



# Feis Dhoire Cholmcille

*Founded in 1922, Feis Dhoire Cholmcille has been the showcase that launched many musical and theatrical careers and the platform that has allowed thousands of children and young adults to experience performance. Created by people of vision in a time of conflict in Ireland, it has endured as a bastion of culture and an oasis of calm where all are always assured of a warm welcome.*

## **The origins of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille**

At 10 am sharp on Tuesday 27 June 1922 the first ever competition at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille got under way. It was the Girls Solo under 16 singing competition, and the first Feis programme reveals that there was a very strong contingent of 57 singers involved.

Competitor number 50 on the list was young Nora Heaney, the daughter of Bernard and Mary Heaney of Spencer Road in the Waterside. Nora was one of a family of brothers and sisters who would feature prominently in the feis throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

When the adjudicator rose to their feet to give the results of the competition Nora was placed joint first with Nancy Doherty following a recall. So, the two young women remain recorded in history as the first gold medal winners and so unwittingly founded an illustrious tradition that has continued on for a century.

After qualifying as a teacher, Nora Torney as she became after her marriage, took up a post at Loretto Convent in Omagh, and remained there until she retired as vice-principal in 1971. In Omagh, Nora was a central figure in the arts scene and was music secretary for the West Tyrone Feis and Music Society and a founder member of the local drama and choral society groups.

Nevertheless, Nora continued to keep up her connection with Derry Feis and as she approached her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1975 she made a guest return to the Guildhall stage to recite her favourite piece. Nora passed away at the age of 97.

While Nora's victory was undoubtedly a source of joy and a fact that obviously remained a point of pride for her throughout her long life, perhaps in those young years she and her fellow competitors were unaware of the turmoil that led to the foundation of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille.

And therein lies one of the pivotal principles of the feis – that while outside society rages, inside the performance venues was an atmosphere of calm centred only on bringing out the best qualities in humanity.

Derry, like the rest of Ireland, was caught up in huge political upheaval and civil unrest at the dawn of the third decade of the twentieth century.

Throughout 1920, as the War of Independence raged across the island, forty people died in the city in the battles between republicans and the joint endeavours of local loyalists and the British Army. Twenty of the deaths came in just one week, between June 18-25 that year.

While the city had elected Sinn Féin's Eoin McNeill as its MP in 1918, unionism still controlled the city authority. The collision course between both communities in Derry began in earnest in January 1920, when a combination of nationalist and republican representatives narrowly won overall control in the Guildhall in a local election. As a result, for the first time, the city had a nationalist council and a nationalist mayor.

The initial actions of the new first citizen, Hugh C O'Doherty, decreed the banning of flags of any description being flown over the unionist citadel of the Guildhall, and he also boldly declared he would not attend any event where a toast to the Crown would be taking place.

O'Doherty, an independent nationalist who had previously parted ways with the Irish Parliamentary Party and who was a solicitor by profession, also voted for a Sinn Féin motion to strip the title of Freeman of Derry from Lord French, who had been commander-in-chief of the British forces in Ireland at the time of the 1916 Rising.

Such events served to set the unionist population on edge and Mayor O'Doherty did little to calm tensions when, near the end of his inaugural speech, he addressed his unionist counterparts on the

city authority by saying: "Is it not time that you reconsidered your position in relation to your countrymen; that you came to the conclusion that you owe your allegiance to the land of your birth, and that you should no longer play the part expected of you by English politicians but join with your fellow countrymen in demanding that the government of this country shall be by Irishmen in the sole interests of Ireland."

The final line of O'Doherty's speech added nothing but further anxiety to the unionist psyche in the city of the famed siege of 1688, and which was synonymous with the battle cry 'no surrender', when he added: "Ireland's right to determine her own destiny will come about whether the Protestants in Ulster like it or not."

Then, in December 1920, when the Government of Ireland Act received royal assent and set in train the partition of Ireland, another syringe full of bitter contention was injected into an already febrile atmosphere in Derry and neighbouring Donegal.

In Derry, people's interest lay in how the Government of Ireland Act, and the Boundary Commission would treat the city and its natural hinterland. While nationalists and unionists obviously viewed the overall political situation very differently, in truth neither wanted the connection between the two regions shattered. However, when partition happened in 1921, Donegal was not included in the new state of Northern Ireland.

It was against this vista of momentous events that the seeds of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille were sown.

Derry Feis, however, already had an illustrious predecessor in the city. Just over twenty years earlier in 1900, Mrs Alexandrina McCausland Stewart had founded what became Londonderry Feis.

An acclaimed singer herself and from a highly prestigious musical background, one of the highlights of her own career was her performance with the renowned Halle Orchestra at St Columb's Hall during feis week in 1914. Having been in Derry since 1898, when she married Abraham McCausland Stewart, she became a frequent performer in Belfast too and at St Columb's Choral Union in Derry. In 1899 she founded the Londonderry Philharmonic Society. In that year she also invited a member of the Dublin Feis Ceoil to Derry to advise on setting up a similar event in her adopted home. The first feis took place in the Guildhall in April 1900.

When Abraham McCausland Stewart suddenly passed away, Alexandrina returned home to her family in Dublin.

However, the pioneer of the feis movement in the city returned each year to take in the competitions and was accorded the honorary title of 'administrator' and received an offer from the feis committee that they would pay her travel expenses to the city each year.

Alexandrina passed away in 1942, aged 77. In 2016, an Ulster History Circle blue plaque was unveiled in her honour at her former home at Crawford Square.

When founding the feis, Mrs McCausland Stewart from the outset sought and received the blessing and co-operation of the Gaelic League in the city.

The early years of the twentieth century had seen the Gaelic revival reach Derry in strength, and they had rapidly established a strong and enthusiastic presence. Derry city even had its own Coiste Ceanntair (district committee).

The Irish language was taught in schools and each summer students thronged to the Ulster Gaelic College at Cloughaneely, close to Falcarragh, in Co Donegal. The full gamut of the Gaelic League's Irish-Ireland programme was embraced and included language classes, debates, lectures, choirs, dramatic performances, music, and dancing. The sum of all these parts was brought together in acclaimed public concerts at the end of the season in the Gaeltacht areas of the county.

But, perhaps as a reaction to the political events of the year prior to partition, came an apparent drive to expunge Irish cultural traditions and replace them with a more British form of expression as the new Northern Ireland began to find its feet. This had a very particular effect on the feis created by Mrs McCausland Stewart.

The *Derry Journal* took a very clear view on this, and the paper latterly offered a very robust opinion on the effect that partition had taken on Londonderry Feis.

In 1946, the newspaper's 'Onlooker' column looked back to major local events almost 25 years earlier and contended: "When the late Mrs Alexandrina McCausland Stewart founded the Londonderry Feis she realised that she could not get on without the Gaelic League. She invited and received its co-operation, it had a representation on the committee, it presented a trophy that, ironically enough, is still up for competitions, and its competitors proved their worth at each annual festival.

"With the departure of Mrs Stewart from Derry the whole character of the Londonderry Feis changed. It became British instead of Irish, the Irish language was relegated to obscurity and its sessions concluded with the English national anthem. Today its antipathy to everything Irish is so open as well as so pronounced that a notice, prominently printed on the first page of its programme, states: 'All vocal music must be sung in the English language, except church music, which may be sung in Latin.'

"The Gaelic League, of course, withdrew from the committee and its members from the Londonderry Feis, which henceforth became an affair of the garrison of occupation."

So, in the early months of 1922, now deprived of the chance to compete in arenas outside its own organisation, the Gaelic League in Derry took a fateful decision.

Known as a fastidious and enthusiastic organiser, Fr John Logue McGettigan became the first secretary of the feis. Mrs Edward Henry O'Doherty was appointed as chair, and it was her job to draw up the musical competitions.

The inaugural feis ran over four nights between Tuesday, June 27 and Friday, June 30, 1922. The staging of the first feis in the summer months came purely because a decision to hold it at all was only taken in the earlier part of that year as political turmoil spread across the island. Feis Dhoire Cholmcille was staged in June for the first three years of its existence before switching to Easter week in 1925, where it has remained ever since.

As the third day of competitions at the first Derry Feis got underway, it was being reported that Dublin's Four Courts were being shelled. The threat of civil war that had been looming over Ireland was no longer a threat; it had begun in earnest. And, as the feis ended on that Friday night, it was being reported that O'Connell Street was a smouldering mess.

In fact, Derry itself stood on the brink of becoming embroiled in the fight between pro and anti-treaty republican factions.

The *Derry Journal* editorial of Friday morning, June 30, 1922, put the state of the country at that time sharply into context.

It said: "The first thought that must arise in the minds of all patriot Irishmen whose newspapers reveal to them the tidings of the deadly conflict will, we believe, be one of profound melancholy.

"It is saddening in the supreme degree to find that things have come to such a terrible pass that two sections of fellow countrymen have had to turn guns upon one another with resultant loss of life and personal injury that are deplorable."

Nevertheless, despite the tragic and dreadful events that were witness to its birth, the first feis proved to be a cultural and competitive triumph.

Around 600 entrants competed across the various disciplines on offer in 1922. By the late 1990s, the feis was accommodating almost 7,000 entrants and had long since spilled out into venues away from its first and beloved home in the Guildhall.

