

A Limerick music collector of note



Then & Now

with Tom Aherne

TREASURE troves can often be found in attics which can be a favourite place for collectors to store their items of interest. John McCarthy from Cappamore was one such collector who stored 535 music and dance sheets in his attic. They were stapled and threaded together and bound and contained in three books.

He was a fiddle player of note who loved to collect things and as a result of his passion, this labour of love can now be enjoyed by one and all. The music was collected between 1876 and 1912 and now they have been restored and published in book form by his grandson Noel McCarthy from Ballysimon, Limerick. The music sheets were discovered by John's son and Noel's father Paddy McCarthy in the attic in 1975.

John McCarthy was born in 1885, the second eldest of a family of six boys and one girl. William McCarthy and Ellen Cunningham from Knocknacarriga, Doon, were his parents and he was reared in Bridge Street, Cappamore. The family was well to do owning a farm and other businesses including a public house and bakery. John was the only one of the seven children who did not go to college, remaining to stay at home instead to run the family businesses. He married Hannah Lally from Knockshambo in North Mayo, who had come to Cappamore where her aunt lived in search of work in 1912. John and Hannah ran the bakery, drapery, public house, and small farm and they had 12 children.



Cappamore man John McCarthy: fiddle player and music collector of note

John was introduced to Irish traditional music in his teens and he received violin lessons from John Corbett, who was a notable music teacher in the area. His teacher described him as a tasty and accurate player. He learned the tunes mainly from sheet music and would have been note perfect. He played with other musicians around the village mainly at house dances and hall dances. By 1912 he had completed the music collection which covered the previous 36 years. Following his marriage a few years later it became very difficult to play music regularly, and he played occasionally at home and for special events. After his death in 1966 his fiddle remained

hanging on the kitchen wall until his grandson Noel came into possession of it in 1975. It was examined by a number of violin makers who estimated that it was of German origin and over 200 years old.

John's music sheets cover the period 1876 to 1912 and his manuscripts contain over 535 tunes. The collection has many music sheets notated by him which are dated 1905-06. His sister Eily has song sheets written between 1910 and 1912. There are older music sheets that were written during the periods 1876-1890 which originated in the Silvermines area. John's collection enlightens us as to what tunes, dances, and songs were popular in East Limerick/North Tipperary at the time. There are versions of tunes and songs that may now be played differently or are now known by other names.

John McCarthy's music manuscripts remained in Chapel House from the early 1900s until 1975. He would often play tunes from his music collection, as did his son Joseph. Noel, his grandson,

took over possession of them in 1975 as he was now starting to play Irish music himself. He was learning by ear so the manuscripts were to spend another 25 years in his own attic in Limerick city. By now they were ageing and in need of proper care and storage and the McCarthy family donated the manuscripts to the University of Limerick in 2001.

Noel, who compiled the book, was born in Mulgrave Street in Limerick city to parents Paddy from Cappamore and Maureen O'Connor from Carrigkerry.

He started playing traditional music at the age of 15 and he learned his first tune on his grandfather's old violin (minus one peg) and he has been playing since. Over the years he has played with many musicians in the Limerick area, and at present he plays in Guerin's in Castleconnell, Pa McGrath's and William Hanley's in Boher.

He has a strong music connection with Carrigkerry his mother's home place and he has been involved with the Glensharrold Wrenboys on Saint



Well known Boher man Owen O'Neill is on the right of our main picture, at the Fitt's Fat Stock Show and Sale of November 1980. The other pictures date from 1971 (right) and 1977. We were delighted to receive a call from the famous Noel O'Connor, aka Limerick's 'Happy Butcher' following the recent publication of a picture of Noel at Fitt's Paddocks in years gone by. The caption erroneously referred to him as 'the late' Noel O'Connor, which came as something of a surprise to the man himself, so our sincere apologies to the good-humoured Noel!

Stephen's Day. Noel has produced two music tapes for them and a CD remembering his great friend John Barry who died suddenly in 2007. He has also competed with Carrigkerry Wrenboys at the All Ireland Wrenboy Competition in Listowel.

Noel is employed as a porter at the University of Limerick and he is a founding member of the University of Limerick traditional music group Cruinniú in 2006. He is married to Helen O'Sullivan from Kilmurry, Sixemilebridge. They live in Ballysimon and their son Fionn is a Munster dance competition winner, so the legacy which started in 1885 continues on to another generation.

The book John McCarthy of Cappamore, Ireland, His Irish Traditional Music Manuscripts 1876-1912 collected from the Cappamore/Silvermines area was launched in O'Dwyer's pub, Cappamore last Friday night by writer and University of Limerick librarian Dr Micheál ó hAodha and Peig Ryan musician and music teacher in Murroe.

Noel's love of music inherited from his grandfather led him to spend seven years researching the material for the book which will be on sale in O'Mahony's and Eason's bookshops in Limerick.

It preserves the past for the future enjoyment of all.

