

THE MUSIC & LIFE OF JOHN McKENNA

'The Buck from the Mountain'

Seán Gilraine



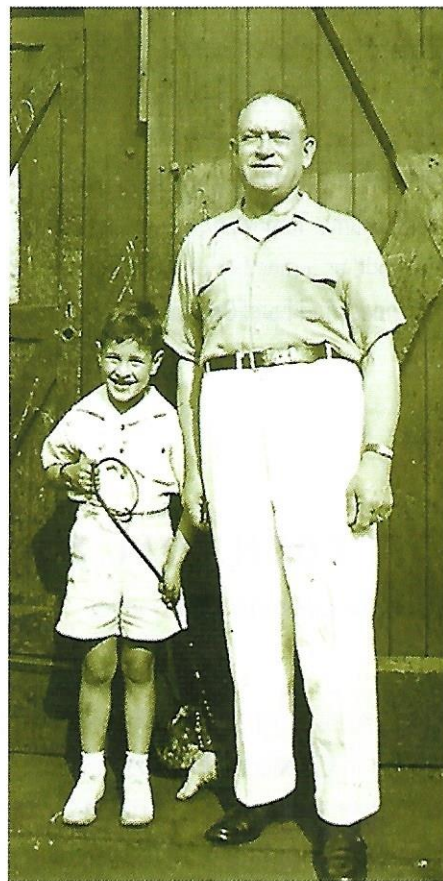
In this article, Sean Gilraine, a very fine flute-player himself, describes the work undertaken, since the early 1970s, by the many admirers of John McKenna's music in tracking down all of

his recordings. Their mission was eventually accomplished in 2014 with the production by The John McKenna Society of a double CD collection of all of his recordings and a book on the music and life of John McKenna. Sean Gilraine, The John McKenna Society and others mentioned in this article deserve great praise for their painstaking research and zeal in producing such a fine record in sound and word of the legacy of Leitrim's best known traditional musician. Sean's talks/lectures on John McKenna are well worth attending.

JOHN McKENNA, born in Tents, Tarmon, Co Leitrim in 1880, emigrated to New York in 1904 and died there in 1947. He became one of the most influential flute players in the history of Irish traditional music. This is largely due to the forty four record sides (tracks) that he cut in New York on 78rpm gramophone discs. These discs were recorded by various record companies including big budget labels like Columbia and Decca,

between circa 1922 and 5 May 1937. This was all done whilst John was working full-time and raising a large family in New York. In June 2014, the John McKenna Society, founded in Drumkeerin in 1978, released the definitive story of his life, both musically and biographically. The release was entitled; *The Music and Life of John McKenna; 'The Buck from the Mountain'*. This article is an account of how the release came to fruition...

In the early 1970s, Joseph Mooney (b.1916 – d.1988), a great Leitrim man with huge admiration for John McKenna's music, travelled to New York to track down some of John's surviving children. There, he met Catherine Reynolds, McKenna's eldest daughter, and he acquired from her a treasure trove of information about the man himself! Then, in the early 1980s, Mooney, a Leitrim County Councillor, lobbied our national broadcaster RTÉ to make a documentary radio programme on McKenna. The pressure paid off because in 1982, Harry Bradshaw and Jackie Small from RTÉ Radio, travelled to the Drumkeerin area to talk with people who, firstly, would have known John personally and, secondly, who had an extensive collection of his records. They met with great McKenna Society members like



■ John McKenna with grandson Paul John Iovino c.1941

Mary Kate Flynn, Tommy Gilmartin, Frank Flynn, Arthur Boyle and Arthur McGrail. The outcome of this was a tribute programme broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 in March 1983. The programme, called 'The Long Note', produced by Bradshaw and presented by Small, sparked a fresh, national interest in the musical genius of McKenna. This newly found interest eventually manifested itself in the release of a cassette tape by the Society in 1986, entitled; *John McKenna: His Original Record-*

ings'. The cassette contained eighteen tracks remastered by Bradshaw, with liner notes by Small.