At various times all the main rooms within St Columb's Hall, the Rialto, the Playhouse, A.O.H Hall on Foyle Street and the former St Eugene's Parish Hall (Stardust) were put to good use. The former Calgach Centre on Butcher Street was also used. In recent years St Mary's College on Northland Road has hosted choir competitions.

At the close of each feis, there was still another event to look forward to. The prizewinners' concert provided a chance, not only for the successful competitors to again showcase their talent but for everyone from across all the disciplines to admire and appreciate the efforts of their counterparts.

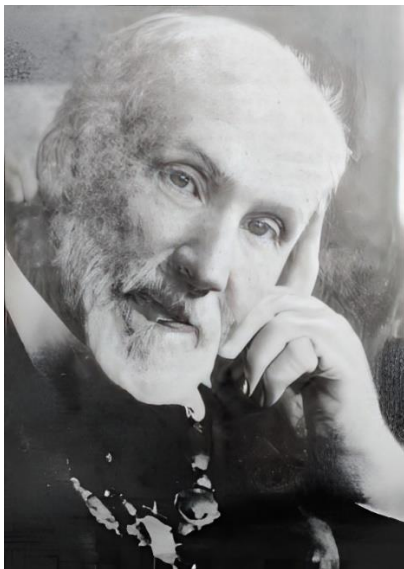
Derry Feis has been a platform that has not only remained steadfastly dedicated to its founding and principal ethos of the preservation of all things culturally Irish but has also provided an outlet for as many children as possible to experience performing. At the very core of this cultural bastion, it really was, and is, the taking part that mattered; not the winning.

By giving generations of young people, a showcase for their hard-earned skills, the institution of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille and its organisers have also unwittingly given to its entrant's abilities that they only learned they had years later. In tandem with long hours of practice across their various disciplines, the feis has by its very nature bestowed abilities upon all those people that have proved ultimately more valuable far beyond the stage. These are talents that the world has come to enjoy and cherish.

## Origins



As the first Feis Dhoire Cholmcille came to an end it was being reported that the Four Courts in Dublin were being shelled signalling the beginning of the Irish Civil War.



Hugh C O'Doherty was the first nationalist mayor in Derry in 1920.

British soldiers on the streets of Derry in the summer of 1920 beside an armoured vehicle mounted with a Lewis machine gun.



A very rare image of Mrs Alexandrina McCausland Stewart, the founder of Londonderry Feis. ***(Picture used with permission of the Ulster History Circle)***



A picture of St Columb's College Orchestra who competed at the feis in 1923. At one point during the violence of 1920, the grounds of St Columb's College were used as headquarters by the IRA. ***(Picture courtesy of the Derry Journal).***



Nora Heaney (Torney) who was the joint winner of the first ever competition held at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille in June 1922. ***(Picture courtesy of Tom Heaney – nwpresspics)***

## **Mrs Edward Henry (Rose) O'Doherty: the 'mother' of Derry Feis**

The political and social circumstances surrounding the foundation of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille are well known and heavily documented.

However, to take the creation of the event beyond the aspiration of an idea, what was required was a person with the talent, knowledge, intelligence, resilience, and determination to bring it into reality.

Still known by most people in Derry as Mrs Edward Henry O'Doherty, Rose McCormick was born on 17 December 1879 at 16 Ferryquay Street. She was the first daughter and the third child of William Henry McCormick and his second wife, Mary Jane McLaughlin and was named after Mary Jane's mother Rose (Hegarty) McLaughlin who had died just six months before baby Rose entered the world.

Two years after Rose McCormick was born, William Henry moved his family to 29 Francis Street, opposite St Eugene's Cathedral. The house belonged to Mary Jane's father, a merchant sailor, Captain Michael McLaughlin who lived next door at number 27. At some point, Captain McLaughlin passed the ownership of both properties to William Henry McCormick.

Rose was educated by the Sisters of Mercy a few doors away from her home at their school in Francis Street and later at the Mercy Convent at Artillery Street. Her mother, Mary Jane had been educated at St Mary's College in Cabra, Co Dublin and wanted her daughters to have a similar education. The Sisters of Mercy had a strong connection with the Sisters of the Holy Cross who had come to England during the Franco – Prussian War. In 1888, these nuns established a new school for catholic girls at Boscombe in Bournemouth. It was decided that Rose and her sister Sarah would go there to complete their education.

Boscombe College developed an outstanding music department and Rose, and Sarah received a top-class musical education with both girls becoming excellent pianists. Rose returned to Derry in the 1890s, while Sarah travelled to Darmstadt in Germany, where for a period, she worked as a governess.

On 19 January 1904, aged 25, Rose married Edward Henry O'Doherty at St Eugene's Cathedral. The ceremony was conducted by Dr John Keys O'Doherty, uncle of the groom and the then Bishop of Derry. The marriage was witnessed by Edward Henry's brother, also called John Keys and Rose's sister Annie.

The newly wed Mr and Mrs O'Doherty went to live at 27 Francis Street, which at this stage in tandem with number 29, now belonged to Rose's mother Mary Jane, following the death of her father William Henry McCormick.

Just over ten years later, Edward Henry and his family moved to number 2 Upper Magazine Street which had recently been vacated by his mother Ellen O'Doherty. She in turn went to live with Edward's brother John Keys at Great James Street.

Rose O'Doherty's grandson Cathal McCabe said: "The McCormick's at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century lived in Foyle Street. They owned a bar called the Traveller's Friend and a hotel. These belonged to my great-great grandfather George McCormick. He had three sons and William was the most sensible of them if you like, and he ran the business. At one time he had three pubs – the one in Foyle Street, and one just inside the Walls on Ferryquay Street (now the Anchor Bar) and The Hong Kong Bar just beside it too.

“That was the family into which my grandmother was born. They were quite well-off, and she was born over the pub in Ferryquay Street. Rose’s mother was the daughter of Captain McLaughlin and he was well-off too. He had started off as a captain on sailing boats to America. He was an apprentice to the famous Derry ship builder, Captain William Coppin, who was his mentor. Captain Michael McLaughlin was the first man, when he was sixteen, to steer to the first ferry from Derry to Moville. He was the one who bought the two houses on Francis Street. He lived in one and rented the other out. When his daughter, Rose’s mother, got married, he gave her and husband William McCormick one of the houses on Francis Street. So, although she was born in Ferryquay Street, Rose grew up in Francis Street.

“The captain had sent his daughter, Mary Jane to Dublin to be educated and so when she had two daughters, she decided to send them to England to Boscombe College. It was there that Rose and Sarah became very accomplished pianists. So, that’s where the musical background came from. Sarah, after her time in Germany came back and married a man called George Conaghan who was a solicitor. George’s father Edward was principal at Long Tower school for many years. George and Sarah’s son was Judge Rory Conaghan.”

“By the time Rose came back from Bournemouth her father had died. The curious thing was that Edward Henry’s father had died almost at the same time. So, my two great-grandfathers’ graves are almost side-by-side in the cemetery.

“Rose then married Edward Henry O’Doherty who was the nephew of Bishop John Keys O’Doherty who was the son of WG O’Doherty who owned a business in Bishop Street. It was unusual at that time that a catholic was able to buy a business next door to the Memorial Hall. He took over the shop, and then he bought the cellar next door, then the house next door to that and another one until he owned virtually all the houses right down to the Memorial Hall. So, he was quite well-off too and he had a huge family of about 12 – and that’s who Edward Henry was.”

“When WG O’Doherty died in around 1895, Edward Henry took over the business with his mother. His mother then bought a house at the top of Magazine Street and that’s where my mother grew up. So that puts it all in perspective – that they both came from quite well-off catholic families. They were conscious of their position in society. My grandmother didn’t give singing lessons or piano lessons. She coached people, but it was a philanthropic thing.

“Anyway, there was a meeting in Magazine Street where she lived with her family and she and Fr McGettigan hatched the idea of creating a feis. It was the time of the Gaelic revival, so the feis was about reviving the Gaelic culture, but it was to be done in a modern sort of way. So, they selected music that could be in Irish or Anglo-Irish – which meant an Irish composer who wrote in English.

“There were lots of those composers such as Hamilton Harty, Charles Stanford and TC Kelly and people like that. Perhaps one of the most influential ones was Carl Hardebeck who was blind and who was a very eager nationalist and who did a lot of arrangements of Irish language songs too. That was the material they used as the test pieces.

“Now, although there was obviously dancing, my grandmother was responsible for the overall concept of the feis and wasn’t particularly interested in the Irish dancing so that was looked after by the local Irish dancing teachers. One of the things that she was very, very keen about was that the adjudicators should come from outside Derry and that there were people of the highest caliber. That’s why they had people like John Larchet from Dublin.

“My grandmother never played a concert in her life. She presided at the piano; she wasn’t a commercial musician in any sense. One thing that sums her attitude to things in life, was that she was the organist in St Patrick’s Cathedral and presided over many High Masses, but she would never

have 'Sweet Heart of Jesus' played. One time I asked her why she would never have it and she said, 'the Holy Name on a high note!' She meant that singing the Holy Name on a high note would have sounded like it was being expressed as an expletive."

Leaving aside the musical talent, creativity, organisational strength, and intelligence required to put Feis Dhoire Cholmcille into action, Rose O'Doherty was also a mother and grandmother. So, what was she like on a personal level?

