

## ENTERTAINMENT IN HISTORIC MANORHAMILTON VENUES

*Margaret Connolly*

THE SPIRIT OF the Irish is indomitable. Examples can be cited from any period throughout the course of our troubled history, but let's dwell on the turbulent era of war and conflict, of unemployment and emigration, which was 20th century Ireland. Our infant nation, born of rebellion in 1916, endured, on its home ground, the War of Independence, the Civil War, the pain of partings and farewells in the fifties and eighties; and, on the world stage, the sacrifice of her many young sons to the cause of peace in the two great World Wars. Yet, we performed and entertained.

### All the World's a Stage

The 17th century marked the first theatrical production in Ireland. 'Gorboduc', a play by Irish playwrights Thomas Backville and Thomas Norton was presented in Dublin Castle by Lord Mountjoy in 1601. The 20th century is, however, regarded as the greatest century of Irish dramatic creativity and influence. The Irish Dramatic Movement gave to the world major playwrights such as Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory, O'Casey and Beckett. Many of our best dramatists and actors, for example, Oliver Goldsmith, G B Shaw and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, moved to London to further their careers but others



### MANORHAMILTON DRAMATIC CLUB 1912-1913

*Back Row:* M Connolly, Phil Gilgunn, J Nangle, Pat Denning

*Middle Row:* Paddy Munday, Frank Lee, Paddy McKenna, Jim Mc Gowan, Matt Feighley, Willie Ferguson, James Loughlin.

*Front Row:* — Mulligan, James Kivlehan, John White, James Dolan, — Farrelly, James McSharry.

planted productive seeds in the native soil. The importance of the establishment by Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore and Edward Martyn in 1899 of the Irish Literary Theatre, which subsequently became Dublin's Abbey Theatre, cannot be over estimated. Micheál Mac Liamóir and Hilton Edwards founded the Gate Theatre in 1928, a year which also saw the birth of An Taidhbhearc, this latter of particular importance as a stage for plays written in Irish.

Although far removed from the vibrancy of the capital, in matters of drama Leitrim was not left behind. As early as 1912 Manorhamilton Amateur

Dramatic Club was busy with rehearsals. Under the capable direction of Fr Charles Comey C they staged in St Clare's Hall, 'a magnificent drama' entitled 'The Eloquent Dempsey' as a fundraiser for the local football and hurling teams. A further production took place later that year when, on Tuesday December 3rd, the audience in St Clare's Hall were kept 'in roars of laughter' with 'The Haunted House', the comic character being J Kivlehan. Other names from that club were M Connolly, Phil Gilgunn, J Nangle, Pat Denning, Paddy Munday, Frank Lee, Paddy McKenna, Jim McGowan, Matt Feighley, Willie Ferguson,

James Loughlin, John White, James Dolan, James McSharry and P J Ferguson. The departure from Manorhamilton of Fr Comey in 1913 most likely hastened the demise of this group.

A look at the 1930's shows the Manorhamilton Premium Players staging 'Paul Twynning' in 1932, a show, which the *Leitrim Observer* reported, brought 'healthy plaudits and unrestrained laughter'. Tommy O'Donnell took part as did two new actors, Miss Roche and Miss Mac Giblin. Just two years later, on Friday 30th November 1934, the Players were treading the boards with 'Captain Jack'.

The 1940's saw a great resurgence in drama with the emergence of the town's Breffni Players. For a decade or more this talented group excelled and entertained with both comedy and tragedy. 'The New Gossoon' in 1943 was most likely their first production and at the other end of their life span, the tragedy 'Maurice Harte' in 1952, their last. The Spring of 1948 was action filled for the Breffni Players and in February of that year they took to the drama circuit presenting O'Casey's 'Juno and the Paycock' at the Western Drama Festival in Tubbercurry. Recalling the cast of 'Juno' will serve as a fitting memorial to the memory of this worthy group—Frank McGuinness, Stephen Murphy, Teresa Gilbride, Bridie Knaggs, Hugh McKenna, Mona Pryal, Miss L Martin, Dessy Mullaney, Andy McGovern, Fabien O'Donnell, Mick O'Connell, Vincent Gilbride, Frank Croal, A McGovern, Teresa Cullen and

K Kelly. When performed in Manorhamilton there was a slight variation in the cast with the addition of Lena McGoldrick and Larry McDermott and a pianist, the talented Charlie McSharry.

