

CATHERINE HAYES

by W.W. Gleeson

She of the world's best-known singers of the nineteenth century, was Catherine Hayes of Limerick. Born at No. 4 Patrick Street on October 29th 1825, she was the youngest of three daughters of John and Mary Hayes. Her father followed a number of occupations before he disappeared overnight, never to be heard of again.

At 15 years, this simple girl, of humble stock, was an opera star and soon to become the idol of Europe. At 20 she entranced the world of opera from the stage at La Scala, Milan.

A contemporary described her at the time as:

"The Swan of Erin, The Irish Nightingale, The Pearl of Scala, exceeding prepossessing. She is somewhat thin, but of eminently graceful and symmetrical figure. Her eyes are large and lustrous and the expression of her features, which are regular, is full of intellectuality".

He found Catherine Hayes a "bright particular star" to whom the eyes of European admiration had been directed, but who was not spoiled by her good fortune, being the same frank and open person, whose girlhood's warbling had, in his mind, foretold fame and fortune for her.

After receiving preliminary voice training in Dublin, she left for Paris in 1844, to study under the celebrated Manuel Garcia, who had also trained Jenny Lind. After a year-and-a-half in Paris, she went to Italy, where she completed her studies in Milan under Ronconi.

She was a brilliant success on the Continent, and had the rare distinction of having had two special operas composed for her. In 1849, she sang in the Covent Garden Theatre, London, where mile-long queues formed to hear her. And during the season she sang before Queen Victoria at a private concert in Buckingham Palace.

A year later, on March 11th and 12th, she gave concerts in her native city, after which she sang outside St. Mary's Parish Church (where she had been baptised) a song specially composed for her by Harvey.

*"When roaming on a foreign strand
I fancy still my steps were here:
Home of my heart, my native land".*

The visit to her native city of such an artiste, as a matter of course, might be expected to excite an immense amount of interest; but really the sensation her too-brief engagement had created had



Catherine Hayes.

surpassed every expectation.

It is on record that after her renderings of Bellini's opera "Norma" and "La Sonnambula" in the old Theatre Royal in Henry Street (accidentally and completely destroyed by fire, on Monday, January 23rd, 1922), the boys in the "gods" in a vociferous outburst, with cries of encore, encore, and cheers, repeated over and over, till the house rang again, were a true test of her abilities, and no mere reputation, however vast, could have won from them such irrepressible bursts of enthusiasm as Catherine Hayes was greeted withal.

In 1850, after a very successful concert in Cork, the following farewell tribute appeared in a local periodical, on the eve of her departure for Rome.

*"And ere long may we welcome
once more, with a smile
Of proud triumph, the Minstrel of
Erin's green isle".*

Six years later, after an outstanding tour of Italy, the Queen of Song returned to Cork. Again, in poetic effusion, she was greeted thus:

*"And peace, joy and gladness encircle
thee round-
And the cheers from the Shannon
will soon swell for Thee.
Not less warm is the 'Faiite' that
hails from the Lee!"*

In 1851, after having travelled throughout France, she returned to England, where she gave farewell concerts. On September 1st of that year, the night of her departure for America -

having previously made two round-the-world trips - she made her final appearance at the Theatre Royal, Liverpool. The theatre was filled to capacity, and the popular idol was cheered for fully five minutes on her entry.

She toured America, and in California, a ticket for one of her recitals sold for 1,150 dollars. Later, she visited Australia.

Her travels seriously affected her health, however. She returned to London, where she married her Australian manager, William Bushnell, in 1857. Four years later, at the age of 36, she died, her husband having predeceased her a year earlier. Her remains lie in a neglected grave in Kensal Green Cemetery, South Kensington, London. Her tombstone bears the simple inscription:

*"CATHERINE HAYES,
Born Limerick, 1825.
Died London, August 2,
1861".*

Today, years after her birth, few remember her, save a small band of her faithful admirers.

In London, where she became famous, her grave is overgrown, and in Limerick, there is no monument or plaque to honour her greatness.

No more for her the blaze of publicity ... the thunderous applause ... the adulation of thousands ... only a neglected grave in grimy Kensal Green Cemetery!

Catherine Hayes deserves more of her native place.