Cathal McCabe, who formerly worked as Director of Music for **Mrs Edward Henry (Rose) O'Doherty: the 'mother' of Derry Feis**

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Cathal McCabe, who formerly worked as Director of Music for RTÉ and who has adjudicated at the feis, added: "First of all, I don't even remember going to her for piano lessons at first because I was so young. We were evacuated to Moville during the war, and we had no piano in Moville you see, but she would say to me to practice on the table. So, I did my five finger exercises on the table.

"She was always very concerned that the performance of the music be done as the person wrote the music and intended it to be done. I remember going down later to Francis Street for lessons was a social experience, because she would be playing piano during the day up until about six o'clock and then she would have her tea or dinner and then the singers would come in the evening.

"If things were running behind, she would make me wait my turn even though I was her grandson. She would put me back because she couldn't put the others back. The O'Doherty's were a very close family. She lived in Francis Street from the age of two and her brother Leo lived in it for a long time too. He was a pharmacist. She was my grandmother, and she was part of the whole situation as I grew up. She taught me right up until the senior certificate when I was about 18.

"I learned an awful lot about music by sitting listening to her teaching other people. She was very good at the interpretation of songs. Funny enough, Sarah, her sister who lived next door to her, was an equally good musician but didn't pursue it. There were two pianos in Francis Street, there was my grandmother's piano which had come from Magazine Street and there was her mother's piano which was up in the drawing room. Then there was obviously a piano next door in Sarah's. Then there was another piano again next door in James MacCafferty's. So, it was a cacophonous part of the world.

"Another thing my grandmother insisted on was this. At 11.30pm on Christmas Eve night, the neighbours, the McCourt's, the Conaghan's, the MacCafferty's all gathered in 29 Francis Street, and they would sing Adeste Fideles on the dot of midnight."

Recalling his own involvement at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille Cathal said: "The feis was an integral part of all our lives. That meant you were put in for choir competitions, solo competitions, and piano. My father was a singer and then he was involved in choirs and conducted St Patrick's and St Anne's choir which won most of the choir competitions in the 1940s. Then he became a member of the Feis Committee.

"So, with my father, my mother being my grandmother's daughter and my grandmother, then my uncle Charlie McCormick who was one of the people who wrote the competitors numbers up on the board, it was a family business. I was put in for everything and I won nothing," Cathal laughed.

He continued: "I would have been at the feis literally all day, every day. To me the heart of the feis was the corridor outside the main hall in the Guildhall. Everything happened there. It was the Guildhall that in a way gave the feis its seriousness. The surroundings in the Guildhall were perfect for it."

The Derry Journal in the 1940s recanted a report from 1922 that at a meeting in Magazine Street that a Fr Peadar McLoingsigh, Parish Priest at Aghyarran, proposed establishing a feis after the parting of the ways with what would become Londonderry Feis.

The suggestion was well received, but others thought that timing of the event wasn't good because the storm clouds of civil war were gathering over Ireland rapidly. And many Gaelic League members were involved in the support for, or against the treaty with Britain that had divided the island.

The Derry Journal reported: "Father Peadar, however, was not dismayed. In spite of the times, perhaps rather by reason of them, he had faith in his idea, and he soon inspired the whole Coiste with his enthusiasm. It was decided to hold a feis, call it Feis Dhoire Cholmcille and to appoint a committee to draw up the syllabus."

However, no matter who formally proposed the establishment of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille it is generally accepted that it was Rose O'Doherty and Fr John Logue McGettigan who had conceived the idea.

Evidence to support this is contained in a letter sent to the Feis Committee in 1975 by a Sister M Colmcille McCormick, of the Missionary Sisters of St Columban, Westminster, California, who was then assistant registrar of the feis in its first year. The Derry born nun was writing to the committee marking the silver jubilee of the feis.

She wrote: "As far as I can remember it was in early January 1922 that either Fr McGettigan or Mrs EH O'Doherty conceived the idea of having the Feis Dhoire Cholmcille. The topic was talked about in the O'Doherty home in Magazine Street. A committee was formed from the Gaelic and musical persons of our acquaintance and representing the three parishes, St Eugene's, the Long Tower and the Waterside. The necessity of insistence on the use of our native language was stressed, and we had the help of the Irish language teacher, Roisin O'Doherty.

"Fr McGettigan was appointed Honorary Secretary and Mrs EH O'Doherty, the expert musician, as registrar undertook the arduous work of compiling the syllabus. I emphasise the fact that without her invaluable help and expertise, Feis Dhoire Cholmcille would never have come into being.

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Mrs Edward Henry O'Doherty passed away less than a fortnight before her beloved feis took place at Easter 1969. She was 89 years old and 47 of those years had been devoted to first the establishment, then the maintenance and growth of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille.

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In 2018, The Ulster History Circle unveiled a blue plaque outside Mrs O'Doherty's former Francis Street home. The plaque simply says: "Mrs Edward Henry (Rose) O'Doherty (1879 - 1969) – Teacher of Music – A Founder of Feis Doire Colmcille 1922 – lived here."

and who has adjudicated at the feis, added: "First of all, I don't even remember going to her for piano lessons at first because I was so young. We were evacuated to Moville during the war, and we had no piano in Moville you see, but she would say to me practice on the table. So, I did my five finger exercises on the table.

"She was always very concerned that the performance of the music be done as the person wrote the music and intended it to be done. I remember going down later to Francis Street for lessons was a social experience, because she would be doing piano during the day up until about six o'clock and then she would have her tea or dinner and then the singers would come in the evening.

"If things were running behind, she would make me wait my turn even though I was her grandson. She would put me back because she couldn't put the others back. The O'Doherty's were a very close family. She lived in Francis Street from the age of two and her brother Leo lived in it for a long time too. He was a pharmacist. She was my grandmother, and she was part of the whole situation as I grew up. She taught me right up until the senior certificate when I was about 18.

"I learned an awful lot about music by sitting listening to her teaching other people. She was very good at the interpretation of songs. Funny enough, Sarah, her sister who lived next door to her, was an equally good musician but didn't pursue it. There were two pianos in Francis Street, there was my grandmother's piano which had come from Magazine Street and there was her mother's piano which was up in the drawing room. Then there was obviously a piano next door in Sarah's. Then there was another piano again next door in James MacCafferty's. So, it was a cacophonous part of the world.

"Another thing my grandmother insisted on was this. At 11.30pm on Christmas Eve night, the neighbours, the McCourt's, the Conaghan's, the MacCafferty's all gathered in 29 Francis Street, and they would sing Adeste Fideles on the dot of midnight."

Recalling his own involvement at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille Cathal said: "The feis was an integral part of all our lives. That meant you were put in for choir competitions, solo competitions, and piano. My father was a singer and then he was involved in choirs and conducted St Patrick's and St Anne's choir which won most of the choir competitions in the 1940s. Then he became a member of the Feis Committee.

"So, with my father, my mother being my grandmother's daughter and my grandmother, then my uncle Charlie McCormick who was one of the people who wrote the competitors numbers up on the board, it was a family business. I was put in for everything and I won nothing," Cathal laughed.

He continued: "I would have been at the feis literally all day, every day. To me the heart of the feis was the corridor outside the main hall in the Guildhall. Everything happened there. It was the Guildhall that in a way gave the feis its seriousness. The surroundings in the Guildhall were perfect for it."

The Derry Journal in the 1940s recanted a report from 1922 that at a meeting in Magazine Street that a Fr Peadar McLoingsigh, Parish Priest at Aghyarran, proposed establishing a feis after the parting of the ways with what would become Londonderry Feis.

The suggestion was well received, but others thought that timing of the event wasn't good because the storm clouds of civil war were gathering over Ireland rapidly. And many Gaelic League members were involved in the support for, or against the treaty with Britain that had divided the island.

The Derry Journal reported: "Father Peadar, however, was not dismayed. In spite of the times, perhaps rather by reason of them, he had faith in his idea, and he soon inspired the whole Coiste with his enthusiasm. It was decided to hold a feis, call it Feis Dhoire Cholmcille and to appoint a committee to draw up the syllabus."

However, no matter who formally proposed the establishment of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille it is generally accepted that it was Rose O'Doherty and Fr John Logue McGettigan who had conceived the idea.

Evidence to support this is contained in a letter sent to the Feis Committee in 1975 by a Sister M Colmcille McCormick, of the Missionary Sisters of St Columban, Westminster, California, who was then assistant registrar of the feis in its first year. The Derry born nun was writing to the committee marking the silver jubilee of the feis.

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Rose McCormick was born in Ferryquay Street on 17 December 1879.



Mrs Edward Henry O'Doherty pictured centre with her brother Charles McCormick on the left and brother Leo McCormick on the right. This picture was taken on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1963 on the steps of St Lurach's, Lawrence Hill, home of Charles McCormick, on the occasion of his 78<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Rose O'Doherty passed away in 1969 around two weeks before her beloved feis began that year. ***Picture courtesy of the Derry Journal.***





Pictured left is the noted Donegal singer Afric McGinley receiving a cup at the feis from an unknown adjudicator. In the centre is Fr John Logue McGettigan who was of the central figures at organising the first feis in 1922.

Mrs Edward Henry (Rose) O'Doherty pictured with prize winners at Feis Doire Colmcille including her granddaughter Ursula who is pictured centre.



The grandson of Rose O'Doherty, Cathal McCabe pictured with the prize winners in the competition named after his grandmother at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille. The centenary Rose O'Doherty Cup for the Most Promising Singer U16 was won by Ella McLaughlin, with Aoibheann O'Doherty (2nd place) and Willow McIntyre (3rd place).



