

# 'The Mayo Feis of 1903'

- Paul Waldron

Just over a hundred years ago, on Wed., 15th and Thurs., 16th April 1903, an event of great cultural importance took place in Ballyhaunis - an event which brought the town to national prominence as a centre of the Gaelic Revival then sweeping the country. It was the first ever Mayo County Feis, and it was organised and hosted by the Ballyhaunis Branch of Connradh na Gaeilge or The Gaelic League. Newspaper reports from early in 1903 show that a great amount of hard work went into organising the event - securing a suitable venue, appointing adjudicators, raising funds for prize-money, etc., not to mention all the administrative work involved in ensuring competitors were entered for the correct competitions, and that everything ran smoothly on the days in question.

By the end of March 1903, most of the arrangements were in place, as recorded in the local press. The organising committee was pleased to record strong support from all Gaelic League Branches around the county. Loose ends were being tied up here-and-there and negotiations were ongoing with the Midland Great Western and Great Southern and Western railway companies with a view to securing concessions for those travelling by train to the Feis.

## Committee

The Mayo Feis Committee, entrusted with organising this massive undertaking, comprised Dr. Conor Maguire, Claremorris (President); Michael J. O'Doherty, Kiltimagh (vice-President); James Casey, Ballyhaunis (Treasurer); John F. Coyne, Ballyhaunis (Secretary); assisted by Messrs J T. Smyth, P. J. Waldron, Frank Dorr, and 'the ladies and gentlemen of the Ballyhaunis Branch'.

In all the literature relating to the Feis, including advertisements published in the local papers and the official programme, it's interesting to see the Irish form of Ballyhaunis given as 'Beal Ath Thamnais', a form that has since been replaced by 'Beal Atha hAmhnais'. The correct Irish form of the name Ballyhaunis was then, and still is open to question. The venue was the newly constructed Convent School in Ballyhaunis, built for the Sisters of Mercy by the redoubtable Canon Canning, then P.P. of Annagh.

## Opening Day

The opening day finally came and the weather held up. As one correspondent reported: "The elements too were most favourable. Better sunshine could not be wished for." The correspondent continued: "About twelve - the hour for Starting the competition - the halls showed every sign of life, the surging crowds chatting away in the old tongue, anxiously awaited the opening of the proceedings. Punctually, at the time appointed, Mr. Michael F. Waldron,

who appeared to be the guiding spirit and director of the whole proceedings, gave the signal, a hush went through the throng, and the patriotic P.P., Rev. J. P. Canning, in a neat and appropriate Irish speech announced the opening of the work, which he prayed would be blessed with every success. Immediately, the competitions were begun, and during the two days not a single hitch occurred in the proceedings."

Amongst the notables in attendance over the two days were Douglas Hyde - 'An Craobhin Aoibhinn' - then President of the Gaelic League and later to become the first President of Ireland; Padraic Pearse, who was to become Commander in Chief of the Irish forces in the 1916 Rising; Padraic Ó Máille of Mounterown, Maam, Co. Galway, a Gaelic League organiser, later a member of the First Dail, 1919, and later still, Deputy Speaker of the Dail. Colonel Maurice Moore of the famous Moore Hall family; and Fr. Bewerunge, an authority on Irish music. A large number of adjudicators were drawn from all over the country, with a sizeable proportion of them members of the clergy,

The competitions took place in the Convent school rooms, while an exhibition of drawings and 'industries' (handcrafts) took place in the adjoining technical school. It was reported that "the specimens of lace were simply beautiful, and a much admired collarette of delicate design, the work of Miss Devine, was greatly admired." The judges, it was said, had a most difficult task selecting the prizewinners such was the excellent quality of frieze, flannel, yarn and items of clothing on show. "A feature which struck us with admiration was that all the ladies - certainly all those of the Ballyhaunis Branch - were attired in costumes of Foxford tweed", the local correspondent said.

