

Sydney still holds Limerick in thrall

A PICTURE in a recent issue of the Limerick Chronicle, taken in the 'fifties, of the internationally-renowned Scottish tenor, the late Sydney Mac Ewan, at a Sunday night concert in the Savoy, has aroused immense interest among readers.

Several requests have come for details of the life of the tenor, who died just over a year ago, and who was one of the best-loved figures ever to grace the stage at the Savoy.

The late Canon Mac Ewan was born in Glasgow in 1908. His school days began, not at the local Catholic school, but at St Saviours, Govan, where his mother was a teacher.

At 14, he became one of only two Catholics on the roll of Hillhead High School.

He wanted to be a priest from his early 'teens because of his close associations with the Jesuits in his home parish, and when he was just 18, he spent six months under the strict rules of a Jesuit novitiate in London, before realising that he had made a mistake.

Returning to Glasgow, his stage career began as a amateur tenor, earning what money he could, while waiting for the academic year to start at the University of Glasgow.

He took tuition at the Atheneum, Glasgow's school of music, and by the time he entered University he had already attracted much attention as a singer of great potential.

With the aid of two bursaries, his academic career progressed, and he augmented his income by singing for the children's hour on Scottish BBC.

After graduating with an MA degree, he took part in occasional BBC concerts and then set off for London and the Royal Academy of Music.

The young tenor got his big break in 1932, when the great Scottish writer and music critic, Sir Compton McKenzie, introduced him to Oscar Preus who

was recording manager with Parlophone records.

It was an association which was to last for over 40 years. Influential doors began to open for him, including the formidable Londonderry House in London, where he was to make the acquaintance and lasting friendship of Count John McCormack.

Recording and broadcasting brought him to the attention of Scots and Irish everywhere, as his reputation grew.

Tours of Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US followed. He became, according to Sir Compton McKenzie, "the greatest living interpreter of Celtic music."

But his real ambition remained—to be a priest in Scotland, and in 1938 he applied again for the priesthood and was accepted.

He was ordained to the priesthood by the Bishop of Argyll and the Isles at St Andrew's Cathedral on June 29, 1944. He sang his first Mass in St Aloysius', Garnethill, next day.

His first curacy was to St Andrew's Cathedral, Glasgow, where he worked mainly for the poor, but his celebrity status had long been established, and people flocked to the Cathedral to meet "the singing priest".

He continued his priestly duties, but still went on tours. In 1956, he was appointed a Canon of Argyll diocese, and it was around this time that he visited Limerick and the Savoy.

He retired in 1976, but continued to assist the priests of Paisley diocese, before retiring eventually to the place where he had spent much of his childhood.

He died on September 25, 1991, in a Glasgow hospital. He had expressed a wish for a quiet funeral, but for the priest who had brought so much happiness to so many in his lifetime, the tributes to him not only as a great entertainer, but as a wonderful priest, flowed at a Requiem Mass concelebrated by the Bishop of Argyll and the Isles and 40 priests.

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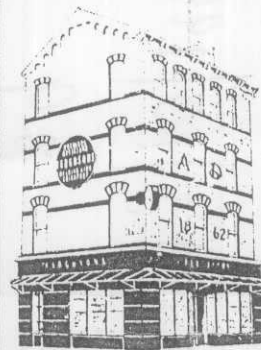
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Taken before curtain-up at a Sunday night concert on Limerick's famous Savoy stage, in the 'fifties: Sydney Canon Mac Ewan, the internationally-renowned Scottish tenor, with Maire Ni Scolai, the equally famous Irish folk singer. They were the guests of Canon Cowper DD, St Patrick's.

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