Granddaughters of Mrs EH O'Doherty, Ursula and Angela O'Doherty pictured when they visited the centenary feis in April 2022.

## The feis programme – a chronicle of the last century

One ritualised part of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille that has existed for decades is the scramble on Good Friday by competitors, their parents, and their supporters alike to get their hands on 'the feis book'.

In recent decades, hordes of feis mothers could be seen vying - if not jostling - for position outside city centre newsagents, like McCool's in William Street, as packages of the eagerly awaited document arrived in store. Virtually as they were unwrapped, they were unceremoniously plucked from shop assistants' hands with barely as much as a 'thank you'.

Unwitting passers-by not from Derry, or the very few unfortunate locals unfamiliar with the ritual, could have been forgiven for thinking they were witnessing the distribution of free gold bars or a pamphlet containing the bona fide secret of eternal youth.

The clamour to get hold of this document was because the feis book, '*clár*' in Gaelic, contained information vital to the planning of the entire following week, which was then executed with military precision.

The book revealed the venue and time of each competition, the number of competitors and who would be in the adjudicator's chair. For those competing in multi-disciplines, it allowed for the planning of how to navigate between halls and if, for example, a dancer needed a lightning costume change to be appropriately dressed to compete as a singer or instrumentalist. Between Good Friday and when battle commenced on Easter Monday morning, the document was probably studied more intensely than any other piece of literature available in the city. It's perhaps fair to say that members of the local clergy probably quietly prayed that their flock would pay as much attention to the Good Book itself.

Moreover, the feis book provided a ready-made notebook for the eager amateur adjudicator, who busily jotted their thoughts down on the winners during competitions. These notes were often used as a topic of conversation, and indeed opinion, during the lull between sessions over tea in the Guildhall's main corridor. When the feis ended each year, in many homes the book was often preciously stored away as a volume for future reference.

However, a century on from the first Derry Feis, what the *clár* also now provides is a fascinating source of the city's social history; year by year, decade after decade.

All the programmes have one thing in common, and that's the carrying of the Feis Dhoire Cholmcille motto on the front cover. The motto is "Do chum glóire Dé agus Onóra na hÉireann," which translated from Irish is "For the Glory of God and the Honour of Ireland."

In 1922, the price of the book was two shillings, and notice of the first prizewinners' concert, to be held on Saturday, July 1, at 7pm, was listed on the front cover. At that stage, the programme made no mention of the cost of attending feis sessions, but competition entry fees were listed inside the programme. The cost of entry to a children's solo competition was one shilling, and it was five shillings for a children's choir. Adults competing in solo competitions were charged two shillings and sixpence, and adult choirs were charged ten shillings each. The cost rose to twenty shillings for bands – around £2.40 in today's money.

The rules also stipulated that: "No competitor in a band or choral competition can compete in more than one band or choir in the same competition."

The original book also listed the donations of prizes by various businesses and individuals across the city. A silver challenge cup to be awarded to the winners of the mixed choir competitions was given by the 'proprietress' of the City Hotel, Miss MC MacDonald. Other cups were put forward by the

Knights of Columbanus, the Derry Division of the AOH and the Irish National Foresters. Among those who put forward gold medals was Mrs Edward Henry O'Doherty herself, whose award was to be presented to the winning solo baritone. Miss Angela Loughery donated a gold medal for the cello competition, and the medal for the top solo contralto was given by the Sisters of Mercy at Pump Street. Waterside solicitor Thomas Conaghan donated a gold medal for the senior violin competition, while the top prize for the winner of the senior piano competition was put up by a Mrs Cooper who lived in London.

In 1927, the feis created a broadcasting first when the prizewinners' concert became the first concert to be broadcast on radio from Derry by the BBC. An hour and a half of the programme was relayed to Belfast, and the announcer on the night was the future Bishop of Derry, Rev Dr Farren, who at that time was on the teaching staff of St Columb's College.

The books, printed for many years by the *Derry Journal* in Shipquay Street, also contain many pages of advertisements from sponsors of the feis. They list the names of family businesses, and some trades, now long gone. Among the business names listed in 1922 are Anthony Carlin, Painting Contractor, of 10 William Street, Henry Lane & Co, Coal Merchants, James Doherty Butchers and Connor's Drapery and Fancy Warehouse of Butcher Street.

One eye-catching advertisement in the first volume was for Prior & Co, Medical Establishment, who were promoting a range of goods from a company called Molenia who produced Molenia Liquid Extract, which they said was an "elixir of unrivalled efficacy in the earlier stage of consumption and pulmonary complaints, most valuable for asthma and bronchitis and a sovereign remedy for ordinary coughs and colds".

Prior & Co also sold Molenia cigarettes (for asthmatics) at one shilling per box.

Ten years later, in 1932, the price of the feis book had decreased to one shilling; perhaps influenced by the growing numbers of entrants in the previous decade or the dire economic circumstances of the 'hungry 30s'.

This volume listed the price of admission to feis sessions, which was one shilling for adults and half price for children. Adult season tickets were seven shillings and sixpence and two shillings and sixpence for children. Season tickets covered entry to all sessions but did not include admission to the prizewinners' concert on Saturday, April 2. This book also contained a directive from the committee that "all competitors in a competition must remain outside the hall until requested to enter by the platform steward."

One 1932 advertisement from Crockett & Guy Ltd of Strand Road presumed that women had little else to occupy them apart from cleaning after the excitement of Easter week had passed. The advert was headlined: "The Feis and then spring cleaning – we can offer the housewife everything to convert this season of labour and discomfort into a period of pleasurable interest: these appliances include the new Hoover Electric Vacuum Cleaner, the O'Cedar Mop and Waxit polisher, the Whirlwind Sweeper (Non-Electric), the Ewbank Sweeper, Furniture Polisher, Brushes and Dusters all in endless variety."

At sixpence, the 1942 feis book was fifty percent cheaper than it had been ten years earlier. In the war years, due to the increasing numbers of entrants, the feis began running across five days of Easter week as opposed to the four days in its initial years.

Of course, by this stage, Derry like the rest of Europe was three years into World War II, and as a highly strategic port for the British was subject to attack from the Third Reich.

A year earlier, in 1941, the Easter Tuesday evening session of the feis had ended in the Guildhall before 11pm. This was a highly unusual occurrence, as most sessions ended at one or two in the morning.

At around 11.30pm, the air raid siren sounded over the city as the drone of a German plane came into earshot. The target of the Luftwaffe was almost certainly British naval boats on Derry's docks, but for whatever reason, the plane veered away left from the Foyle and unloaded two parachute mines. One landed harmlessly in a sandpit at Collon Terrace but the other struck Messines Park. Thirteen people, ranging from 10 months to 60 years of age, were killed and many more were injured. It was the only attack by Germany on Derry, but a devastating one.

In 1942, the burgeoning numbers taking part, along with the additional competitions, saw two prizewinners' concerts take place on Saturday, April 11: one for children at 3pm, with the adult showcase beginning at 7pm.

And a note from the committee in this volume stated: "Irish costumes as far as possible are to be worn at the feis and at all its functions. Failing such, however, the nearest and becoming approach to the same is expected of all competitors. The public, on these occasions, demands such."

Although Derry was involved in World War II because of its constitutional harness to the UK, and by that association became an important location in military terms, an advertisement in the feis book of 1942 gave a clear indication that these connections were unwanted by the nationalist population.

The advert read: "Buy Irish Goods – It is our duty to support our own industries and manufacturers. Ask your supplier when purchasing – Is This Irish?"

By 1952, the price of the feis book had risen again to one shilling and sixpence, and a sign of technological advances and changes in methods of home entertainment was illustrated on the back page of this volume.

An advert placed by HB Philips Ltd of Beethoven House on Shipquay Street was selling PYE portable radio and television receivers and boasted that these products were only "obtainable in Londonderry." Exactly twenty years earlier, the same firm had an advert on the back page of the programme selling five different models of piano ranging in price from £36 to 65 guineas.

Meanwhile, Sammon Shoes Ltd in Sackville Street were advertising Jumping-Jacks Flexible Shoes for Children. Bootees were available for 24 shillings and ninepence, while sandals would cost you 24 shillings and sevenpence.

Advances in the travel industry were also in evidence with an advertisement from Foyle Travel, which was based at 22 William Street. This travel agency was owned by the late leader of the Nationalist Party, Eddie McAteer, whose accountancy firm operated upstairs from the travel firm.

In 1962, Foyle Travel was again advertising in the feis book. The business had by this time moved three doors up to 25 William Street and was advertising trips to Butlin's for £10 per week, Red Island Holiday Camp for £7 and ten shillings a week and continental holidays for £11 and three shillings for five days.

In keeping with the connection with the Gaelic League, an advertisement for cultural classes at the Albert Hall in Bishop Street featured in the 1952 programme. Language classes ran on Mondays and Thursdays, history and singing classes on Wednesdays, Irish and English drama classes ran on Tuesdays and dancing classes took place on Sunday nights.

And, if you fancied a flutter, the Derry City Greyhound Racing Co invited punters to the Brandywell on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 7.45pm, although with a clear stipulation that “persons under 18 years of age will not be admitted under any circumstances”.

In 1946, during the silver jubilee of the feis, one of the founders Fr John Logue McGettigan, who was still the organisation's president at that point, said at the end of that feis that very few had dreamt the event would last so long when it began in 1922. But, not only had the feis survived, it had grown beyond all expectations in terms of entries and popularity.

