

# Remembering Professor King-Griffin<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

**I**n 1999 I was compiling an anthology of my late uncle's writings and I stumbled across a reference that intrigued me. Seamus Ó'Cinnéide - no stranger to eccentricity himself - wrote in his celebrated *I Mo Scriobhail Fein* column of "an amiable city eccentric"<sup>2</sup> - Professor King-Griffin - who was the organist at St. John's Cathedral and who presided over the annual Trees for Ireland plantings at King John's Castle. According to Ó'Cinnéide: "...his birthday announcement used to appear thus in a national daily newspaper.<sup>3</sup> Professor King-Griffin is 32 (or whatever) to day. He is a descendant of the Ancient and Noble Ó'Griofa Sept." I had come across other fleeting references to King-Griffin in an assortment of local histories. Jim Kemmy included an example of King-Griffin's journalism in his (1997) *Limerick Compendium*. King-Griffin receives a brief mention in a history of St. John's Cathedral and also appears a number of times in an account of amateur operas staged by the Christian Brothers between 1940 and 1949.<sup>4</sup> I was curious to find out more about this man who played an important role in the cultural life of Limerick City in the 1940s and 1950s. He was centrally involved in a range of musical events - operas and competitive plain or Gregorian Chant festivals. These musical events were an important aspect of Limerick cultural life in the pre-television era.

## Early Days in Miltown-Malbay

Professor Michael King-Griffin<sup>5</sup> died in London on March 22nd 1981. He was 72 years of age. He is buried in Ballard Cemetery in his coastal hometown of Miltown-Malbay, County Clare - itself renowned for its traditional Irish music heritage. A simple limestone headstone erected by his sister Monnie marks his last resting place. He had spent the last two decades of his life in Ruislip, North London living with his only sibling Monnie (Monica) Churchill.

Professor King-Griffin began life as Michael Griffin on January 26th 1909. He was born at Church Street, Miltown-Malbay, to Patrick and Mary Griffin (nee King).<sup>6</sup> His father, known locally as 'Cocky', was the town postman, and his mother was originally from the nearby village of Mullagh. The family home stood

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by **Coin Devereux**

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opposite the local Catholic Church - St. Josephs. Michael Griffin received his early schooling in Miltown-Malbay national school and then attended the Christian Brothers' School in Ennistymon. He studied piano with a local music teacher, Miss Mary Burke Vaughan, and he subsequently taught music to boys and girls in the Miltown-Malbay area.

Michael Griffin furthered his studies in music under the guide of Professor Earnest De Regge,<sup>7</sup> a Belgian who was the organist at St. Flannan's College in Ennis. Professor De Regge was born in Flanders in 1901. He came to Ireland in 1923 and he was appointed Professor of Music at St. Flannan's, Ennis, as well as organist/choirmaster at the local cathedral. De Regge was famous for composing *The Minuetto Grazioso* and for publishing, with Michael O'Siochfhradha, a second-level music textbook in both English and Irish in the 1940s. Professor De Regge was killed tragically along with seven others on the afternoon of January 15th 1958, when a floor collapsed at a furniture auction at Carmody's Hotel, Ennis. His compositions are still popular in his native Belgium.

King-Griffin's connection with De Regge may have been a strong influencing

factor in his decision to leave Ireland in order to further his studies in Continental Europe. Although the details of his travels at this time are somewhat sketchy, we know that he studied in Bonn and that he met Fr. W.J. O'Grady (who would later become Administrator of St. John's Cathedral) at the Irish College in Paris,<sup>8</sup> a fact that no doubt influenced his decision to return to Ireland.

## Arrival in Limerick

Michael King-Griffin arrived in Limerick in the late 1930s. Like his mentor Earnest De Regge, King-Griffin taught music at the old St. Munchin's Diocesan Training College in Henry Street and served as organist at St. John's Cathedral. He supplemented his earnings by teaching elocution and music in the variety of places in which he lived in Limerick.<sup>9</sup> In sartorial terms he appears to have 'cut quite a dash' to use a modern phrase. He is remembered by many for wearing a cape tied at the neck with a sapphire. One of my interviewees told me that he was noted for wearing a Dexter (frock-like) coat and bowler hat. The RTE broadcaster Ciaran MacMathuna also commented upon his dress-sense and recalled that:

"The music in the Cathedral [St. John's] was dominated by the tall and rather haughty figure of the organist and choirmaster Professor 'King' Griffin who



