

The Arts in Limerick

By D. DOYLE

THE response of any people to artistic and beautiful things is mainly a matter of tradition. There are some who hold that the great in art needs no introduction, that its beauty and its message go forth unaided to reach the minds and spirits of all who behold. That may be true to a limited extent. That some peoples have created and appreciated greater artistic works than others is certain. It is true that the artistic output of all peoples has not been constant. Who has explained how the glory of the eighteenth century sank into the dullness of the nineteenth? Who will explain how a war-torn, half-demolished Vienna, capital of a dismembered and impoverished Austria, worried to death with the fact of Russian occupation, with all the social problems of housing, hospitals and refugees, found the time, the material, the labour and more than a million pounds to rebuild its opera house, while at the same time London barely saved its Covent Garden from turning into a dance hall, and drama famous Dublin still dithers about its new Abbey Theatre?

The purpose of this short article is to assess the Limerick response to immaterial and lovely things. What has been said in the first paragraph has been said with the purpose of raising questions in the mind, without which it might be impossible to view the facts in proper perspective. Vienna couldn't go on living without its opera, and remain Viennese, so it found the money. When a people prefer Jaguars and roadhouses to opera houses and theatres, it pays for what it appreciates and has nothing left but lip service for art.

Peoples who have great appreciation of beauty are usually the inheritors of great traditions. Where does Limerick stand? No purpose would be served by going far back in the history of the city to find the answers. Limerick, like the rest of Ireland, has two traditions, the Celtic and the Anglo Irish, both rich, both separate. Perhaps soon these two will no longer remain separate but will merge in the heat of conflict where each will enrich the other and start a new tradition.

In the nineteen thirties, Limerick was in the doldrums. Its best voices were singing negro minstrels. In drama, a flame which had been lit by the College Players at the end of the twenties flared up, then flickered and died in the damp apathy of the time.

The early forties saw a change. Drama was again alive, cautiously staging surefire comedy, but at least regaining the skills of playing. The Brislane Choral Society brought Limerick singers to new peaks, with productions of more than a hundred voices in the Stabat Mater, the Messiah, the Elijah and a production of the Creation, which was radio broadcast to the whole country.

It became apparent that Limerick felt a new want, that it was reaching out to better things.

The Brislane Choral Society met Muintir na Tire, a strong social and community movement, with the object of founding a music festival in Limerick to resemble the Feis Ceoil of Dublin. Discussion found further interests. The result was an all arts festival called Feile Luimnighe, founded "to foster the knowledge and practice of the arts, with first attention to national culture, and to encourage creative effort."

FEILE LUIMNIGHE

Feile Luimnighe has seven sections, each organised by its own sub-committee and with a Feile Executive co-ordinating the work of all. The seven sections are Drama, Music, Dancing, Drawing and Painting, Elocution, History, Irish Language. The Feile has been very successful, both in its wide appeal and in the progress it has made towards the attainment of its aims.

DRAMA

The drama section of the festival is now in its eleventh year and approximately twenty plays are produced each year during the fortnight of the festival. One of the most noticeable results has been the marked improvement in the technical standards of rural groups. Techniques in rural areas have improved so much that twice in recent years rural groups have attained the highest marks in the festival.

Three years ago, Feile Luimnighe helped to found the All-Ireland Drama Festival, in which the winners of thirteen district festivals compete, and in each year Feile Luimnighe winners have gone on to win national trophies.

MUSIC

The music section of the Feile attracts up to two thousand competitors each year. Specialist adjudicators are brought for choral, instrumental and solo singing. The improvement in standards has been continuous. Many adjudicators have remarked on the exceptional fine tone quality of young Limerick voices, which they have declared the finest in Ireland. One adjudicator was so impressed that she has since established a branch of her academy in the city, which has resulted in a further raising of standards. The public interest has grown so much that the Vocational Educational Committee are now planning a School of Music.

DANCING

The dancing festival also attracts thousands of competitors. Most of the dancing is traditional Irish folk dancing, but one competition, designed to encourage initiative, has brought forth many colourful new dances based on traditional styles.

DRAWING AND PAINTING

Very interesting art competitions were held in the early years of the Feile and attracted a great deal of attention. Organisation difficulties resulted in the suspension of this section a few years ago, but in the present year (1956) the Executive is planning its revival.

ELOCUTION

This section had a small and timorous start. Existing somewhere between the actor's and the singer's art, it was at first unsure, but of recent years, under a vigorous sub-committee and officers, it has brought nearly a thousand competitors, and besides solo competitions there are competitions for choric verse speaking and for debate and public speaking. It is now one of the major sections of the festival.

LANGUAGE

The competitions for the speaking of the Irish language are a very useful adjunct of the general education programme. The history section is small, is a written competition, and does not attract so many, but the resultant study of local history is very beneficial.

Feile Luimnighe lasts four weeks. It ends on Palm Sunday with a prizewinners' concert. It is always both a happy and tremendous occasion. There have been four weeks of performances, adjudications and discussions, minds are alive and keen, conversation is standing on tiptoe.

FRANCISCAN CHORAL SOCIETY.

The Franciscan Choral Society is based on a church choir, many times winner at Felle Luimnighe. It produces musical comedies and good concerts and gives three to four performances during the year.

CECILIAN MUSICAL SOCIETY

This society also specialises in the production of musical comedy, does perhaps half-a-dozen shows a year and, in addition, maintains its own small orchestra, whose work gives a basis for the many musical ventures of each season.

SYMPHONY CONCERT SOCIETY.

The foundation of this society has succeeded in bringing many famous orchestras to the city. In recent years, in addition to several visits from the Radio Eireann Symphony Orchestra, patrons have seen and heard the Halle Orchestra, under Sir John Barbarolli, the London Symphony Orchestra, under Sir Adrian Boult, as well as many famous Chamber Music Orchestras. Limerick is now looking forward to a visit from the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, to be conducted by F. F. Twangler.

GRAMOPHONE SOCIETIES

Indicative also of this increasing interest in music are two gramophone societies. These are very active and give regular recitals. On each occasion, some member prepares the programme from his own collection and gives introductory talks and appreciations for the benefit of his fellow members.

ART

Art is catered for by the Limerick Art Club, which holds meetings, lectures and exhibitions. This work is backed by the art course of the City Technical Schools and by the numerous and varied home and foreign exhibitions at the City Art Gallery.

LOCAL HISTORY

Many intelligences, not attracted to art, music, poetry or drama, find their haven in the Limerick Archaeological Society and the Old Limerick Society. Both of these study the history of Limerick and its neighbourhood, arrange many lectures and excursions.

LANGUAGES

In addition to the never decreasing interest in the Irish language, which is catered for by many organisations, such as Connradh na Gaedhilge, Cara, and An Realt, there has been a growing interest in European languages. There are now German, French and Italian Circles in the city. These Circles arrange numerous classes in the languages and organise lectures on the cultures and customs of the countries concerned.

These many and varied societies give some indication of the aspirations of the people in Limerick and its supporting hinterland. The continually rising standards of general education are taxing the libraries and schools to the fullest. Increased foreign travel is widening the horizon. The present Ireland is a young Ireland evolving out of the dual Ireland of the past. It is self-conscious and knows it has much to learn. It is learning.

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