No sooner had the Breffni Players taken their well deserved retirement than another group sprang into life. The Sean McDermott Dramatic Troupe was the brainchild of Joe McKiernan and came into being in 1954, its purpose, to raise funds for the local football club. Their first production, that year, 'The Real McCoy', with producer Tomás O'Duibhir, had in its cast Mary Dolan, Jim Meehan, Joe McKiernan, Eithne Mulvey, Mary Haslette, Sean Flynn and Larry McMorrow. For the next two decades this dedicated troupe gave to the area a feast of fabulous entertainment with plays like 'The Able Dealer' (1955), 'Paid in his Own Coin' (1957), 'The Money Doesn't Matter' (1963/64), 'All the King's Horses' (1965), 'The Bugle in the Blood' (1966), 'The Righteous are Bold' (1967), 'Home is the Hero' (1968/69) and 'Juno and the Paycock' in 1972. Over those years other names appeared in the cast—Shay Ferguson, May Cryan, Mick O'Dell, Patsy Parkes, Yvonne Lambe, Dymrna Mulligan, Michael Fox, Den McGuinness, Oliver Haslette, Barbara Lambe, Sean Farrell, Patsy Ferguson, Rena Meehan, Helena Dolan, Tom Bredin, Ann Farrell, Marie Bredin. In the sixties, a brother of the De la Salle order, Brother Anthony (now Fr Tom Culloty) took over as producer.

A talented priest in Glenfarne, Fr Patsy Young, brought together the dramatic talents of Glenfarne and Manorhamilton in 1975 to form the Cloonclare Players. Several detailed and informative articles tracing the life story of this All-Ireland award-winning group have appeared in previous editions of the *Leitrim Guardian* and so I will not recount their many successes but in tribute let it be said that from their first production, 'Many Young Men of Twenty' to their last, 'The King of Friday's Men' in 1995, the word 'professional' was earned and worn by them with pride. What a century of drama!

### **And the Band Played On**

From the mid to the late 19th century and into the 20th century, the tradition of marching bands became firmly established, a tradition which has thrived ever since. Football matches, festivals and parades all reserve a slot for the distinctive sound and the colourful display of these bands. For the first recorded modern half-time show by a marching band we look to America and find it given by the University of Illinois's Marching Illini in 1907. Despite the trials and tribulations of the 20th century, Manorhamilton produced in that period five such bands, their full story already told in Dominic Rooney's article in the 2006 edition of the *Leitrim Guardian*. As early as 1900, the 1st Castle Street Band appeared on the scene. Its life span was, perhaps, twelve years and a photograph from 1903 shows us the then members in their

uniform of caps and sashes, the musicians drawn from well remembered Manorhamilton families – Francie McSharry, John Wilson, Willie Ferguson, Jack Harte, James and Pat Mitchell, Tom and John McGloin and Johnny Harte.

In the eighteen and nineteen hundreds the ravages of drunkenness on a population bedevilled by poverty and emigration, were widespread. In an effort to control this curse, Fr Theobald Mathew of the Capuchin Order, founded a Total Abstinence Society in Cork in 1838. The work of the Society had a remarkable impact on the condition of the Irish people and only ended with the coming of the Great Famine in 1845. After the Famine and the swift decline of teetotalism, there was little enthusiasm for another such crusade and temperance was favoured over teetotalism. In 1898 the Jesuit, Fr James Cullen, founded the Pioneer Total Abstinence League in Dublin. This was the first temperance association to insist on a two year probation as a test of purpose and a guarantee of stability. The association had the blessing of Rome and in 1905 the Irish hierarchy called on the Capuchins to once again take up the challenge. Their vigorous and sustained efforts bore fruit and temperance societies sprang up all over the country. In that same year of 1905 a sum of £20 was bequeathed by Fr Stephen McTernan PP Killasnett to the local movement and within a year, grocer, James McMorrow, opened a temperance hotel and restaurant at Lower

Main Street. The coming of the afore-mentioned Fr Charles Comey further progressed the work, with the founding of the Manorhamilton Brass and Reed Temperance Band in 1908. Its lifetime was approximately that of Fr Comey's curacy in Manorhamilton and it did not long survive his departure to Ballyjamesduff in 1913. Names associated with this band were James 'Tiger' Meehan, Bernie Brian Rooney, Jamsie McSharry, Francie McLoughlin, Joe McLoughlin, Joe 'Bacon' Keaney, 'Wee' John Rooney, Jimmy Spelman, John 'Jig' Wilson and Paddy Munday.