Professor King-Griffin at the organ



Miltown Malbay, Main Street, Co. Clare

Postcard of Main Street, Miltown Malbay, c.1910

(Limerick Museum)

wore gloves all the time to protect his hands."<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, MacMathuna also tells us that:

"I always thought that he came from some mid-European musical city but was delighted when I found out that he was a native of one of my favourite places, Miltown Malbay in County Clare."<sup>11</sup>

### Music

Professor King-Griffin made an immense contribution to city life as an expert musician. As well as being organist at St. John's Cathedral, his band played on 2RN - the precursor to RTE Radio One. He also visited France to play church music in the 1940s. King-Griffin was instrumental with Fr. W.J. O'Grady in organising the Gregorian or 'Plain' Chant festivals at St. John's in the 1940s. This competitive festival took place in May of each year. The actual competition between school choirs took place at the St. John's Temperance Hall (Mulgrave Street) with all choirs also participating in a mass at the nearby cathedral. During and after the 'Emergency' years he assisted with elocution lessons and breathing techniques for the boys participating in the operas staged by the Christian Brothers in that decade.<sup>12</sup>

Professor King-Griffin also acted as a critic and contributed colourful reviews of the musicals to the local press.<sup>13</sup> In 1947, for example, he reviewed the production of *The Gondoliers* that took place at the Lyric Theatre, Glentworth Street, from

January 13th to 18th. According to King-Griffin this was by far the best effort to date by the Christian Brothers' pupils. In terms of their speaking and elocution (he does not mention his own role in this) he wrote that:

"The speaking voices of the principles were distinctly audible and the dialogue was spoken with dramatic effect that engaged the interest of the audience. Good enunciation, easy delivery and the vocal flexibility of refined speech disclosed a sound knowledge of the fundamentals of elocutionary science. Occasionally, the charm of *the melodious Limerick intonation invaded the Venetian scene to give it a homely flavour.*" [My emphasis]<sup>14</sup>

In the midst of his highly stylised Victorian English, King-Griffin found room for a light-hearted comment or two about the participants. The reviews were always detailed and fair in their evaluation of the operas.

### The "Trees for Ireland" Campaign and Other Journalism

In addition to his musical activities Professor King-Griffin was involved in writing occasional pieces for both the *Limerick Chronicle* and *Limerick Leader* as well as being the prime mover in the local Trees for Ireland campaign.<sup>15</sup> On the 18th of April 1959, for example, Professor King-Griffin donated some cedar trees for

planting at King John's Castle. The city's dignitaries including the Mayor, Cllr. J.P. Liddy, attended the Arbor Day and the event was by invitation only. Attendees were treated to a tour of King John's Castle following a tree planting ceremony at 3 pm by the Mayor and others.<sup>16</sup>

In his capacity as an occasional contributor to the local press, Professor King-Griffin wrote on a variety of themes including sport. In July 1951 he gave an account of the 1951 Limerick Citizens' Regatta. What is again most striking is his use of the English language, the mixture of humour with a highly formalised writing style. He wrote:

"The vagaries of the climate are sometimes disconcerting, but the brilliant sunshine, gentle zephyr and moderate temperatures of yesterday afternoon made ideal summer weather which was truly delightful. Under such meteorological conditions the Limerick Citizens' Regatta was successfully held, and the presence of large crowds along the quays and the embankments was indicative of a revival of interest in rowing.

The regatta meeting, a very popular fixture, provided an agreeable mixture of enjoyment, sport, and social intercourse. Many enthusiastic patrons ardently descanted with vertiginous volubility on the merits of their favourite crews, regardless of grammatical exactitude. A surge of spontaneous friendliness pervaded the festive atmosphere, and often during the progress of the races the rigid



Postcard showing the interior of St. John's Cathedral c.1910

(Limerick Museum)

formalities of etiquette were relaxed as the antics of over-zealous supporters of crews compelled spectators to cling together in strenuous effort to preserve an attitude of equilibrium.

In general, nothing exceptional was recorded to render the day memorable, and as the fame of most of the winning crews had preceded them no great sensation was experienced. Some oarsmen instinctively felt the strength of their muscles inadequate to the courage of their hearts, while others, bewildered by the rapidity of unforeseen circumstances, just failed to reach the high standard set by their aspiring souls. Many crews gave creditable performances that were loudly applauded, and a few crews produced remarkable spectacular splashing that passed unappreciated. With keen rivalry among competing crews, all the races were eagerly contested and the impartial observer had no difficulty in discovering the qualities and the foibles of the various contenders.