## Programme

An impressive programme or 'Clár na h-Oibre' was published for the Feis, detailing the competitions and listing all the competitors. An exhaustive set of conditions or rules were set down including one which describes the lengths to which anonymity was preserved in some of the composition competitions, and where pseudonyms were to be used. Some of these assumed names included: Seaghán Mac Searrach, Geata na Coille, An Fuisseóg, Aoife, Guth ó'n Lár, Brian Boramha, Sean Gaedhilgeóir, An Chuach, Scoilire Bocht, Smolach, Fear Spaid, Londubh, Caitrina Clair, Craobhin Cno, Cead-a-reatha, Goll Mac Moirne, An Chearsach, Pairc a Mhuilinn, Muadhán, Banba, Éire, Naomh Brighid, Naomh Muire, Mac-na-mBeannacht, Craobhin Cno, An Caitlín Cúl, Micheál Ruadh, Clann Dálaigh, Oisín, Béal-Áth-Thamhnais and Leágh na bhFionn.

In singing competitions, test pieces - Amhráin



Organising Committee of the First Mayo County Feis, Ballyhaunis, 1903.

1. Johnny Lawless, Dublin; 2. Richard Tarpey N.T., Bekan; 3. Michael J. O'Doherty, N.T., Kiltimagh; 4. Thomas O'Kelly Jnr., Ballina; 5. Michael F. Waidron, Knox St., Ballyhaunis; 6. Andrew Dodd, Ballina; 7. John Fitzhenry (Gaelic League organizer); 8. Philip Waldron, Drimbane, Ballyhaunis; 9. John Fergus Coyne, Bridge St., Ballyhaunis; 10. P. A. McHugh, N.T., Kiltimagh; 11. Michael J. Waldron, Knox St., Ballyhaunis; 12. Michael Murphy, Kiltimagh; 13. S. O'leary, Cork; 14. Padraic Ó Maille, Maam; 15. Frank Dorr, Foxford; 16. Michael Ó Maille N.T., Comamona, Co. Galway (brother of Padraic above); 17. Frank Swift, Abbeyquarter, Ballyhaunis; 18. John T. Smyth, Main St., Ballyhaunis. Original photograph taken by "E. A. Bieisty, photographer, Ballyhaunis". Taken at the back door of the Convent Primary School.

Ceaptha - from this list had to be sung, as well as one of the competitor's own choosing: Tigearna Mhuighe-Eó, Droighneán Donn, Máire Ní hEidhin, Máire Béil Átha hAmhnais, Péarla an Bhrollaigh Bháin, Condae Mhuighe-Eó, Druimfhionn Donn Dílis, Siubhail A Ghrádh, Is Truagh Gan Peata, A bhean úd-Shíos ar choir an Tsrutháin, Casadh and tSúgáin, Caitlín Ní hUallacháin, Go Mairidh ar nGaedheal, Fáinne geal an lae, Eibhlín a Rúin, Sa Mhúimín Dílis, Seaghán Buidhe

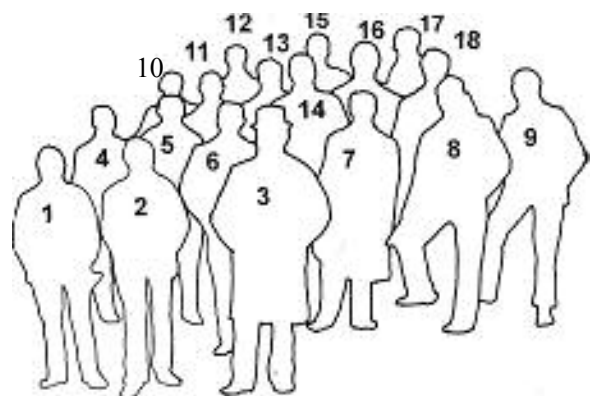
The programme had a number of patriotic ads too, those of particular local interest being for Henry's Drapery and General Warehouse, Ballyhaunis; "The Irish House, Ballyhaunis", proprietor Seumas Ó Catharnaighe; Morley's Hotel, proprietor Mrs. Coyne; Michael Delaney, Ballyhaunis, agent for The Commercial Union Assurance Company; and a new Irish song entitled "Rosg Catha Bhéil Áth' Thamhnais", written by Philip J. Waldron and P. A. Waldron and 'on sale at Feis', price 3d.

### Local Competitors

Competitors in the forty-six competitions/classes came from all over Mayo, Connacht and further afield. Listed

below are the entrants who came from the general Ballyhaunis area.

