

# St. Mary's All-Ireland Fife and Drum Band, Limerick



In the autumn of 1885, just twenty years after the end of the American Civil War, St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band was founded. From its humble beginnings in the Yellow Driller, on the King's Island, it progressed next to Nicholas Street then onto Barrington's Mall, Fish Lane and finally, in 1922, the new band room was built in Mary Street, the brainchild of Patrick 'Tods' McNamara, an Abbey Fisherman, many of whom formed the original band.

Among the founding fathers of the band were Paddy Salmon, Steve Collins, Patrick and Michael McNamara (two of the famous *McNamara's Band* quartet) Paddy (Halley) Kennedy, Jack Gogarty, Jim Ring, Paddy (Sparrow) O'Donoghue and his two brothers, Ned Walsh, John Lynch, Tom Forward, Jack McNamara, John Hayes, Jim Doyle, Gerry, Michael and Jimmy Frawley.

The musical talent of the band must have been unique. At its first attempt, in September 1885, the band won the All-Ireland Championship under the baton of maestro Steve Collins. The band line-up on that occasion was J. Hayes, J. McNamara, J. Ring, J. Sullivan, T. Forward, J. Gogarty, J. Donoghue, P. McNamara (Bandmaster) J. O'Donovan and J. Salmon. Other championship successes were to follow: Limerick 1908, 1909, 1919; Waterford 1911, 1912. There were no contests during World War I or the years during the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars.

The Great War saw the involvement of members of the band and the deaths of three of them. All three were members of the Royal Munster Fusiliers and all three were killed in action within six months of each other in 1915.

The band again achieved success at Limerick in 1927, 1928 and 1930, at Cork in 1931 and at Limerick in 1947. In 1963 and 1964, the band were again winners at the Limerick and Waterford venues, at Dublin in 1965 and Waterford in 1975, where the band "stole the show", winning first prize in all categories as well as the prize for Best Conductor, the late George Tweedle. In 1988, the band was again successful under the baton of John McNamara. There are only three surviving members who won six Republic of Ireland Championships with the band - Paddy 'Whacker' Casey, Jack McGrath and John McNamara.

---

by Patrick J. McNamara

---

In 1985, the late W.W. Gleeson, a local historian and honorary band member, wrote the following passage in the band's centenary commemorative booklet published that year: *I well remember the early days of 2RN (Radio Éireann) when listening in St. Mary's Band room to parish-born Paddy O'Donovan-Reid, recording to the accompaniment of his wife, the former Ms Elizabeth Clifford his favourite piece, Bird Songs at Eventide.*

*The same afternoon, two young officers from the Army School of Music called to the home of Patrick Salmon, seeking his aid in the collection of traditional Irish ballads and classical music, at the request of Col. Fritz Brasse. As was to be expected from a man of Salmon's kind-hearted nature, the request was granted.*

In 1922, a proposal was made to visit America with the intention of taking part in the famous New York St. Patrick's Day Parade. Alas, due to civil unrest in the city, this was not to be. It would take another 70 years for the dream to become a reality. It finally happened in March 1992. The band's first American engagements were in New Haven and Meriden, Connecticut, where they participated in the local St. Patrick's Day Parade. This was followed by the fulfilment of their 70-year-old dream, to play in the New York Parade on St. Patrick's Day. This was an experience to be savoured and never forgotten.