Following Superintendent Bergin's arrival in Manorhamilton in 1940, his involvement in local activities became total. With the Thompsons, Jimmy and Georgie, Frank McGuinness, Joe Travers and Frank Fox, the next band was born. This was the Manorhamilton Brass Band with bandmaster, Joe Cummins. The practice venue was, initially, Connolly's Hall and later St Clare's Hall. For eight years they entertained both the town and the surrounding area and despite the crippling effects of unemployment and the resulting farewells to the homeland, survived up to the mid fifties.

Having, by far, the longest performance life was the 2nd Castle Street Band, more usually referred to as the Castle Street Fife and Drum Band. The idea which kick-started this group came from Paddy McSharry, son of Francie, the base drummer with the 1st Castle Street Band. With the help of Tom Dominic



Rooney, Mick O'Connell, Paddy Wilson, Pat Mitchell and Tom Fox, Paddy's idea became a reality and for twenty years the strains of this band resounded throughout the North Leitrim Glens. Their passing away in 1976 is best described in the words of Pat Mitchell who said of the band 'It never broke up, just faded away'.

Those who attended Manorhamilton Boys' School in the period 1958 to 1965, may have been fortunate enough to have been members of the De La Salle Brass Band. Drawn from pupils of 5th and 6th classes, it was the brainchild of Br Jerome. Although only here for two years, Br Jerome set the band on a firm footing, oversaw its first performance in 1959 and left it in the capable hands of Br Anthony until it ceased to play in 1965.

All the above bands were, as one would say, the 'official' ones but others existed too. It is interesting to note that in the 1930's there were, in many places, bands with the common name of Melody Bands. Killargue had one as had Glenfarne, Leitrim Village, Drumshanbo and our own town. It was reported in the local paper that the important event of a Donkey Derby on June 20th 1939, was followed by a dance, with music supplied by Manorhamilton Melody Band. Admission 1s/6d. One cannot conclude the subject of bands without giving a mention to the 1950's group, the Cluainin Trio. The original members were Peter McKenna (accordion), one of the Daly brothers from Creevelea (fiddle) and Brendan Wilson (drums). Over the following years Peter McKenna was the constant while Mick Bennett, Patsy McBride and Michael Clancy replaced one another as the necessity arose. Many remember those memorable nights of Ceilí and Old Time in St Clare's Hall with the Trio on stage. And for the lucky, a stroll up the Ross Lane completed the night's enjoyment!

### Sing, Sing a Song

As with its drama groups and bands, the choral and concert scene in the span of 20th century Manorhamilton was indeed vibrant. A notice in the *Leitrim Observer* in February 1906 sets the tone for the following decades. On the 3rd of that month, entertainment to 'brighten the lives of the inmates of the Workhouse',

was organised by Rev T C Connolly CC and Rev M J Portens BA. It was held in the dining hall of that institution and the Master of the Workhouse provided refreshments to the inmates. Artists on the night were Miss Stockdale, Ms McDermott, Mr O'Farrell, Mr F E Meehan, Miss Lily Rutherford, Mr J P McGuinness, Miss Gibson, Mr James Dolan, Miss Murphy, Miss Templeman and Mrs Conboy. What a Christian and thoughtful gesture by the residents of the town!

In February 1939, Manorhamilton Musical Society was in its first season, having opened its activities in September 1938 under the conductorship of Mr H Franklin, Sligo. Weekly rehearsals were held for both choir and orchestra in preparation for that all important premier concert on February 15th, the first part of which would be broadcast by the Dublin Broadcasting Station. The 38 strong choir had 17 sopranos, 9 contraltos, 6 tenors and 6 basses. The programme tells us that the orchestra was almost totally local too. 1st violins—Mrs O'Carroll, Miss Kelly, Mrs H McGowan, Miss E Clarke, Miss S Duncan, Mr F Fox and Mr G Ferguson. 2nd violins—Dr Fitzgerald, Miss L McGovern, Miss Leonard, Mr J Travers and Mr P McManus. Cello—Mr A O Daly and Mr M Franklin. Bass—Mr H H Hallows. The pianist was Mrs Dillon NT. The programme included compositions by Bach, Mendelssohn, Hamilton Harty, Percy French and others. The dancers, all pupils of Mr O'Donohue's School of

Dancing, Ballyshannon, were M Lynott, D Gormley, T McPoilin, T McSharry, T Gallen, B Knaggs, E Leonard, T Gilbride, M O'Connell, J Gormley, P Lee and Mr Flynn. Another major contributor to the show, The Breffni Ceilidhe Band, which later that year became 1st prizewinners at Sligo Feis Ceoil, was also drawn from the society's members. The performance did not disappoint and congratulatory messages were received from places as far apart as London, Cardiff and Dublin. Mr Harold R White, a Dublin music critic, writing in a Dublin newspaper, praised the Society highly saying 'It is a matter of great satisfaction that Manorhamilton possesses such fine vocal and instrumental material and that they study music of such a good standard'.