The welcome appearance of the numerous visiting crews created a very favourable impression. Occasionally, they ably displayed their prowess in watermanship, and with confidence rowed gamely in admirable combination. The home crews rarely taxed their physical stamina, and not one of their performances was considered a criterion of stamina. They manipulated their boats according to mood and temperament, and seldom unnecessarily burdened themselves with trophies.

During the intervals between the races a diverting feature which caused much merriment was the hilarity with which persons on the river banks familiarly greeted, with modern sobriquets, pleasure parties that lolled in cush-

ioned ease, and promptly returned compliments in appropriate idiom as they leisurely cruised about the river.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to sketch the life and cultural contribution of one Limerick citizen in the middle of the last century. In writing about the past there is a very real danger in presenting it in either monochrome or through a nostalgic lens. I am particularly interested in the fact that even in the most repressive of times, creativity and individuality will rear its head. Writers, musicians and artists are likely to take a contrary viewpoint and live by their own rules. They can sometimes represent an interesting and instructive counterpoint to the prevailing norms of the day. Local historical research offers us the opportunity to explore the otherwise hidden history of ordinary (and often extraordinary) people's lives. It is in this context that Professor King-Griffin represents a figure of interest.

### NOTES

1. With particular thanks to the Power family for permission to reproduce the photograph of Professor King-Griffin, to John O'Brien, photographer, for his work in reprinting the photograph and to Patsy Harrold, Sean Killeen and Joe Malone for their recollections.
2. Seamus Ó'Cinnéide: *GAA Centenary Year and the Year of the Trees* in E. Devereux (ed) (1999): *Last Word By The Listener*, Limerick, University of Limerick Press pp. 82-83.
3. The personal columns of *The Irish Times*.
4. W. Fitzmaurice and K. Hannan (eds) (1991): *In The Shadow of The Spire* and V. Prendergast: (1998) *A Set of Curious Chances*.
5. He also referred to himself as Charles Michael King-Griffin. It should be noted that it is not clear as to when he began to style himself as King-Griffin.
6. *Parish Records*, Roman Catholic Church, Miltown-Malbay, County Clare.
7. For a more detailed account see John Rattigan: *Riches of Clare: Earnest De Regge* in *The Clare Champion*, September 22nd 2002.
8. F. Prendergast: *St. John's Cathedral Choir* in W. Fitzmaurice and K. Hannan (eds): *In The Shadow of The Spire*, (1991) pp. 42-43. The reference to meeting King-Griffin in Paris mistakenly says 1924 - given the year of King-Griffin's birth (1909) it should presumably read 1934.
9. Professor King Griffin lived in a variety of locations, including The Commercial Hotel, O'Connell Street and in Rosbrien.
10. C. MacMathuna: *Memories of St. John's Parish, Limerick* in W. Fitzmaurice and K. Hannan (eds): *In The Shadow of The Spire*, (1991) p. 47.
11. *ibid*.
12. V. Prendergast's (1998): *A Set of Curious Chances* provides invaluable detail on the operas in question. They were performed as follows: *The Bohemian Girl* (1940); *Maritana* (1941); *The Mikado* (1943); *The Gondoliers* (1944); *The Yeoman of The Guard* (1945); *The Mikado* (1946); *The Gondoliers* (1947); *Iolanthe* (1948); *The Pirates of Penzance* (1949).
13. See for example Professor Michael King-Griffin: *The Gondoliers: Fine Performances All Round*, *The Limerick Leader* 20/3/1947; *The Mikado: Fine Performance*, *The Limerick Leader* 19/1/1946; *A Great Show: Feast of Light Opera, Sparkling Production*, *The Limerick Leader* 17/1/1948.
14. Professor King-Griffin: *The Gondoliers: Fine Performance, High Merit All Round*, *The Limerick Leader*, 20/1/1947.
15. The Trees for Ireland Campaign was founded in 1952.
16. For a detailed account see *Limerick Arbor Day* in *The Limerick Chronicle* 9/4/1959 and *Arbor Day in Limerick*, *The Limerick Chronicle* 23/4/1959.
17. Professor King-Griffin: *Impressions of the 1951 Limerick Regatta*, *The Limerick Leader* 21 July 1951.