During their American tour the band journeyed to Glastonbury, Connecticut, to pay tribute to a fellow ex-band member, Michael Danford, who had emigrated to the United States some years previously. Presentations were made on behalf of the band to Michael, who delighted in hearing them playing some of his favourite marches. Michael is now longer with us - *beannacht Dé lena anam*

During the band's visit to New Haven in 1992, they established strong links with the Stony Creek Drum Corps, who visited Limerick in 1996. The Stony Creek Band was formed in 1886, one year after the foundation of St. Mary's Band. The American contingent also included top representatives from several other marching bands, including Lancraft and the Westbrook Drum Corps. Also included in the group were members of The

Connecticut Governor's Guard. They were welcomed in a special ceremony held in St. Mary's Band Hall. The visitors made presentations to St. Mary's, including greetings from the Governor of Connecticut, the Key to the City and various gifts of band memorabilia; their American hosts also presented them with photographs and citations. St. Mary's in return presented their American guests with similar mementos from Limerick. In his welcoming speech, the St. Mary's Band President, Jack McGrath, noted that North Haven was a fishing area in Connecticut and the relationship between the two bands was appropriate because St. Mary's Band was originally mainly made up of old Abbey Fishermen.

Another first for the band was the official opening by Junior Minister Willie O'Dea in 1993 of the St. Mary's Band Museum. The museum features all the memorabilia, trophies and prizes won since 1885, covering 120 years of music by St. Mary's. The museum was named in honour of Patrick McNamara, the person who first had the vision to suggest developing and building their own band room and dance hall. Michael Burke, the band's Honorary President up to the time of his death, was also honoured and remembered by having one of the display cabinets named in his memory. An appeal at the official opening was made to the general public who may have any artefacts associated with the band to consider donating them to the museum. Junior Minister Willie O'Dea said in his remarks at the opening: *"It's great to see tradition, particularly in this historic part of Limerick being preserved in such a wonderful manner".* Band President Jack McGrath added *"it was up to the present members to keep the tradition going and pass it on to those coming in after them."*

The band is recognized world-wide due to its participation in the International Band Parade, held in Limerick every year, during St. Patrick's week. The following is a translation of an article from the French journal, *Flutes du Monde*, published in 1993:

*A fine example of the Irish flute & drum band is provided by a remarkable hundred-year-old band, The St. Mary's All-Ireland Prize Band in Limerick. The band (founded in 1885) won the All-Ireland Championship for flute & drum bands twelve times between 1885 and 1947 as well as the*

ST. MARY'S

MARY STREET,

LIMERICK



PRIZE BAND

LIMERICK,

May 14<sup>th</sup> 1940.City Manager  
Limerick Corporation.

Dear Sir

I am directed by my Committee to write to and answer your letter of the 2nd inst in connection with the vacant space of ground at the back of our Dame Hall you have mentioned in your letter if I informed you to whom we pay ground rent and amount of same you would then advise us on the matter. We are paying yearly rent of £10.0.0 to Mr P. O'Donnell (Solicitor) who is agent for the ground owned by G. Kearney. We were only paying £2.0.0. Receipts were enclosed but when the houses were demolished from the ground the rent went for extra. Thanking you for your kind attention in this matter

I Remain Yours

V. Kyp. Secretary

Letterhead of St. Mary's Prize Band, 1940. (Limerick Museum)

Republic of Ireland Championship in 1963, 1964, 1975, 1986 and 1988. In 1992 the band put into effect a project proposed in 1922: a trip to the U.S. to take part in the New York St. Patrick's Day Parade. The band now has 30 or so players. The repertoire of the St. Mary's All-Ireland Prize Band includes classical pieces, marches and traditional Irish tunes.

Since its foundation in 1885, the band has had just five Presidents. They are Patrick McNamara, Paddy O'Mahony, Michael Burke, Aidan Hurley and Jack McGrath. Some of the honorary members include W. W. Gleeson, Joe "The Dane" Hayes, Frances Condell, First Lady Mayor of Limerick, Jim Kemmy, Christy Nash (Isle of Wight), Monsignor Bourke and Jack County of New Haven, Connecticut.

