

# We Had a Song to Sing



he inspiration for my title comes from the opera, *The Yeoman of the Guard*, by Gilbert and Sullivan and is sung by the jester, Jack Point. It follows the trend set by Vincent Prendergast in his marvellous book entitled *A Set of Curious Chances*, which he took from the *Mikado* by the same famous duo. While Gilbert and Sullivan chose two totally different settings, The Tower of London and the fictional town of Titipu, our locations are the same, Sexton Street Christian Brothers School. Vincent's work deals with the operas staged by the secondary pupils of that renowned seat of learning in the 1930s and 1940s, and the major contribution of the Brothers to the musical life of the city and its hinterland. I doubt if the well-known tunes from those marvellously melodious works would have taken root so easily among us without the spring productions in the old Lyric cinema. The book also dispelled the belief, widely held and promoted by some, that life was dull and morbid in all phases of those decades: tough? yes; poor? yes in many cases; authoritarian? definitely yes, but we could take it and found our way around many a decree and fixed rule. Above all, the entertainment was local, vibrant, happy, and cheap in those pre- and post-war years.

My short article concerns an historic photograph and its subject matter, the school choirs of 1948 and 1949. The choir members were, by and large, also in the operas in those years and both groups were guided, or should I say driven, by another famous duo, Murray and Curran, but with the title of Reverend Brother before their surnames.

## Brother T.J. Murray

Brother Murray, irreverently known as 'Bosh' from an expression he himself used in his teaching days, was a Corkman who had taught in Quay Lane school in his young days and retained a great regard for the 'Parish' thereafter. He became superior in Sexton Street in the War years and contributed enormously to the educational and musical life of the city and its hinterland in a self-effacing manner that never sought or courted publicity. He deserves, in my opinion, to be remembered in his adopted city by some form of tangible memorial, a building perhaps, or a street name.

He was somewhat coercive in recruiting for his musical endeavours, and it must be said that he didn't have a note in his head, but Brother Curran considers that he had an uncanny knack of recognising a winning combination even if he usually commented that "they were not as good as last year's lot."

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by Anthony O'Brien

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## The Feis Ceol Preparations

Brother Murray now began to build on his successes in the operatic field and, aided by his musical Chiefs of Staff, first Jim Scallan and later Brother Curran, he tested the choral scene by entering the newly formed choir for the Féile Luimnighe and was successful against no mean opposition. He then turned his attention to the Dublin Feis Ceoil, the premier musical event for soloists, choirs, and instrumentalists. It was regarded as the springboard for furthering a musical career and boasted among its prize winners John McCormack and James Joyce. The choral entries were like a Who's Who of the top Dublin colleges, especially the ladies' ones. I cannot recall the choir's participation in the Feis Ceoil of 1947, but I am told that it took part without success. It must have been as a small choir, as they travelled in cars and probably did not stay overnight going or coming, and this would have been regarded as a feat in those days and certainly not the best arrangement for success.

My memories of the choirs of 1948 and 1949 seem to blend into one year's event and I cannot separate the two, except for two incidents, one in each year. I do recall going for an audition with some other boys for admission to the choir when a vacancy occurred in 1948. The F.A. Cup Final took place that day when Manchester United, led by Dubliner Johnny Carey, defeated Blackpool, and I must confess that I opted for Blackpool that day and followed their fortunes for many years with Matthews, Mortensen, Johnson, and Slater and our own Ewan Fenton in a side which eventually triumphed in 1953.

I can also recall another sporting connection in 1949 when Philib O'Laoire of the famed Cor Cois Laoi in Cork came to one of our practice sessions in the old chapel in order to give his opinion on our preparedness for the big day. He told us later that 'we were not too bad,' and that he was now going to Thomond Park to see Sunday's Well win the Munster Senior Cup, and to my knowledge he was not disappointed.

Practice sessions were usually held after school with occasional small remissions from homework and, as zero hour approached, on Saturdays, no less, Brother Curran took all the rehearsals and if somebody was off key a frown would appear and he would move along the rows with his ear to each mouth in turn until he located the offender and the look on his

face made comment unnecessary. That said, he was superb and we knew it, and if your attention strayed his admonition of 'Machai in ainm Croim' was taken in good part.

## The Dublin Trip

Learning from the 1947 experience, participation in the following two years was undertaken over several days. We were fitted out in grey pants with red and white belts, white shirts and red ties, and with the school name, which was officially St. Michael's C.B.S., on the shirt pocket. Junior members wore short pants, a common practice in those days, and needless to remark, parents paid for the outfits as the word 'sponsorship' had not yet entered the school curriculum.