However, in 1962 Feis Dhoire Cholmcille reached its 40th year in existence. It is very doubtful that the feis paid much attention to the era of psychedelia, but the feis *clár* for that year certainly showed signs of it as it was printed in bright pink, yellow and blue pages.

In the adverts that year, Eaton's bakery posed a serious question about whether white or brown bread was better for your health. The advertisement reads: “Some say, the whiter your bread, the sooner you're dead. Others say there is no special merit in brown bread. We cater for both beliefs, but we are not greatly concerned about colour. Our greatest concern is flavour – in all our products.”

1972 should have seen the golden jubilee of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille celebrated in style.

But, just as fifty years before in 1922, the event was pitted against a backdrop of violence. However, while the first feis went ahead, in 1972 another outbreak of the Troubles halted the event in its tracks for the first time.

The year was by far the worst of the Troubles, with 497 people losing their lives across the North. On January 30 that year, 13 people were shot dead by British soldiers in the Bogside in what became known as Bloody Sunday. A fourteenth man died later from his injuries.

Inter-communal relations in the city had reached an all-time low and, as a republican bombing campaign took hold in the city centre, Derry became a virtual ghost town after dark. In this era, it was often impossible for young people to attend dancing, singing or music lessons let alone operate a week-long feis.

The decision was regrettably taken that the feis and the celebration of a wonderful 50 years in existence could not go ahead. The same decision for the same reasons had to be taken again in 1973 and 1974. The feis was dealt another hammer blow in June 1972 when an IRA bomb devastated the Guildhall and left the event without a home.

Undaunted, the feis returned in 1975 when, three years after it should have been held, the 50th anniversary celebrations went ahead. With the Guildhall still out of bounds, the feis relocated to St Columb's Hall.

It was not until 2020 that the feis, for the second time in its lifespan, was prevented from taking place, this time as a result of the Covid pandemic. Thankfully, it was able to return in 2022 and, though technically not the 100th staging of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille, the decision was taken to celebrate 100 years since the event was first held.

A wider societal change that had taken place in 1971 had been decimalisation. So, in 1975, the price of the feis book was listed in the 'new money'. It was 50 new pence. Easter arrived early that year and the jubilee feis ran between March 31 and April 4, with the prizewinners' concert being held on Saturday, April 5.

The official opening of the feis was conducted by the new Bishop of Derry, Rev Edward Daly, and there was a recital by the St Columb's TA (Temperance Association) Band. Immediately after the official opening, there was a special jubilee competition to mark the anniversary. In essence, this was

a veteran's competition, as it was open only to those who had not competed at the feis in the previous ten years. It was also designed to be a talent showcase, as competitors were directed to "present an item in keeping with the character of the feis, under any of the sections of the syllabus – language, vocal, and instrumental music, speech, drama and dance."

The prize, awarded by Fr D Mullan, administrator of St Eugene's Cathedral, was a copy of the Book of Kells.

As the feis turned 60 in 1982, excerpts from the welcome address to the feis provide a lovely insight into the founding ethos included in the feis book that year. It said: "Listen with special affection to the songs of our own land and the language of our fathers. A nation without its cultural roots will soon wither; a nation that preserves the riches of its past is a wise and careful provider for its own future.

"Give all the attention you can to every one of the performers, from the struggling four-year-old to the gold-medalled veteran; each one of them is our special friend this week, each one of them a living expression of something beautiful, something to be treasured.

"Friends have departed. Hardship and anxiety have come the way of many of us in this town we love. May the feis lift our hearts and renew our spirits.

"And so on with the feis! 'Can we have the required silence, please, for competition number one?'"

In 1992, the opening address in the feis book was penned by the recently appointed feis secretary and future Archbishop of Ireland, Dr Eamon Martin, who wrote: "Last Easter in a crowded corridor outside the main hall of the Guildhall, I overheard two good ladies chatting near the tea counter.

'Who's that wee priest with the curly hair?' said one.

'Do you not know?' her companion replied.

'That's Fr Martin who's taking over from Fr Mullan next year.'

"At this point, they both caught me listening and attempted to console me on my recent appointment as feis secretary, saying 'God help you, son...I mean Father. That's a wile job you've got!'"

Another feature of the feis *clár* has been its remembrance of those who passed in the intervening year before the next feis. There are many examples of these obituaries in the annals of the feis book, but in 2010 one of the great dancing masters of the North West was eulogised.

Seamus Kerrigan, a protégé of the vaunted city dancing teacher Nellie Sweeney, hailed from south Derry and built the Kerrigan School of Dancing into a formidable competitive outfit over many decades. His dancers, from his native area and beyond in Tyrone, were greatly admired and feared in competition in equal measure.

Part of his obituary reads: "Seamus Kerrigan loved to come here to Derry, the city of dance, and its feis. Our Nellie Sweeney had given him so much. It was to her honour that he showed he had been a worthy pupil. He delighted to be among his colleagues from across his professional world. His respected prowess often matched it, at times surpassed it, and more than once, of course 'was robbed'. He paid his annual visit to our late illustrious registrar Sibéal Sharkey in her office, warmly received, friendship warmly renewed. Now, with the great ones of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille, he has passed..."

The cover of the centenary feis *clár* is appropriately trimmed in green with the feis logo emblazoned in gold.

In the introduction to the 100th year of the feis, the committee chair Fr Kevin Mullan wrote: “The sounds of song and melody and the rhythm of the dancing shoes ring out again in our city. It is spring at its finest. The flowers have pushed up; the blossoms have opened. The colour of another year is on offer.

“In the eyes and smiles of young people is the invitation to come away with them to the land of story and imagination.

“And hasn’t it always been so! The magic and the achievement of our young people as they are released from the hands of their parents and teachers onto the feis stage is a gift to our hearts.

“The applause of the audience, the praise of the adjudicator, the warm proud embrace of parents when their children have done their best, and the respect of the staff for each performer, these make us all friends, almost one family together.

“This experience is the true legacy of those wonderful pioneers of 1922, when, under the inspiration of Mrs Edward Henry O’Doherty and Father John McGettigan, they created Feis Dhoire Cholmcille.

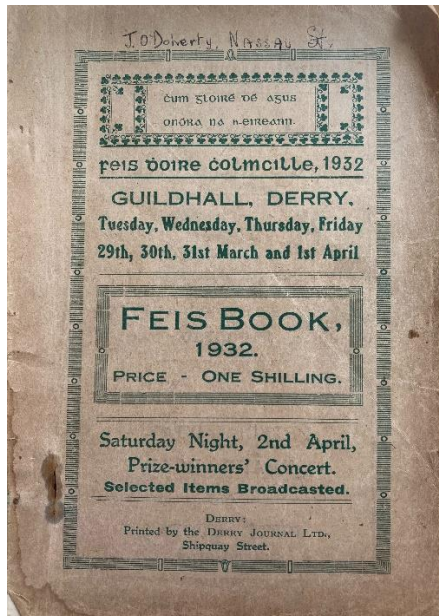
“It was journeyed through time, responding to the talents and interests of all age groups, and writing names not just into a programme but into the memory of our city and beyond.

“Derry Feis is a place where all belong. To deny this to any young person would be to have gotten your priorities wrong.

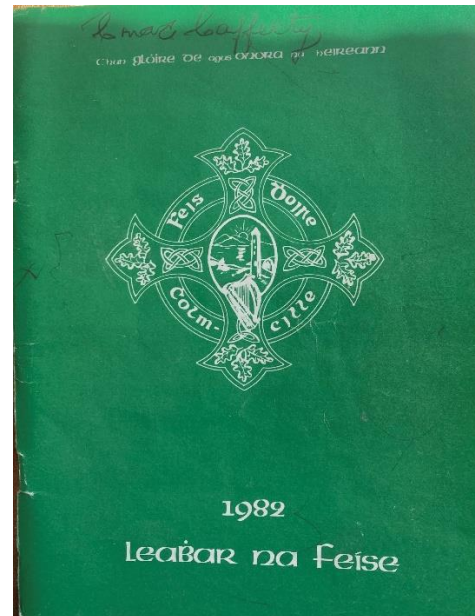
“In this 100th year, we are so happy to be together once more. It is your achievement, the people of the city and your friends. Now we all need to think about what we should, and can, do.”

The feis didn't take place in 1972, 1973 or 1974 because of the Troubles. An IRA bomb devastated the Guildhall in June 1972, so when the feis returned in 1975 it relocated to St Columb's Hall.