In 1910 a small group of educated and mostly Protestant women in Co Wexford founded an organisation which, from its conception, worked to better the lives of its members and the general public. This was *The United Irishwomen*, a name given it by Susan Mitchell, herself a descendant of the Cullen family of Skreeney House, Manorhamilton. In 1935 it was decided to adopt a new name, the *Irish Countrywomens' Association (ICA)*. The inspiration for the association initially came from the Co-Operative movement whose founder was Horace Plunkett. Life for the women of Ireland at the time was, in the main, one of hardship and drudgery. The ICA brought these ladies hope, friendship, support and fun. Its promotion and encouragement of choral singing, set dancing, art, drama and creative writing had a phenomenal effect on the



■ **The Micas**

lives of women and on Irish society in general. Manorhamilton ladies formed their guild in 1945 and while we pay tribute to its many worthwhile activities, let us look specifically at its contribution to music. Mrs Harding is credited with starting the ICA Choir here. It blossomed under her guidance and, with the musical expertise of Mrs Ennis and Marie McGowan, claimed prizes at Feiseanna and other competitive events. An off-shoot of the choir, the Micas, came into being in 1969. The clever name, which mirrored its parent, Manorhamilton ICA was thought up by Una Kilbane. The original members were Maura O'Donnell, Dympna Sheehan, Mrs Ennis, Maureen Rooney and Una Kilbane and it later down sized to three—Maura, Dympna and Una. Eileen Daly was the wardrobe mistress and the ever helpful Mrs O'Carroll, enlisted the expertise of Máire Ní Scolláí to perfect the gaeilge. The sweetness and melodious harmony of the Micas charmed audiences up to about 1973.

Just about this time a new Minister, Rev David Godfrey, had taken up residence at the Church of Ireland Rectory. His

enthusiasm and musical expertise brought into being a new choral group, the Breffni Singers. I was privileged to be a member and for 20 years after Rev Godfrey's departure from Manorhamilton, its musical director. 2002 saw the winding up of this group which, for almost thirty years, sang everything from Bach to the Beatles and from Mozart to Lloyd Webber. Concerts, competitions, weddings, funerals, ordinations and jubilees were all covered on the journey. The memories of special performances are vivid—those annual Christmas Carol Concerts with Drumshanbo Church Choir and Strabane Brass, the trips to North Wales Choral Festival in Llandudno, the wonderful 'Slice of Ireland with a Drop of Kavanagh' concert in the National Concert Hall in 1991, Gay Byrne's last Christmas Carol Concert broadcast from St Patrick's Church, Drumshanbo in 2000. It was an honour to be part of a century of dedicated performers.

**Venues, Usual and Unusual** Entertainment took place in some unexpected places. Manorhamilton Courthouse, dating back to 1819, served more than the judiciary. A concert there in 1893 was so well attended that 'two persons sat on the canopy over the justices' seat, where angels should be and seemed to enjoy their exalted position'. It was probably no less crowded on the occasion of Percy French's visit there. And on the 30th of November 1909, a dance was held in the Grand Jury Room with pianist Miss R Gaffney assisted by Miss A Conboy, Miss G Templeman and Miss

Tate. The revellers, we are told, 'danced until dawn'.

In the latter half of the 1920's two new venues became available. McGloin's Hall and Connolly's Hall. Both catered for meetings, concerts and dances. McGloin's, built by Haslettes, functioned up to the 1950's and was demolished when Jim McKenna bought the neighbouring premises, McManus's, in 1967. Michael Connolly, in opening his hall, also introduced the town to a variety of shows. Jack Doyle, the 'Gorgeous Gael', performed there and audiences experienced the first chorus girls in town with the coming of Gracie Daniels and his road show. Though it was strictly never a cinema, the showing of films was a most popular innovation. In the pre-war days Ernie Coats from Donegal brought the films and his son operated the projector which had to be covered with wet sacks to keep it cool, No Health and Safety then! Later the job of projectionist went to Ali McGovern. The youth of the town scanned the notice board on the footpath outside and tuned in to hear the town crier, Josie Murphy, to see what was showing. Money was scarce in those days and to have the admission price, jam jars were collected and sold to Killasnett Co-Op for 3d each.

