

# A PIONEER OF IRISH TRADITIONAL MUSIC

**I** sat in a quiet front room in a house in Bridge Road, Listowel, and listened to a gracious lady speak of her father, the late Thomas J. Purcell, one of the pioneers of Irish traditional music on both sides of the Atlantic. Above us on the wall, was a large framed picture of the subject of our conversation, looking every inch the epitome of erudition. As we spoke, I could not help going back over the years to the early 1920s and recalling my personal contacts with the worthy professor.

In a vain attempt to generate in me a love of the pianoforte, my parents had unsuccessfully sent me to two other music teachers but, alas, I rebelled against the tedium of scales and chords. I was finally sent as a last resort, and probably as a result of influence, to Professor Purcell in Church Street to see if he could make musical head or tail of me.

Had I known of the professor's interest in traditional music, I would have loyally remained at his side, for at this time my whole attention was taken by the balladsingers, their voices emanating from the pubs around the marketplace. Nothing else seemed to matter. But I saw the professor only as the local church organist and as a man versed in classical and sacred music. I daresay that my reputation as a musical drop-out did not endear me to him for I often found him looking over his glasses at me with quizzical eyes. So, before I could find out the true nature of the man, he and I parted company, something I regret to this day.

Thomas Joseph Purcell was born in Limerick City in 1848, when the Great Famine was at its height and when the quays were chock-a-block with starving throngs waiting for sailing vessels like the *Primrose*, *Tessie*, *Jane Watson* and *Jane Black* to bear them down the estuary and out into the spacious Atlantic in the hope of finding salvation and a fresh beginning in the New World. Limerick was then a city, the atmosphere of which we recapture in the songs and satirical verses of Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond.

Thomas was one of a family of six, his sisters being Mary, Agnes and Annie: his brothers Dan and Willie. His parents kept a flour and meal store in 44 William Street. The numeration may have

BY BRYAN MACRAHON

changed with the passing years, for Bassett's Directory for 1880 – published in Limerick at 1, Brunswick Street, gives William Purcell as flour dealer at Upper William Street and offers Purcell and Company as general drapers and clothiers at 32 and 33 William Street. The descendants of Dan are, I believe, lawyers in Dublin, and an aunt of Thomas's was Reverend Mother Bridget Purcell in Newcastle West and Rathkeale convents.

The Purcell family were well-to-do

and also owned flour mills at Rosmadda, near Limerick but in County Clare.

Thomas was born with a defect in his left leg and, medical treatment proving unavailing, he was sent off to London to study music at the Royal College of Music. There he qualified as a doctor of music, with the title of professor. Returning to Ireland in the late or middle 1870s we find him listed as a Professor of Music at 8 Upper Mallow Street, Limerick. About this time, he married Nora Kennelly of Blennerville, Tralee, having three children, Edward, Annie and Mai. His wife died while the children were yet young.

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EDITED BY  
**Thomas J. Purcell.**

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Attracted by the musical reputation of Chicago, he emigrated to Chicago in 1880, making arrangements for his children, whom he had left in the care of Mother Bridget, to follow him when he was established in the U.S. and had provided himself with a home. He set up as a professor of music in a friendly circle of old friends and neighbours, Kerry and Limerick folk for the most part, and presently was appointed temporary organist at St. Colmcille's Church in Paulina or Polina Street in Chicago, a building which now no longer exists. He occupied this post until his return to Ireland in 1908.

He became firm friends with Pastor Gilligan of St. Colmcille's and so acclaimed and appreciated was his virtuosity on the organ that the Church was kept open for eight or nine years beyond its allotted span because of the numbers of worshippers who attended masses and services to experience the inspiring playing of the brown-bearded young Irish organist.

His life at this period was both arduous and exciting. He saws to it that his three children, Eddie, Annie and Mai, whom a friend had accompanied to Chicago, received the best possible education: their descendants, among them Eddie's son Addison, are still living in Chicago. As a widower, in addition to the burden of his home and family, Thomas had his duties in church, a seemingly never-ending round of concerts, recitals and receptions, not to mention the attention the professor had to devote to special home students studying the piano, organ, violin or guitar.