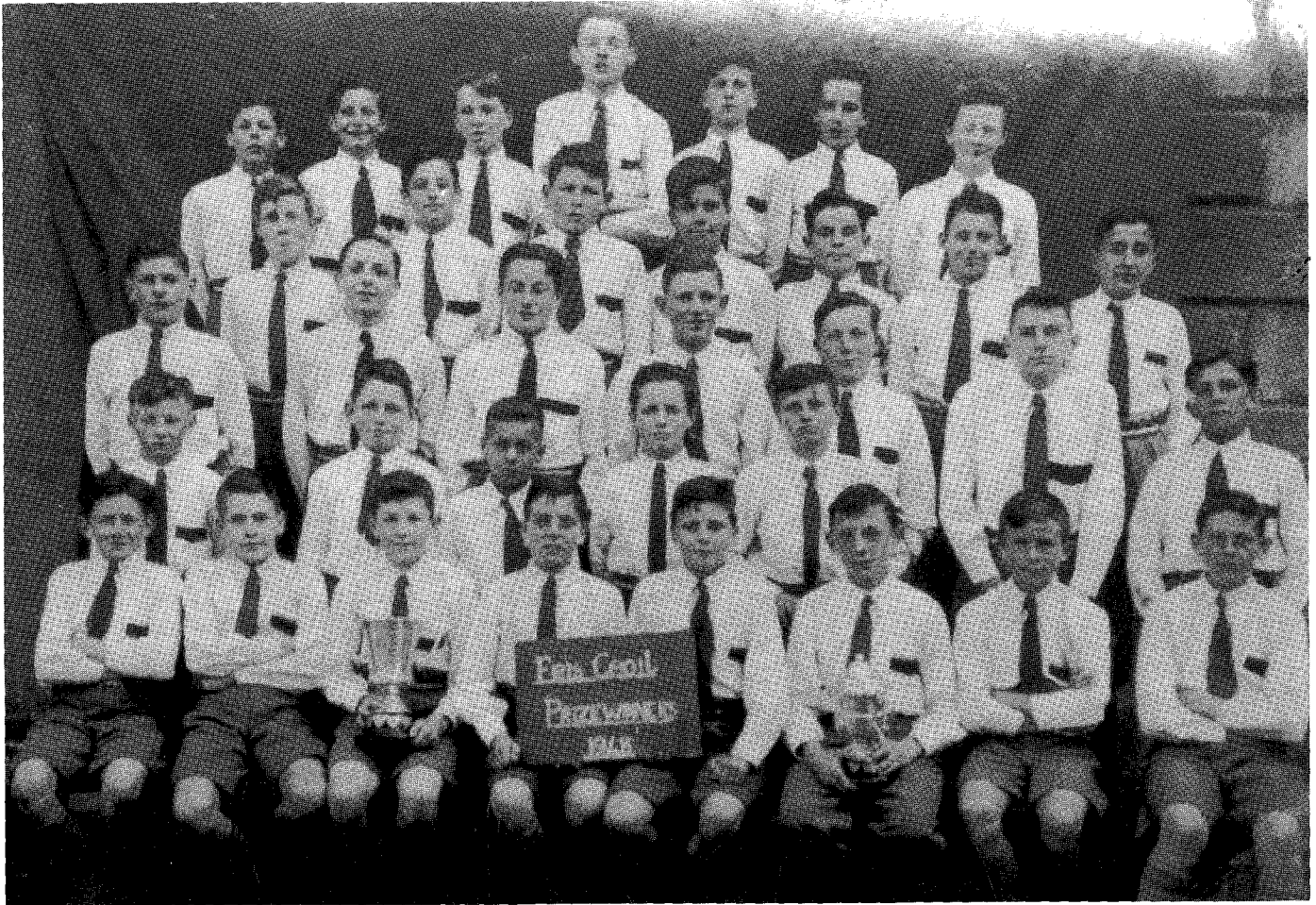
A C.I.E. bus was hired for the journey, with driver and conductor, who were to stay with us throughout and ferry us to all the locations visited in the capital. There were about 40 of us all told, including Brothers Murray, Curran and Doody, the latter availing of a lift to his native place. We were well provided for on board in the matter of sweets, biscuits, fruit and soft drinks. 'Bosh' was quite a liberal quartermaster, but there were no free meals as he would call for a rendering from one of the recent operatic productions, *Iolanthe* and *The Pirates of Penzance*, and solo items were usually reserved for the returned journey. There were several accomplished boy sopranos and others with deeper voices, who had no hesitation when called on to entertain.