A notice in the *Leitrim Observer* in 1950 read 'Manorhamilton has its Cinema'. T R Armstrong had built the Park Cinema, with films showing on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday and a free matinee on St Stephen's Day. The staff is well remembered and one in

particular added to the night's fun with her witty quips! With Mickey Gilmartin, the projectionist, were Willie Lee, Girlie Holland, Maggie Rogan and Molly McGuinness. Two special events of the non-film variety which took place in the Park Cinema deserve a mention. For one week in the summers of the mid-fifties the venue became a theatre for Jack McKenna's Dublin Repertory Company. Prominent members of this group were John Crowley, Annie Dalton, Moira Deady, Frank O'Donovan and Bob Carrickford—all of whom starred in the RTE drama series, *The Rior-dans*, in the 1960s and 1970s. Feis Chluainín Uí Ruairc saw a welcome revival in 1950 and its custom, over the following years, was to award scholarships to the Gaeltacht. These depended on available finance and in the autumn of 1950 funds were at vanishing point. Ideas for a fundraiser were sought and Sean Fitzgibbon NT. Cullentra suggested a pantomime and bravely undertook to write and produce it. Taking 'The Wild Rose of Lough Gill' as his theme, his scripting, based on the town characters and local happenings, was hilarious. It is said that the entire cast of thirty eight was superb but, of course, some had more demanding roles than others. The heroine, Cathlin Curran, was played by Celine Bergin and her lover, Eamon Tracy, by P Sheridan. Sir Frederick Hamilton and the villain Harrison were M Guilfoyle and Tomás Ó Duibhir respectively. The veteran actor, Frank McGuinness was brilliant as Mad Murtagh McSharry as was Mona Pryal as Gloria. So popular was the production that we are told in the newspaper

report that 'two hours before the show commenced, hundreds of people were already braving the snow and storm in hopes of getting in'.

### St Clare's Hall, an Historic Gem

Quoting from Scripture 'The best wine has been kept till last'. Little did the Parish Priest of Manorhamilton, Fr Francis Maguire, think when he built St Clare's Church in 1810 that, not only would it accommodate Catholic worshippers for many years but would then facilitate followers of the performing arts for another century. The tenure of land and property was starkly different in the early 1800's and a lease for the Church was procured from a kindly landlord, Nathaniel Clements, 2nd Earl of Leitrim. Not all the Earls of Leitrim were as tolerant and generous and the 3rd Earl, the 'notorious' one, viewed things differently to his predecessor. It is said that on a Sunday morning in 1860, he locked the little Church, thereby denying the parishioners the right to attend Mass, However, he was pursued on horseback by the intrepid John O'Donnell of Larkfield and forced, at gunpoint, to return and unlock the door admitting the gathered worshippers. When the new St Clare's Church was built in 1885, the old St Clare's became a classical school up to 1912 but even during that period it was used for social functions from 1894 on. In 1912/13 it was converted to a parish hall and was in constant use until the Community Centre was built in 1969. Well known artists like Milo O'Shea and Ruby Murray performed there

and of special note was the visit of Delia Murphy in 1941. The welcome recorded her was tumultuous and many were obliged with her autograph. It is worth noting that this general area had special musical traditions of its own. Ever since St Patrick left his choirmaster at Dromahair, North Leitrim has been music loving. St Benin taught his choirs at Dromahair for twenty years and this same love of music brought O'Carolan, the blind harper, to O'Donnell's house at Larkfield. Bunting collected some of his finest airs at Killargue and stated that, even after hundreds of years, the influence of St Patrick's choirmaster was still evident. However, let's go back to Delia. In St Clare's Hall she sang the favourites—'If I were a Blackbird', 'The Humour is on Me Now', 'Courtin' in the Kitchen', 'The Three Lovely Lassies from Bannion', 'The Bold Fenian Men'. To allow the great lady a break, local artists made their contributions – Sean Brady NT, P Thornton, Frank Jinks, Mrs P Thornton and Thomas Taylor. Mrs Hickey recited 'The Trimmings of the Rosary' and 'Och I Don't know' and Dominic Connolly sang two comic songs. The night ended with further renditions from Delia –'Thank You Ma'am says Dan', 'The Kerry Cow', 'The Moonshiner' and 'The Girl from Donegal'. The summation was delivered by P L Coyle, Chairman of Manorhamilton Red Cross Branch who said he regretted so many had to be turned away for lack of space and to facilitate those, the performance would be repeated on the following Monday night. Catering was in the capable hands of Mrs McEnroy of the Central Hotel.

So much, for so long in a hall so small!