His circle of friends appreciated his predicament and so, possibly romantically plotting to relieve his burden, they saw to it that once again he met a most attractive Kennelly girl - Catherine from

Clounmacon, Listowel. They met at a musical evening at the Keating farm at Joliet, a city about 30 miles south-west of Chicago. Romance apart, mention of this farm, which employed upwards of 200 men and women, opened up a picture of life in the rural context of the U.S. at that time. Here, where the Irish fore-gathered, the Heffernans and Leahys (Jack Leahy, that Grand Old Man of Dromin, Listowel, was a cousin of Catherine Kennelly's and the Leahy-Heffernan clan have since produced poets and educators in the Chicago context) did their best to see that the romance between Thomas and Catherine ripened into marriage. Three children were born to them, Francis, who died of fever in childhood in Chicago, Tom, who died subsequently in Listowel, and Rita, who was alert and informative in her home in the Bridge Road and who was to die after this article was written.

Rita recalled a vivid Chicago childhood. The spacious house in which they lived was always thrumming with music, the John Broadwood piano was never out of use, and father seemed always to be dressing up in a black cutaway suit preparatory to going off to give a recital somewhere in the city. Distinguished people were forever calling on the professor enlisting his musical talents for one cause or another. "He almost killed himself with work", Rita declared.

About this time he began to arrange and publish the *Folk Songs Of Ireland* (Traditional Version) Harmonised and Edited by Prof. Thomas J. Purcell, Chicago, Ill., U.S.A. Vol. 1. (Vol. 2 remained unfinished and was later left behind in Chicago). I have a copy of this collection before me as I write: the cover, once a brilliant green and gold adorned with harp and shamrock, is dated 1906. The contents reads: "Published by Thomas J. Purcell, Chicago, Ill. USA" and

lists as associated publishers Lyon and Healy of Chicago, Oliver Ditson of New York, Novello and Co. of London and Pigott and Co., Dublin. The introductory note is by Geo. F. Mulligan B.A., A.M., LLB, who states that "as finally written, much of the melodic beauty of the old and indisputably authenticated songs of Ireland, had been sacrificed to literalness! It is to eliminate the false and jangling chords and to restore the melody of the strains as they once were played, that Professor Purcell has undertaken the admirable work of so harmonising the folk songs of Ireland".

A feature of the publication is the dedication which accompanies each of the songs and which provides a sociological or historical dimension for the publication. "O'Donnell Aboo!", which he describes as "War Song 1597" (National Anthem) Poetry by M.J. McCann, Arr. by Thos. J. Purcell, Op 59", is dedicated to the soldier and jurist, the Hon. Marcus Kavanagh, Chicago, "Who Fears to Speak of Ninety Eight" is dedicated "to my friend Wm. J. O'Neill, Chicago", and "The Boys of Wexford" to "M.D. Hennessy, Chicago, Ill". This last named dedication should have been exchanged with the dedication of "The Pastheen Fionn" which he offered to Rev. Thomas F. Troy of Listowel and Chicago. Incredible as it may seem, Father Troy, who comes from a brilliant family who lived a few doors from me here in Church Street, Listowel, was descended, as also are the McKennas of Listowel, from Thos. McKenna from Monaghan and "brave United Irishman" of the '98 song "The Boys of Wexford", who married Jane Foulkes, "the captain's daughter, the captain of the Yeos", both of whom, if local lore is to be believed, made their way to Kerry after the disaster of Vinegar Hill and who now lie buried in the Hegarty grave at Kilsyne.

or Kilshenane cemetery, six miles south of Listowel.

Thus, a monograph could be written on each dedication which includes clergy, lawyers, musicians and indeed the Choral Society of Chicago. (They sang "Reynard the Fox", which begins, as is well known, "The first day of Spring in the year ninety-three" ...) and thus provides a clue to the width of Purcell's acquaintance, friendships and influence in the Chicago of a century ago. Rita recalled with pride that in Congress Year in Ireland in 1932, Piggotts of Dublin (now McCullough and Pigott of 11, Suffolk St.), possibly with an eye to U.S. visitors, devoted a full window to Purcell's musical arrangements.

(A humorous interlude occurred at

on one of the quays (next to Bryne's "The Hole in the Wall", Rita said) but the spiral staircase rising from the porch to the organ loft of the church proved a difficult obstacle to surmount and, after some time, he transferred to Listowel, his wife Catherine's native parish.