**NO CAPTIONS REQUIRED ON REMAINING IMAGES**



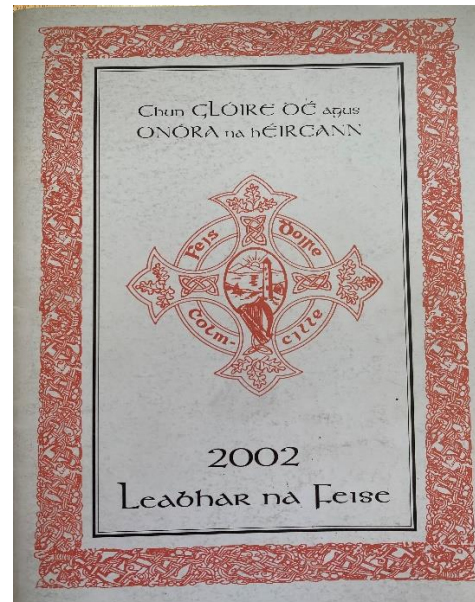
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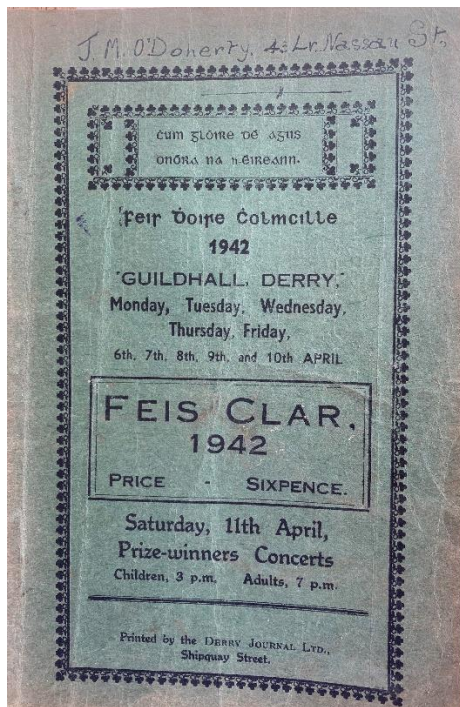
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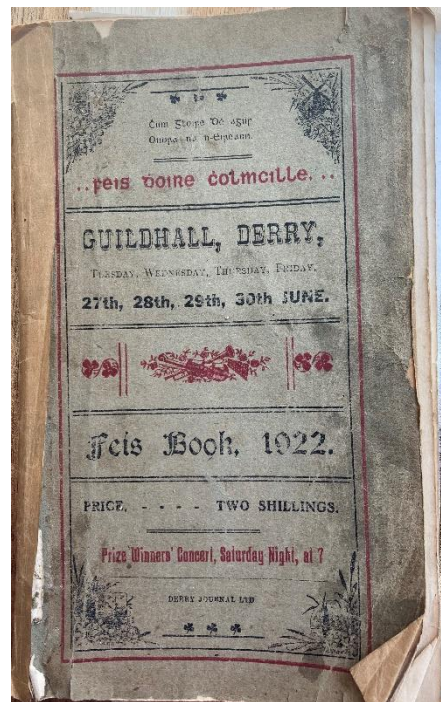
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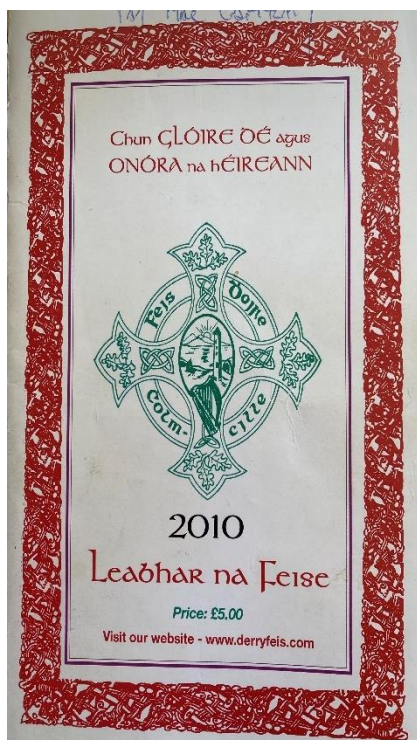
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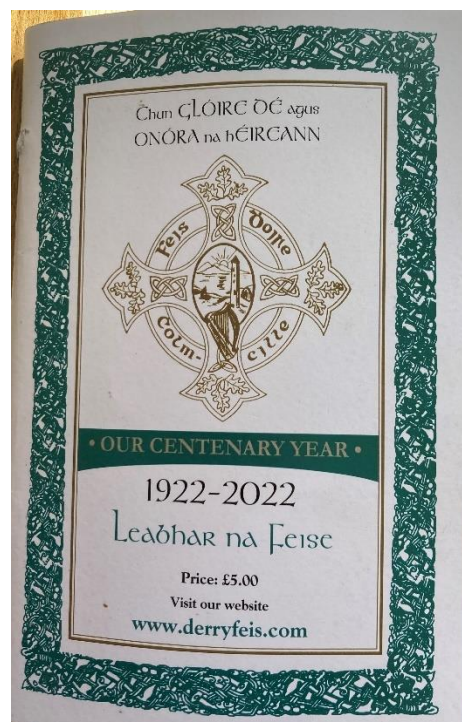
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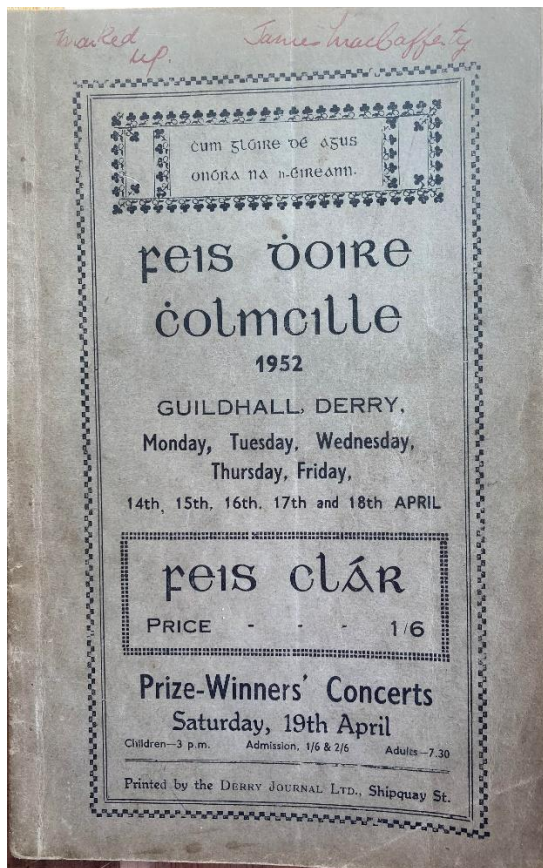
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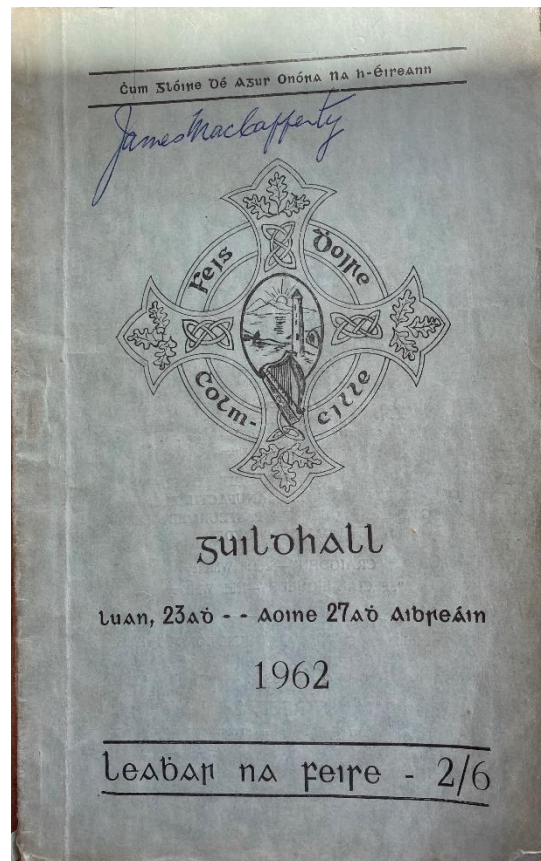
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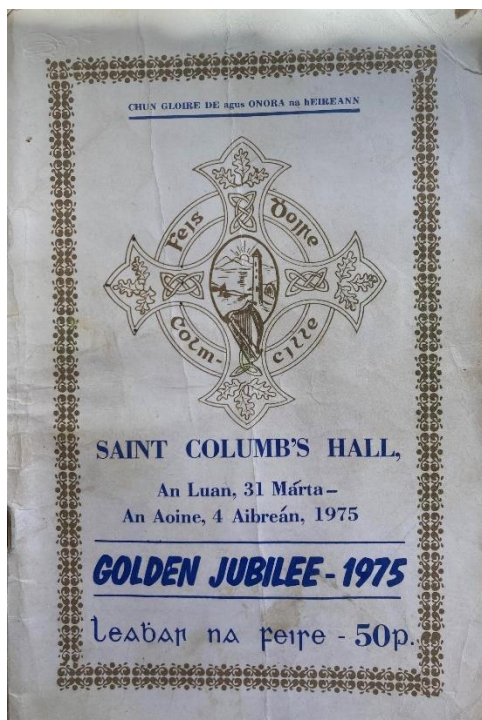
Clar 8



Clar 9



Clar 10



Clar 11



Clar 12

## **Feis medals: the treasured prize with a value beyond measure**

While many aspects of the operation of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille have adapted to modern practices since 1922, one thing that has never been altered - apart from the centenary - is the design of the much-prized medals awarded every year.

Every single part of the classic design of the striking medals is rich in the symbolism that reflects the ethos of the feis, and that will remain the same for as long as they continue to be awarded.

The design of the medal in 1922 was the work of a nun, Mother Clement Hogan, of the former Loreto Abbey, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM), in Rathfarnham, Dublin.

Unfortunately, the archives of the Loreto Sisters do not hold any photographs of Mother Hogan or her designs for the Feis Dhoire Cholmcille medals.