Loyalty to the band is reflected in the long service given by its members, Paddy "Whacker" Casey, who is the longest serving member, with 66 years service and Colm McGrath, former Vice-President and current Honorary Sec., for the last 55 years. Some other past and present members who gave very long service to the band include: Christy Nash (75 years), Gerry Clancy (73 years), Michael Burke (67 years), Michael Hayes (64 years), Sean Meehan (63 years), Miko Ryan (60 years), Michael Kelly (52 years), Jim Ring (45 years), Jack McGrath (43 years), Joe Sheehan (43 years), Aidan Hurley (42 years), Cyril Kiely (42 years), Paddy Kennedy (40 years), Tony McGrath (37 years), John McMahon (38 years), Joe McNamara (34 years), Jackie Harris (33 years), Christy Kiely (31 years), Kevin

O'Donnell (31 years), Sean Cronin (30 years), Christy O'Connor (30 years), Derek Mulcahy (30 years), Noel Malone (30 years), and Gary O'Brien (30 years).

The most notable conductors and bandmasters from 1885 to the present are: Steve Collins, Pat McNamara, Jim Ring, Patsy Salmon, Miko Ryan, Christy Nash, Danny Flynn (uncle of Limerick's famous poet and author, Criostoir O'Flynn), Gus McNamara, George Tweedle, Jimmy Daly, John A. McNamara and Derek Mulcahy.

The first Sunday in November is set aside by the band for a Mass of Remembrance for deceased members, celebrated in St. Mary's Church. In the story of St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band, proud tribute must be credited to the numerous members who helped to keep the continuity of the band together for over a century.

Ever since its foundation in 1885, St. Mary's Fife and Drum Band has honoured the unique custom of parading through the ancient Parish of St. Mary's on New Year's Eve and thence to St. Mary's Cathedral to ring the old year out and the new year in. It may not be the longest established band in the City of Limerick, but it holds the unique distinction of continuous establishment ever since its foundation, an unrivalled record. The band can be rightfully and justifiably termed a great Limerick musical institution.

### McNamara's Band

There are few who are not familiar with the well know musical composition,

McNamara's Band. But how many know the world-wide celebrated musical ensemble got its name from four Limerick brothers: Patrick, John, Michael and Thomas, all of who were born in the latter part of the last century in Meat Market Place, Old Thomas Street, off Athlunkard Street.

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, England, in 1962.

John was a member of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, and was also attached to a regimental band. He previously had served in the South African campaign and re-enlisted in August 1914, at the outbreak of World War I. On 9th May 1915, he was killed in action at the Battle of Aubers Ridge in France; on that day, 139 members of the 2nd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers, including 30 Limerick men, were also killed. After the battle, none of the bodies were recovered; they are commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial, Pas de Calais, France.

John was posthumously awarded the 1914 - 15 Star, The Victory Medal and the British War Medal.

On 18th July 1965, Thomas McNamara - the last of the quartet - paid his second and final visit in 64 years to the spot where he was born and reared. In May 1978, he passed to his eternal reward, the last member of the McNamara brother combination that had won the All-Ireland Championship in 1895.

Of Patrick, musician and composer, it could be said that there were few who could claim to be his peer, with the honourable exception of his good friend and neighbour, Patsy Salmon of Church Street. Patrick was the bandmaster on the occasion of the 1895 championship. In 1905, when he emigrated to the United States, he carried with him this great musical tradition, where his band continued to be known as "McNamara's Band." Reunited with his brother Thomas, who arrived in the States in 1901, the combination soon caught the imagination of a great songwriter, and so, the famous ballad was born. Thomas returned home just before the outbreak of World War I and joined the British Army. After the war, he returned to America. Thomas was one of a group who helped to smuggle Eamon de Valera out of Ireland to the United States during the troubled days of 1920.

In latter years, the McNamara trio cut many records for Voralion Records, Thomas on the piccolo, Patrick on violin and Patrick's daughter, Eileen, on the piano. In 1921, The Aeolian Co. cut a number of other recordings.

The death of Thomas McNamara in 1978 ended the world-renowned saga of McNamara's Band. Those who gave it the name and the musical life had all gone to their eternal reward.