During his stay in Newcastle West, he had sheet music of his arrangements of traditional airs published by E. Donajowski of 26 Castle Street, Berner's Street, London. About ten of these are still in existence – two I have seen by courtesy of Dr. Robert Corridan, The Square, Listowel, whose brother, Fr. Paddy Corridan, P.O., Sandyford, Dublin, was, as a boy, a pupil of Professor Purcell's. These two examples of sheet music, listed on the back as

I digress for a moment to call attention to the Troy family, five of whom were priests – three were monsignori – who achieved eminence in many aspects of US ecclesiastical life, including army chaplaincies, college and parochial life. Miss Mai Quillinan of Church Street reminds me of Fr. Jim's appearance at the Eucharistic Congress in 1932 in Dublin dressed as an honorary Indian chief and leading a troupe of full-blooded Indians! She too recalled the five priests and Sister Mary Jane, together with their father, John and his wife, Bessie, nee McKenna, holding a musical evening in their home with Thomas Purcell at the keyboard. The best known member of the family on this side of the Atlantic was ex-Kerry player Father Charlie Troy, KHS and PP. Ballyfermot, whom I saw trying to make peace in Listowel during a Civil War battle for possession of the town. As a postscript, I am reminded that John Troy's wife Bessie has come down to us as a marvellous personality – she impishly interrupted the musical evening by encouraging an itinerant barrel-organ player to render raucous tunes outside the window. The evening ended in uproarious laughter!

The Purcells later transferred to Upper Charles Street, Listowel, to the house where the clinic is now and where the professor died in 1930, at the age of 82. He is buried in Listowel. His wife with her son and daughter later moved to Bridge Road, where another old Clounmacon neighbour gave them no less than two adjoining houses which he had built, at a modest rent. Rita lived in one of these houses. She recalled her father as a strict and accurate teacher who demanded the highest standards of application from his pupils and who would tolerate no pettishness. I also recall him in his role as organist in St. Mary's Parish Church, singing perhaps "The Shadow of the Cross" during Holy Week.

Picture me then as acolyte-cum-choir boy pumping the organ for dear life say on St. Patrick's Day, Easter Sunday or Christmas Day. As the mass ended, the old professor, recalling days of American triumph, rocked from side to side on his stool while almost every pipe in the organ throbbed with the transferred ecstasy of its maestro. His voice too filled the crowded church with a paean of glory that caused the worshippers below to stand spellbound gazing upwards, until at last, as the final note died away, the old man's hands fell limply to his side. A powerful memory indeed and one I treasure dearly.

I add that on my part this article, set down on May Day, 1982, has no scholarly pretensions beyond those of fallible memory and is designed solely to provide guidelines for the researcher who will one day pay adequate tribute to the memory of an accomplished Limerick musician who was truly a pioneer in the revival of Irish traditional music.

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this point in my interview with Rita. On my referring that I meant in the musical sense, she came out with "He was anything but a Pioneer! He had to have his glass of stout every mid-morning at 11 a.m. sharp, and some cream crackers and cheese as well". When I explained that the reference was not to the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association we both laughed heartily. As also we did when Rita recalled her getting into mischief for removing some ribbons and tassels from an expensive guitar in their Chicago home and adorning herself with them!).

With his wife Catherine Kennelly Purcell and his second family of Tom and Rita, Thomas returned to Ireland in 1908. Catherine Kennelly, whom I knew well in later years, was a woman of the most attractive disposition with merry laughing eyes which somehow conveyed happy yet busy memories of her life in U.S.

Undoubtedly the pace of life in the U.S. may have been a factor in his return. "St. Patrick's Week was hectic", Rita recalled but the rising tide of national feeling in Ireland may have been a factor. Whether or not, the probability is that he longed for the peace of an Irish country town.

He played and taught for some time in Newcastle West where the family lived

being available at Wm. Phelan's, Newcastle West, are "The Battle March of Brian Boru" and "The Shamrock". Published in 1911, "The Shamrock" is dedicated to Miss Cussen of Ballyegna House, Ardagh, Co. Limerick, whom Dr. Robert Cussen of Newcastle West, that eminent authority on so many subjects, identified as a daughter of Joseph Cussen, "either Mary Ellen or Kitty – though there was a third girl". Dr. Cussen clearly recalled the Purcell family's stay in Newcastle West and his friendship with Tom.

Arrived in Listowel to take up the post as organist in St. Mary's Parish Church, to act as honorary examiner for the London College of Music, to adjudicate at Feiseanna and to teach selected pupils, Thomas with his wife and family stayed with Miss Molly Barrett of 26 Church Street – Molly was an old neighbour of Catherine Purcell in the Bedford-Clounmacon area and for many years proved the soul of kindness to the returned exiles.

Probably at this time there was also friendship with the Troy family who lived second-next door at number 22 Church Street (now O'Halloran's), for the professor and family were very friendly with Fr. Tom Troy in Chicago, where he served for a while in St. Colmcilles.