Fast forward then to the John McKenna Festival in June 2010 when this author was asked by the Society to deliver an oration at his memorial which is located opposite Tarmon Church (the memorial was unveiled by the Society in 1980 to commemorate the centenary of John's birth). This oration led to my direct contact with McKenna's surviving relatives in America and, most especially, with a great grand-daughter, Pamela Iovino Carrillo. The following year, the Festival of June 2011, saw the arrival of Pamela and her family, together with McKenna's grandchild, Mrs. Barbara Lees McKenna and other relatives, making their first visit to Ireland. During their stay in Leitrim they visited the original homestead (now owned and restored by the Society) in Tents, and, on their departure, they presented the author with a cassette tape of previously unreleased recordings. This was gold dust as far as the Society was concerned, and it was decided to apply for funding with a view to further research on McKenna's musical and biographical past and producing an updated version of the 1986 release.

This work started in June 2012 and brought the Society into contact with wonderful people like Mayo man, Alan Morrisroe. Alan, one of the leading experts on the 78rpm gramophone era, led the Society to even more rare tracks that were



John McKenna Traditional Festival
8-11 JUNE 2017
Drumkeeran, Co. Leitrim

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www.johnmckenna.ie

Thursday 8 June
A social Evening of Music and Song featuring young and old.
Aras Bride, Drumkeeran • 6pm

Friday 9 June
Festival Concert
Marcus Heron Family and Don Stiffe
Drumkeeran Community Centre • 9pm

Saturday 10 June
'Leitrim Day' Workshop
This unique workshop will afford young musicians an opportunity to learn and develop skills in arranging, playing and recording music in groups under the guidance of David Sheridan, Lorraine Sweeney & Catherine McEvoy
Booking essential - Limited places
087 258 1529 info@johnmckenna.ie
Community Centre - Open from 9am
9.30am - 12.30pm - €10

Competitions: Flute: U12, U14, U18.
Tin Whistle: U10, U12, U14, U18.
Prizes €50/€30 / €20 for U18 Flute winners
Drumkeeran Community Centre • 3.00pm

Singing Session
with Jackie Boyce, Jim Bainbridge & Fiona and Jim Byrne
Davitt's • 2pm

previously unreleased, the last of which had surfaced in America in November 2010. So the timing of the Society's work couldn't have been better. Alan's work culminated in the Society acquiring McKenna's complete corpus of 44 recordings. Harry Bradshaw was again brought on board to do the digital remastering and the final work was presented on two CDs. With the help of McKenna's family, especially the aforementioned Pamela, and contributors like Jackie Small, Lorraine Sweeney, Mick Mulvey, Gregory Daly, Shane Meehan, Matt Molloy, Conal Ó Gráda, Harry Bradley, Patsy Hanly, Mary T. Gilmartin, Gerry Flynn, Dáithí Gormley and Mick Woods (RIP), the Society was able to produce a 104-page book to accompany the double CD. The book gives a comprehensive account of his life and

times, his discography and discussions on his musical style, legacy and enduring influence.

The work was completed in June 2014, in time for the annual McKenna Festival and 'The Buck from the Mountain' was formally launched by modern, flute giant and McKenna student, Matt Molloy in front of a packed Drumkeeran Community Centre. This proud

night in the Society's history was consolidated by the presence of eleven close members of John's family, five grandchildren and six great grandchildren, all from different parts of the USA. It was the first time for most of them to meet each other and they did so under a Drumkeeran sky! I'd say John McKenna himself was looking down favourably on proceedings!

The Music and Life of John McKenna; 'The Buck from the Mountain' is available from johnmckenna.ie

I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of the great Leitrim flute player Mick Woods (1928-2017). Mick recorded a tribute album to McKenna in London in 1978, and he was the closest ever embodiment of the great man's music! My thanks to Mick Mulvey for his editing assistance.