What the Loreto Order was able to say, however, was that Elizabeth Hogan was born in 1850 to Irishman John Hogan and an Italian mother Cornelia Bevignani. It is unclear whether Bessie, as she was known, was born in Dublin or Rome.

When Bessie was nine, she and her family returned to Ireland, where she attended the Loreto Abbey in Rathfarnham as a pupil and entered the religious life on August 25, 1871, and was professed into the Loreto Sisters on May 4, 1874. Elizabeth chose the name 'Clement' in religious life and was known by it for the rest of her life.

A talented artist, she produced many paintings and was art mistress in Loreto Abbey for most of her life in the order. Mother Clement retired due to ill health in 1924 but remained a member of the community until her death, aged 92, on November 19, 1939. In all, she had devoted 69 years to religious life.

However, artistic talent was ingrained into the DNA of Mother Clement, whose father was the famed 19th-century Irish sculptor John Hogan.

His work chiefly centred on ecclesiastical pieces, and he is best known for producing versions of 'The Dead Christ'. The first version, carved in 1829, is in St Therese's Church in Dublin, the second, made in 1833, is at St Finbarr's Church in Cork and the final version, from 1854, resides at the Basilica of St John the Baptist in Newfoundland in Canada.

John Hogan was also commissioned by Mother Teresa Ball, the foundress of the IBVM in Ireland, to produce a marble altar of 'The Dead Christ' for the abbey at Rathfarnham. It was installed in June 1843. Interestingly, the two statues of angels at each side of the altar are said to have been modelled on his two daughters, Elizabeth and Francesca.

The County Waterford-born artist also carved a marble statue of Daniel O'Connell in 1837 which still stands at Dublin City Hall to mark the spot where 'The Liberator' made his first speech against the Act of Union in 1800.

Mother Clement's design of the feis medal is formed in the shape of a Celtic cross meant to symbolise Ireland's suffering.

On the front of the medal, within a central oval panel, is a typical Irish landscape of a mountain, a field and water. In the foreground of the oval panel is a round tower stretching towards heaven, while over the mountain are seen the rays of the rising sun representing the dispersal of doom and gloom and spreading a message of hope, peace, and gladness.

Encircling the central panel of the medal is a ring symbolising eternity. In the foreground of that panel is an image of a harp, the most recognised symbol of Ireland as a nation. Then, spreading out from the centre, each arm of the cross has an interlacing Celtic design with the oak leaves of Doire Colmcille at each end. The circle interlinking each arm of the cross is inscribed with the words 'Feis Dhoire Cholmcille'.

Perhaps what truly sets the design of the medal apart from any other similar prize is the fact that the back of the original 1922 medal was as intricately marked as the front. The reverse side is just as packed with symbolism as its opposite.

On the back of the medal, on the left arm of the cross, sits a dove – the symbol of Derry's patron, St Colmcille. Opposite that, on the right arm, is another harp, but also an open book symbolising learning. At the base of the cross is an Irish round tower with a hill and a valley showing in the distance. The circle of the cross on the reverse is emblazoned with shamrocks, representing St Patrick and Ireland. A blank space on the reverse side of the medal is a purposeful gap reserved there so prizewinners could have their names inscribed on it. The top arm of the cross is dominated by a church, representing faith and Colmcille. The overall effect of the medal is designed to stand for music, learning, Derry, Ireland, St Colmcille, and God.

Aine McHugh, archivist for the IBVM, said: "A note on our record indicates that Mother Clement's sister Francesca was married and lived in Binion House, Clonmany, Co Donegal, which may explain the connection with Feis Dhoire Cholmcille."

The first feis programme from 1922 also contains additional information on the medals. In a brief section called 'Execution of Medal,' it is explained: "The committee entrusted the execution of this highly artistic design to Messrs. Wm. Egan and Sons, Jewellers, Patrick Street, Cork, and this eminent firm has carried out the work very successfully."

Egan's Jewellers and Silversmiths were established in Cork in the 1820s and produced magnificent silver items, including the mace for University College Cork in 1910.

Egan's premises shifted from Cork's Grand Parade to St Patrick's Street in 1876. The original shop on St Patrick's Street was destroyed during the burning of Cork in 1920 but reopened for business again on the same site in 1925.

During the Civil War in 1922, communications between Dublin and Cork were disrupted, so for a brief period, Egan Jewellers produced silver which was assayed (quality assured) by the firm itself. This 'Republican silver,' as it became known, is now extremely valuable, with some examples of it to be found in Cork Public Museum.

Despite the obvious associations, there is no evidence at all to suggest that the first incarnation of the feis medals were crafted from Republican silver.

The company continued to produce much sought-after silverware until the firm eventually closed its doors in 1986 after 110 years in the same spot, and its merchandise continues to be much sought-after by antique dealers.

The first feis book also lays out the committee's stipulations for the award of the medals.

It says: "The medal is struck in gold, silver (gold centre), silver, and bronze. The Gold Medal will be known as the 'The Feis Dhoire Cholmcille Gold Medal' and will be awarded only in the case of special excellence in any subject.

"The other medals will be the ordinary medals awarded at the feis as 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes, except in the cases of Duets, Trios, and Quartettes, which will be silver and bronze.

“Choirs, bands and reels, will be otherwise provided for by the committee.”

The fact that the first feis committee chose such a prestigious company to strike the medals reveals the determination to embed the prestige of the competition in all respects from the outset.

Only in 2022 was the medal design altered slightly to mark the centenary of the feis. That alteration simply saw the inclusion of the years 1922-2022. From 2023 onwards, the design will revert to its traditional format.

In later years, rounded versions of the medal have also been awarded at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille. The distinction between those medals and the Celtic cross design is that the latter versions are awarded to winners in the junior competitions of the feis while the original design is awarded to senior competitors. The feis medal has long since become the symbol of the institution itself and is used in all feis memorabilia and official communications.

Aisling Bonner, feis secretary, said: “The design of the original medal was meant to reflect the reasons behind the foundation of the feis as well as being a physical representation of the principles it has operated on over the last century. It is a unique design that we are very proud of and that hasn’t changed in any aspect since the first medal was struck.”

“The inclusion of the years 1922-2022 on the medals for the centenary feis was only to mark the 100th anniversary of the feis. It meant that anyone who won a medal in 2022 has a truly unique memento of taking part in the most special celebration. These medals are future heirlooms, and future generations can hear the stories of how they were won by their mums, dads, and, eventually, grandmothers and grandfathers.”

## Feis Medals



The original feis medal was designed by Mother Clement Hogan of the Loreto Sisters.



The reverse of the medal was just as intricately designed as the front and was rich in symbolism.



The 2022 medals saw the first minor amendment to the design in a century in order to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Feis Dhoire Cholmáille.



The former Loreto Abbey at Rathfarnham pictured in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is where Mother Clement Hogan designed the medals for the first Feis Dhoire Cholmcille in 1922. (*Picture courtesy of IBVM*)



The main altar in Loreto Abbey, the centre piece executed by sculptor of John Hogan and you can just about see the two side statutes with angels purported to be Mother Clement and her sister Francesca. (*Picture courtesy of IBVM*)

## **Feis attracted the 'best of the best' adjudicators**

A feis adjudicator's lot in life is often a very unenviable one.

The official scrutiny of performances in any sphere of the arts is always, of course, a highly subjective practice. What one adjudicator values, another doesn't see as vitally important in the overall marking scheme.

Before they even take their completely visible seat in the middle of the performance arena, each adjudicator knows that, in any given year, their opinion will be both applauded and despised, often in equal measure. It is the nature of competitive activity, and it is not for the inexperienced character to tackle.

For those reasons alone, adjudicators tend to give off a solitary, almost aloof, demeanour so that any accusations of partiality are minimised. At the end of each competition, they must take to the stage and justify their reasoning for awarding prizes, knowing that their decision is final and binding and that their decision could have either a deflating or a positive and formative effect on a young person's life.

However, the shrewd competitor and teacher will always realise that, in lieu of winning a medal, the long-term prize lies in heeding an adjudicator's remark or notes and using them as guidance to improve. From that, in turn, comes the life skills of confidence and resilience that carry young people beyond their competitive years into well-adjusted adulthood.

From the beginning in 1922 - particularly in the music section - Feis Dhoire Cholmcille managed to secure the services of some of the most revered musical figures in Ireland to sit in the judging hot seat. Undoubtedly, this is because of the reach, influence and respected reputation of Mrs Edward Henry (Rose) O'Doherty and the respect in which she was held across the island and beyond.

Feis records reveal that the very first three-strong panel of music adjudicators formed a virtual *Who's Who* of Ireland's musical experts in that era and who, in keeping with the origins of the feis, also held a distinctly nationalist view within their cultural outlook.

The very fact that they attended gave the event the prestige it needed to succeed and develop, and show the rest of Ireland that, in Derry and its hinterlands, there was an abundance of musical talent that was at least the equal of any other place on the island. It also set the benchmark for the calibre of adjudicators that followed down the decades.

Between 1922-24 and again in 1929, the feis saw Arthur Warren Darley (1873-1929) climb into the adjudicator's seat in Derry. Born in Dún Laoghaire, he came from a family steeped in both the classical and Irish traditional music genres, and he strode across both masterfully.

The young Darley began learning the violin aged eight and studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM) and had the distinction of becoming a teacher there while still a student. By 1900, Darley was a senior professor at RIAM and was later a fellow in the College of Violinists in London, a professor at the Leinster School of Music and Drama and, in 1928, he was appointed the first director of the Municipal School of Music in Dublin.