Bagpipes - 'Irish Air, with Reel and Jig of Competitors own choosing' - John O'Gorman, Lisacul. Fideag or Flute - 'Irish Air, with Reel and Jig of Competitors own choosing' - John Griffin, Cloontowert (joint 1st prize); John Keane, Kilgarriff and Luke Keenan, Knock. Violin - 'Performance of "The Blackbird", with Reel and Jig of Competitors own choosing' - John Tarpey,



Lecarrow; Michael J. Waldron, Ballyhaunis (2nd prize). Solo Singing - gentlemen: John T. Smyth, Ballyhaunis; M. J. Waldron (1st prize), Ballyhaunis; Henry Taaffe, Edenpark; John Keane, Kilgarriff (commendation); James Murray, Kilgarriff; and John Lavan, Shanvaghera. Boys - Francis Waldron, Ballyhaunis Branch Gaelic League; Girls - Annie M. Cuddy and Eileen Flynn, Convent Schools; Children under-10: Maggie Fitzmaurice (special prize) and Maria Fitzmaurice, Convent Schools.

Unpublished Irish Song (competitors to be over 50 years of age) - Peter Burke, Ballyhaunis; Pat Carney, Meeltrane, Knock; Thomas Egan, Knock; Brian Kearns, Knock (1st prize); Michael Ganley, Agloragh; John Lavan, Shanvaghera; James Murray, Coogue; Henry Taaffe, EdenparL

'An original Irish song on The Races of Castlebar' - James O'Molloy, Ballyhaunis (winner).

Choirs - Ballyhaunis Choir and the Ballyhaunis Shamrock Choir (special prize).

Dancing: Reel and Jig (Connacht Style), Hornpipe and Double Jig, seniors - Austin Cavanagh, Bekan; John F. Coyne, Ballyhaunis; Michael Cunnane, Crossard; Dominick Donegan, Ballinlough; P. Kenny, Cloonbook, Michael Moran, Aughtaboy; Patrick Moran, Aughtaboy (2nd prize); Tom Tighe Jnr. and Tom Tighe Snr., Bekan; Philip J. Waldron, Ballyhaunis.

Reel and Jig (Connacht Style), juniors - John J. Caulfield and Sarah Caulfield, Ballyhaunis; Delia Coyne, Sarah Flanagan, Eileen Flynn and Mary K. Kenny, Convent Schools.

Irish Speech: "The best way to advance the Gaelic Movement" (time limit, ten minutes) - Paddy Culliney, Lasseny; John Keane, Kilgarriff; Brian Kearns, Cullintragh; James Molloy, Ballyhaunis; James Murray, Coogue; Henry Taaffe, Edenpark; Philip J. Waldron, Drimbane.

'Best Irish Speaking Family, consisting of father, mother, and at least three children - competitors will be required to sustain a conversation on the ordinary affairs of life, Adjudicators reserving the right to alter the drift of the discourse at any point' - Frank Carney and family, Shanvaghera (the only entrants).

Storytelling (seniors) - 'Best telling of an Irish Story' - Michael Ganley, Agloragh; Peter Burke, John McHugh, James Molloy and Philip J. Waldron, Ballyhaunis; James Murray, Coogue; Hugh Flatley, Edenpark; John Keane, Kilgarriff (joint winner); Thomas Egan, Knock; Paddy Culliney, Lassany; John Lavan, Shanvaghera; James Waldron, Tavanaghmore.

'Conversation together with O'Growney, parts I & II (seniors)' - James Murray, Coogue; P. J. Waldron of Ballyhaunis (commendation).

'Juniors Elementary Conversation, together with O'Growney, part I (juniors)' - from Ballyhaunis Convent Schools: May Cassidy, Tessie Cassidy, Lillie Coyne, Bridget Dwyer, Norah Fitzmaurice, Eileen Flynn, Maggie Freely, Mary K. Kenny (book prize), Annie Lyons, Kate Moran, Lillie Prenty; with John Dwyer (book prize),

William Dwyer, John Charles Smyth, Francis Waldron (1st prize) from the Ballyhaunis Branch of the Gaelic League. Recitation (Seniors) - 'Piece of their own choosing, not to occupy more than five minutes' - Annie Waldron, Convent Schools; Thomas Egan, Patrick McKeague and Mary E. McNicholas, Knock; James Murray, Coogue; Henry Taaffe, Edenpark; Philip J. Waldron, Ballyhaunis Branch (2nd prize).