In Dublin some of our number stayed with relatives, but the majority were accommodated in spick and span dormitories in Artane Industrial School. I cannot recall if we were entertained by the famous Band, or if we gave a rendering or two for their benefit, but we did perform earlier for a large gathering of brothers and novices in their house in Marino.

## Feis Ceoil Participation

It may be strange to recall that the events leading up to the Feis Ceoil recitals and their aftermath loom larger in the memory than the event itself, but that is my recollection, and other than remembering the venue as the Metropolitan Hall in Lower Abbey Street, I am indebted to the Feis Ceoil Executive and Frank Prendergast for filling the gaps in my knowledge.

The choir was late arriving in the hall and all the other choirs had completed their pieces. The adjudicator, Harold Darke, must have had to do some hurried adjustments to his marks for, after he had heard the Limerick performance, he said that "the arrival of the C.B.S. Choir had set



**FEIS CEOIL PRIZEWINNERS, 1948.**

**Front row: Paddy McCormack, Noel Fleming, Tommy Bourke, Danny Kelly, Michael O'Brien, Paddy Colleran, Anthony O'Brien, Eugene Mulholland.**

**2nd Row: Vivian Cobbe, Billy Slattery, Frank Imbusch, Tommy McGovern, Mat Fogarty.**

**3rd Row: Michael Murnane, Joe Hourigan, Mossie Donnelly, Michael Jackman, Jim Murnane, Paddy Ring, Michael Melleney.**

**4th Row: Tom Egan, Harry Beegan, Tony O'Donoghue, Leo Simpson, Dermot Kelly, Pascal Ryan, Ronan Geary.**

**5th Row: John Clarke, Tom Farrell, Denis Egan, Hugh Foy, Martin Fogarty, Pat McGovern, Eugene Guerin.**

the other performances at naught." Many competitions were won by the choir in 1948, including the best overall performance. The Thomas Derrig Cup and the 3part Cup for Secondary and Technical School Choirs were among those won. Thomas Derrig had visited Sexton Street in 1945 and his cup was reserved for choirs that had won in certain categories earlier in the Feis. There was further success for the choir, though not in the Derrig Cup, in 1949.

Choir members, Paddy Ring in 1948, and Noel Fleming in 1949, came second in the boys' solo competition, and Hilda Roche, well known Limerick contralto, came third in her competition in 1949. The entrance fee for choirs was ten shillings and first prize was £3, with runners up getting £1, and the conductor of the winning choir got a silver medal, and methinks they deserved it.

### **The Aftermath**

In Dublin, trips were made to the zoo, the Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, Cleary's Restaurant for high tea, and to the roof of Independent House for the customary photograph. A trip was made on the

Howth Tram during the 1949 visit, the year before this service was withdrawn, and a broadcast was made from the old Radio Eireann studios in Henry Street.

On the trip home a stop was made at the Brigidine Convent in Mountrath where the good Sisters dispensed tea and cakes, just as the Christian Brothers had done in Naas on the outward journey. We arrived back in Sexton Street at a late hour to be reclaimed by our families after an exciting and successful outing.

### **The Photograph**

Several photographs were taken at different times after our return and the one accompanying this article does not show Brothers Murray or Curran or Frank Prendergast and Tony Bromell and there may be others. I like to think that the group contained in it, and missing from it, is a microcosm of life in those days.

Four of the group went on to become priests, Harry Beegan, Pat McGovern, Paddy Colleran and Ronan Geary, still happily with us in the Crescent, the others alas gone to their reward. Brother Murray died in 1977. He had returned to Limerick for some years in the 1960's and in

retirement had worked at fund raising for Ard Scoil Ris. Brother Curran is living in retirement in Co. Meath. Several of the choir became Christian Brothers in the English Province, and the educational trend was carried on by Tony Bromell and Frank Imbusch at third level prominence. In music Paddy McCormack, Paddy Ring, Mick O'Brien, Noel Fleming and Denis Egan made their mark and brightened our lives considerably. Dermot Kelly, Vivian Cobbe, Billy Slattery and Eugene Mulholland thrilled us on the sporting field, as did Frank Prendergast, who went on to carry the torch in the political and trade union spheres also. Many others made their mark in the public service and in the commercial, industrial, and service industries. Many of the group have joined the three deceased priests in the heavenly kingdom and I have not distinguished between them and the living in my photograph. I prefer to remember them as they were in those happy carefree days. My prayer is that the Good Lord will ensure their presence in the heavenly choir with Brother Murray looking on, nodding approval and perhaps forgetting himself and calling for the occasional 'Song to Sing O.'