hugh James Gallagher,

Brendan Meehan, Francis McKeon,

Tadhg Mulvey, Kevin Lee, Joe Molloy,

James Durkin, Deborah Kehoe,

Alan Foley.

Footnote: Since this article was written earlier in the year, Salthill (Co Galway) revived its An Tóstal Festival last May (2011), the first time it has been held there since 1959. For forty four years—since 1967—Drumshanbo has had the 'role' of being the only place in Ireland to continue holding *An Tóstal* since its inception in 1953. It is a 'role' that Drumshanbo is now delighted to share with Salthill.





Celebrating the memory of Fr Mychal Judge in Keshcarrigan



The Christy McCaffery Memorial Perpetual Shield presented by Josephine McCaffery to Charles Reilly, Mohill for Champion Sheep Of The Show

Pets corner at Mohill Show



Left: Glamorous Granny 1st Mai Prendergast 2nd Jennifer Logan

Right: James Mahon, Tony O Reilly, Joe Dugdale, George Argue, Anna Dugdale, Teresa O Reilly & Irene Argue

Below Right: Sean Heaney presents a drawing, by Sandra Vernon, of Fenagh Abbey to Fr Bernard Hogan



PHOTOS:
THÉRÈSE FOY