Recitation (Juniors) - 'Best telling of a humorous Irish Story' (competitors to be under 20 years of age) - Josie Coyne (2nd prize), Mary K. Kenny (1st prize), Convent Schools.

Seniors - 'Our Father', 'Hail Mary', 'The Creed', 'Confiteor', 'Act of Contrition', 'The Angelus' and 'Hail, Holy Queen' in Irish - Timothy Fitzmaurice, James Molloy and Philip J. Waldron, Ballyhaunis; John Keane, Kilgarriff.

Juniors - 'Our Father', 'Hail Mary' and 'The Creed' in Irish - John Dwyer, William Dwyer, John C. Smyth and Francis Waldron from the Ballyhaunis branch of the Gaelic League; Louisa and Mary Taaffe from Edenpark; and the following from the Convent School: May Cassidy, Tessie Cassidy, Delia Coyne, Josie Coyne, Bridget Dwyer, Maggie Dwyer, Maggie Fitzmaurice, Marie Fitzmaurice, Nora Fitzmaurice, Eileen Flynn, Maggie Freely, Julia Gilmore, Lillie Gilmore, Mary Gilmore, Mary Griffin, May Hanson (highly commended), Nora Jordan, Mary K. Kenny, Monica Kenny, Annie Lyons, Cecilia Lyons, Kate McGarry, Ellie Moran, Kate Moran, Bridie Murphy, Bella Regan, Mary K. Smyth, Nellie Smyth, Nora Smyth, Mary E. Waldron, Nora Waldron, Stella Waldron (book prize).

'Historical essay on The Penal Days (about 1,500 words); James O'Molloy, Ballyhaunis (1st prize). 'Best drawing of an Irish bard or chieftain' - Charles Kearns, Aughtaboy; Mary Cooney (1st prize), Mary E. Fahy and Bridie Smyth (2nd prize) from Ballyhaunis Convent Schools.

'Best hand-knitted pair of cycling stockings' - Mrs. Mary A. Swift, Kinchora Villa, Ballyhaunis (joint 1st prize) and Katie Rodgers, Shanvaghera.

'Best Home Spun Hank of Flax' - Bridget Horan and Una Horan (1st prize), both of Sinoolane, Kilmovee. 'Best Piece of Frieze' - Mrs. Catherine Healy, Shanvallah (1st prize); and Mrs. P. Lavan, Aughtaboy. 'Best Piece of Home-made flannel' - John Deasy, Killinagher; Mrs. Maria Fitzmaurice, Togher (1st prize); Maria Neary, Forthill; and Mrs. Ellen Waldron, Gortnageerach.

'Best Piece of Irish Crochet Lace' - Kate Brennan, Kate J. Devine, B. Fahy, Ellen Ganly, Kate Greally, Ellie A. Hevican, Maire Ni Dubhain, Annie Sweeney, Maggie Waldron (1st prize), B. Walsh, St. Joseph's Technical School (Convent), Ballyhaunis.

Other competitions/classes included: An essay on the Life and Times of Dr. McHale (about 1,500 words); an unpublished folklore story; best list of Connacht Proverbs; Irish letter for juniors on 'Why should I learn Irish?'; Best translation of the late William Rooney's song The Men of

the West'; Best reader of Irish (confined to gangers under the Congested Districts Board); Harp- Irish Air, with Reel and Jig of Competitor's own choosing; Best knowledge of four or more unpublished songs, learned at home from parents or others (confined to children of Irish speaking parents), presented by Eoghan Ó Neachtan; Best answering from History of Ireland (1500 AD to 1700 AD), presented by Padraic Ó Máille, Timthire, Chonnartha na Gaedhilge.

### Prizes

Most prizes were £1, a guinea or medal for first place; with an occasional second prize of ten shillings. Some competitions offered other prizes, e.g., for the 'Best Translation of 'The Men of the West', first prize was a suit or dress length of Irish material, presented by Mr. Frank Dorr, Foxford. This was won by Dr. Conor Maguire, Claremorris. For the 'Best Reader of Irish', the prize was one of "Richards and Walshes 'Emerald Isle' watches", presented by Mr. Frank Swift (Abbeyquarter, Ballyhaunis). The winner here was John Solon, Ballinasmula, Claremorris, who incidentally was the only competitor. In the 'Reel and Jig (Juniors)' competition, the first prize was fifteen shillings, while second prize was a pair of Ballinasmula boots, presented by Rev. B. M. Quinn, C.C., Ballina. Lizzie M. Lavan (1st) and Annie M. Lavan (2nd), both of Kiltimagh, were placed in this competition.

