

# McNAMARA'S BAND

My name is McNamara,  
I'm the leader of the band;  
Although we're small in numbers,  
We're the best band in the land!

By Willie W. Gleeson

There are few of us who are not familiar with the above lines from the well-known song "McNamara's Band". But how many know that the world-wide celebrated musical ensemble got its name from the four Limerick brothers: Patrick, Michael, John and Thomas McNamara, all of whom were born at Meat Market Place, Old Thomas Street, off Athlunkard Street, in St. Mary's parish, Limerick, in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Thomas - the last of the quartette - paid his second, and last, visit in 64 years to the spot where he was born and reared, on July 18, 1965. He died in May, 1978, being then the last survivor of the combination that won the All-Ireland Championship for St. Mary's Prize Band in 1895. His brother, Patrick, was the bandmaster on the occasion, when they "stole the show" from 26 other groups ... something rarely heard of nowadays!

Patrick was a musician and composer, and there were few who could claim to be his peer, with the honourable exception of his good friend and neighbour, Patrick Sammon, of Church Street.

He played throughout the 32 Counties, at balls, Pattern Day celebrations, weddings, St. Patrick's Day parades; all the time with banner proclaiming: "McNamara's Band", of which he was leader and arranger.

When he emigrated to the United States in 1905, he carried with him this great musical tradition, and his orchestra there continued to be known as "McNamara's Band". Reunited with his brother, Thomas, who had arrived in the States in 1901, the combination soon caught the imagination of a Tin Pan Alley song-writer, and so the famous tune was born.

In later years discs were cut for the Voralion Records by the McNamara trio: Thomas on the piccolo; Patrick, the violin, and Patrick's daughter, Eileen, on the piano. A number of other records were cut by the Aeolian Company in 1921, and some - set tunes, reel medleys, Irish waltz medleys and old classics - are treasured family possessions in the home of Mrs. Isobella McCarthy, Long Range, St. Francis Abbey - a niece of the McNamaras.

Patrick, who did much to popularise Irish music in the U.S., visited Limerick with his wife and children in 1912. The return trip was to be made on the Titanic after some muddling, providentially for the McNamaras, the arrangement misfired.

The Titanic, pronounced unsinkable, was on her maiden voyage to New York, having called at Queenstown (Coming to take on passengers. When about

200 miles off the coast of Newfoundland tragedy struck when the "Queen of the Atlantic" struck an iceberg, and sank with the loss of 1,500 lives. Among the 700 rescued by the Carpathia was a young Limerick girl, named Nellie O'Dwyer, of Mungret Street (a sister of the well-known barber, "Bishop" O'Dwyer). (For the record, date of the disaster was April 14, 1912).

All four brothers played in one row with St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band. Michael, a Boer War veteran, was an instructor and sergeant in the Royal Munster Fusiliers. He retired with the rank of Regimental Sergeant-Major, and died in Devon in 1962. John was also attached to a regimental band, but was transferred to an ambulance corps during the Great War. He was killed in France in 1916 while attending the wounded.

Thomas saw service with the British Navy; later with the army where he was awarded the 1914 Mons Star and British War Medal, while also gaining the Merchant Marine Medal and the Victory Medal 1914-1918. Subsequently, he was one of the crew that smuggled de Valera from Liverpool to the United States in 1920. He spent most of his chequered career with the American Navy; and for 23 years, after leaving the Merchant Marine, worked on the boats for the New York Fire Department.

When I organised the Old Limerick Historical Society's flight to New York, for the World's Fair, in 1964, I tried to contact my old friend, but failed. Little did I think then that, a year later, I would "bang into him" in Nicholas Street "around the corner" from where I lived in Exchange Street!

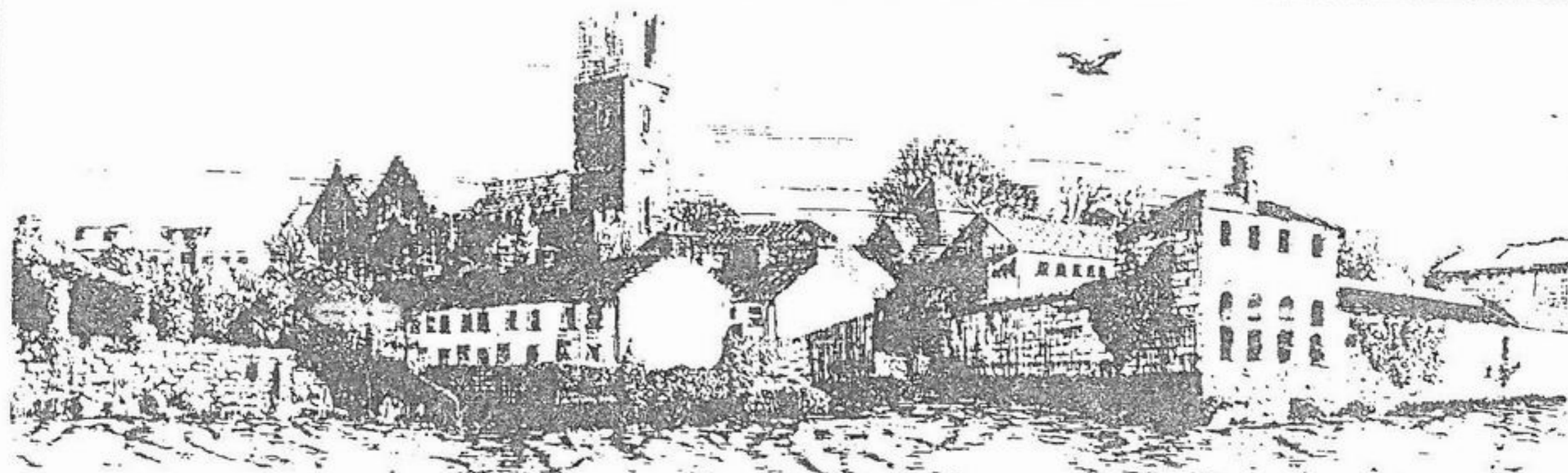
A month later I was to meet the grand veteran again - for the last time - as he accompanied his old band to St. Mary's Church, for a feastday celebration. It was to be his final parade and performance in the "Parish".

It was a day of many memories for Thomas. He told me that all the old places that he knew were gone, and there was little left to remind him of the old days when he was a child. But it brought back the happy past when he met his bosom friend, Christopher "Ducker" Nash, with whom he joined St. Mary's Band, 75 years ago.

And so ends the "McNamara's Band" saga.

Those who gave it the name and musical life have passed over to the Great Majority; still in its ancient records the band plays on. And though the McNamaras and their band are gone their name will live forever in the words of the very popular song

**A credit to old Ireland  
Is McNamara's Band.**



A view of King's Island, the home of McNamara's Band.