Darley was also the founder and leader of the Dublin String Quartet, which gave the first performance of Swann Hennessy's String Quartet No 2, a piece dedicated to the republican Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, who died on hunger strike in 1920. It was first performed in Paris on January 25, 1922, at the World Congress of the Irish Race, in front of many Irish Civil War opponents.

Darley's interest in traditional Irish music saw him become president of the Irish Music Club and he also founded the orchestra 'Cumann Ceoil' that broadcast regularly on *RTÉ* between 1926-1969. He also helped collect old Irish ballads and was responsible for putting airs to songs such as *The Boys from Wexford*, *Boolavogue* and *Kelly the Boy from Killane*.

Given the composition of these airs, it is perhaps unsurprising that Darley supported the nationalist cause during the War of Independence, and during his time as a church organist in Bruckless, Co Donegal, he opened his home, Bruckless House, to republican leaders. These songs were also published by the Feis Ceoil Association in 1914. His contribution to the War of Independence saw him perform at many 1916 commemorations at the Theatre Royal, and he also received an obituary in the republican newspaper *An Phoblacht* a month after his death in December 1929. Ireland's second president, Sean T O'Kelly, also wrote on Darley's death in *The Nation* and praised his contribution to Irish music.

Darley was in fact a co-founder of the Feis Ceoil in Dublin and the Fr Matthew Feis, an event run by the Irish Capuchin order, and he viewed the burgeoning feis movement as a springboard for the Irish cultural revival of the era. The Arthur Darley Memorial Prize is still awarded to violinists at the Feis Ceoil each year.

In a lecture he gave in 1910, Darley lamented the apathy shown to music in Ireland at that time. He contended that 'great artists' could play to half-empty rooms "yet if there was a boxing match announced, the doors would be besieged hours before they are opened."

He did, however, find room for optimism that a nationwide interest in music would happen, and said that choral singing had been greatly aided by the establishment of the feis movement and the regeneration of the Irish language.

In that same lecture to the Eithne Choral Society, some twelve years before the establishment of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille, he said: "Who knows but there is a rift in the dark clouds that hang over musical art in Ireland. Surely the day must come with the awakening of the nation when a love for the divine art of music will turn the heart of every Irishman and Irishwoman. Then we will have in this land a people appreciative of music, a people who will encourage not only their own music but also the great musical monks of the world. And this will lead ever upwards. It will lead us to a great national school of Irish composers, a school worthy of our country, a school that will place Ireland amongst the great musical nations of the world."

Another highly notable figure that joined the panel of adjudicators at the first feis in 1922, and again in 1924, was Dr John Francis Larchet (1884-1967). A composer and teacher, he received his degree in music from Trinity College in 1915, following that with his doctorate in 1917. He also was a student at RIAM, and from 1908 until 1935 was musical director at the Abbey Theatre. As such, he too was embedded in the cultural revival of the era and was responsible for producing the stage music of many of the seminal plays of the Irish literary renaissance, including those of WB Yeats.

Although a prolific composer and arranger, his major contribution to Irish music was as a teacher. He later held a position at RIAM and was professor of music at University College Dublin from 1921-1958. He taught figures such as Michael Bowles, Brian Boydell and Gerard Victory, who would in later decades also adjudicate at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille.

Larchet specialised in composing miniatures and arranging Irish folksongs to be played by classical ensembles, and his 1954 arrangement of 'Amhrán na bhFiann' is classed as the official version and is still in use today.

Speaking of his experience as a judge at the first feis in 1922, Dr Larchet paid the event a tremendous compliment when he said: "Of what I have heard, I would say that Dublin would have to wake up or come to Derry to be awakened."

At the end of the first feis, Dr Larchet said that his visit had been the most pleasant of his life, and remarking on the outbreak of civil war in Ireland that very week, he said he trusted the time was not "too far distant when peace would come and that the guns would not be turned into ploughshares but tuning forks".

The third in a vaunted trio of adjudicators who presided over the music competitions in 1922 hailed from the fledgling northern state whose creation, in turn, inspired the establishment of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille.

Dr Annie Patterson (1886-1934) was born in Lurgan, Co Armagh, and was an organist, music teacher, writer, composer, and arranger. A student at Alexandra College in Dublin and the RIAM, she received her doctorate in 1889 and became the first Irish or British woman to become a doctor of music. After completing her studies, she became an examiner for the Royal University of Ireland and worked as an organist and conductor for the Dublin Choral Union and the Hampstead Harmonic Society. She too was a co-founder of the Feis Ceoil in Dublin in 1897, and the Annie Patterson Medal is still awarded in her honour at that feis.

Dr Patterson composed sacred and secular cantatas, orchestral works and songs based on Irish themes. Among her compositions was *Go mairidh ár nGaedhilg slán* – the rallying song of the Gaelic League written in 1905, over a decade after the organisation was founded in 1893.

Annie Patterson also wrote poetry, essays, and short stories as well as articles and books on music, and published material in the *Girl's Own Paper* in England and a series of articles on music in the *Weekly Irish Times* between 1899 and 1901. In 1924, she began work as a lecturer in music at University College Cork, where she remained until her death in 1934.

Hans Waldemar Rosen (1904-1994) was born in Dresden, Germany, and became a renowned music teacher and choral conductor following his graduation from the University of Leipzig. Continuing his studies at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, he directed the university choir, and in the 1930s established himself as a music critic back in Leipzig and became programme editor with the Gewandhaus Orchestra and editor of a music magazine.

At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Rosen was conscripted into the German army, and his writing skills were used in his role as a war correspondent until he was captured by the British and interned as a prisoner of war in Wales.

He moved to Dublin in 1948, having to live for a period in the Salvation Army hostel in York Street before establishing himself as a teacher of vocal technique and musicianship of excellent ability. His students included 'Ireland's Golden Tenor' Frank Patterson, the Irish operatic soprano Veronica Dunne and Charles Mitchell, the actor and renowned *RTÉ* newsreader. Rosen was one of many musicians from central and eastern Europe recruited by Radio Éireann in the 1950s when there was a real lack of Irish musicians and music teachers. When he joined Radio Éireann he conducted the station's vocal octet and was among several conductors of the station choir, Cór Radio Éireann.

Hans Rosen adjudicated at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille in both 1955 and 1962.

Born on Christmas Eve 1921, Gerard Victory came to adjudicate at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille in 1959. He was a prolific Dublin-born composer who wrote over 200 works across a variety of genres and styles.

Although his composition skills were largely self-taught, he did receive some formal training from one of the original adjudicators of the feis, Dr Larchet. However, his career was largely centred on music administration and he served as RTE's director of music from 1967-1982, and he was also president of UNESCO's International Rostrum of Composers, a fellow of the RIAM and received the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and German Bundesverdienstkreuz.

Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair (1906-1982) hailed from Dundalk and was a composer renowned for his work on the conservative side of Irish art music, arguing constantly that all such music should be based on the traditional genre.

Employed as conductor of the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra, he was also conductor of the Abbey Theatre ensemble, succeeding Seán Ó Riada in the role. A prolific composer and arranger of traditional music for a variety of instrumentations, he played in several orchestras and ensembles for which he frequently wrote or arranged music. These proved highly popular during his lifetime and were frequently performed and broadcast. In 1957, two years before he adjudicated at Derry Feis, he gained some widespread fame for his Hollywood film scores, including John Ford's *The Rising of the Moon*.

Another pupil of Dr Larchet was Wexford man TC Kelly (1917-1985), who sat in the adjudicator's chair in 1962, 1966 and again in 1983. His extensive output mainly consisted of very skilled arrangements of Irish traditional music for orchestras, mixed choir, or small instrumental ensembles. He too followed the conservative musical outlook of Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair.

Other noted adjudicators at Feis Dhoire Cholmcille have included *Seóirse* Bodley (1963), Nancy Calthorpe (1963 and 1968), AJ Potter (1965), Anthony Hughes (1967 and 1981), Proinnsias Ó Duinn (1975), Michael Bowles (1977), Fintan O'Carroll (1977), *Seán Óg Ó Tuama* (1978 -1979) and Brian Boydell (1983). Each of these individuals made massive contributions to music in Ireland throughout their careers.

Derry's own Redmond Friel (1907-1979) sat in the adjudicator's chair in 1976. A lifelong backer of Feis Dhoire Cholmcille, he served on its committee for many years. His intricate knowledge of choral music also meant that he was in great demand as an adjudicator at feiseanna across the length and breadth of Ireland.

A former headmaster of Waterside Boys' School, he was also a member of the music staff of St Columb's College, and his notable orchestral compositions include *Symphonic Movement* (1949) and *The Children of Lir* (1950), a ballet concert suite based on the legend from Irish mythology. Also among his prolific output were the noted compositions *Tiofaidh an Samradh*, *Mass of St Anne*, *An Cosaire*, *The Flower of Finlay* and *As I Roved Out*.

When he passed away in December 1979, his *Mass for St Columb*, which he composed for the centenary celebrations of St Columb's College earlier that year, was played at his funeral Mass at St Columb's Church on Chapel Road, where he had served as organist for 45 years.

In February 2022, an Ulster History Circle blue plaque in his honour was unveiled at Chapel Road Primary School in his native Waterside.

## Adjudicators



Arthur Darley captured in a 1926 portrait.

Dr John Francis Larchet.