The dancing adjudicators weren't too impressed with the more traditional dancing styles and added the following note to their results list: "Adjudicators regret to notice in most cases a disposition to clog dancing, and would recommend competitors in future to engage the services of competent dancing masters who teach deportment, step and style." One of these adjudicators was Mr. J. O'Tuohy, M.D., probably old 'Master Tuohy' who was a dancing master well known all over the west of Ireland at that time.

At least one of the musicians who competed was to make a successful musical career for himself - John Griffin of Cloontowart, Lisacul, who tied for first place in the Flute Solo competition, went on to become a most popular recording artist in the U.S. in the 1920s. Billed as 'The Fourth Avenue Bus Man' he made over thirty 78 records on which he sang, played the flute and lilted.

In addition to the competitions and exhibitions, extra entertainments were organised on each of the two nights, after the prizewinners had been awarded their prizes. Two plays written by Dr. Douglas Hyde were performed: 'An Posadh' on Wednesday night by the Ballagherreen Branch; 'Casadh an tSugain' on Thursday night by the Claremorris Branch. Also on the Wednesday night a concert was given which included an ode written specially for the festival and delivered by Ballyhaunis man James O'Molloy; songs from Messrs. James Clandillon (later Broadcasting Director, Radio Eireann) and John Lawless, Miss Olive Barry and Miss Lily Foley (later married to Coiint John McCormack); dancing by Messrs. Gaughan, O'Ryan, Moran, Gormley, and the young ladies from Foxford; a recital on the harp by Mr. Owen Lloyd

which, the correspondent said "completely held his audiences spell-bound". Father O'Beirne played the violin; Dr. Conor Maguire sang his translation of "The Men of the West", which won first prize in that competition, while his son Gerald also sang. The Ballyhaunis Choirs and the Foxford Choir contributed. One performer on the night could be described as one of the most influential musicians in the traditional music scene, and one who had a profound influence on the music of Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo - John Gorman, billed as 'John O'Gorman, the famous Irish piper'. John came from Derrylahan, near Carrowbehy, Co. Roscommon, though his address in the Feis programme is given as Lisacul. Other traditional musicians on the night were violinist M. J. Waldron of Knox Street and William Fleming of Lahardane, a flute-player.

### Photograph

An historic photograph of the organising committee, and taken on the back steps of the Convent Primary School, was published in *The Western People* in 1977 and *The Annagh Magazine* in 1981. Efforts to track down the original earlier this year proved fruitless, and the quality of the picture reproduced in those two publications was not good enough to be reproduced again in time for the centenary last April. However, a couple of months ago Ballyhaunis native Fr. Kieran Waldron came into the possession of an original copy of the photograph - one which had belonged to Dame J. C. Coyne, founder of the Handmaidens in Knock, and whose brother-in-law John Fergus Coyne is amongst those in the picture. Not only is the photo in perfect condition, but all of the eighteen men in it are named. The photograph was taken by Edward A. Beisty - a well known photographer in Ballyhaunis at the time: a press item the week before the Feis announced - "Visitors to Ballyhaunis next week should call and see Eamonn Ui Biadhac, Solus Sgáthadóineacht. Mr. Biesty has been very busy with his camera, and will have on show during the Feis, a great many snapshots recently taken in and around Ballyhaunis."

On the closing night Dr. Hyde, before announcing the prize-winners, spoke in Irish and expressed his delight with the success of the Feis. He paid tribute to the Ballyhaunis nuns and the clergy of the province who had shown such support for the venture.

Almost forty years later Dr. Michael F. Waldron, one of the main organisers of the Feis, recalled in the local papers that: "The [1903] Feis was financed solely by voluntary subscriptions and the admission charges to the concerts. No grants-in-aid of any kind were received from either local or central sources." He went on to state that: "After defraying all expenses and paying out all money prizes, a surplus of almost £100 remained which it was decided to make the nucleus of a County Fund, to be devoted to the publication of selected winning works of that and subsequent feiseanna". Headed: "Padraic Pearse was so impressed with the Feis that he wrote a glowing leading article in 'An Claidheamh Soluis' on the subject."