

# A TRIBUTE TO FRANK ROCHE

By "AN MANGAIRE SUGACH"

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A few weeks ago, when a branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, the organisation of Irish traditional musicians, was formed in Kilmallock, the Munster secretary of the organisation, in a letter he wrote to the Kilmallock branch secretary, remarked: "Tá sprid na Róisteach beo fós sa chuid sin de Luimnigh"—the spirit of the Roches still lives in that part of Limerick. One bare fortnight after that tribute was paid to the Roches, the newspapers carried the announcement of the death, at an advanced age, of Frank Roche, the most famous of those Roche brothers who so prodigally spent their talents in the cause of Irish music.

## FAMOUS FAMILY

There were three of them, Jim, John and Frank. Jim, who was considered by many to be the best musician of the three, was a violinist, but was still better known as an organist, in which capacity he held a number of important appointments. John, the sole surviving brother, who now resides in Dublin, played the violin and piano. In all probability, the Roches inherited their talent from their father, John senior, who was a famous dancing master. He was also a famous Fenian, a fact which earned the family great respect all over East Limerick. And his patriotism, like his love for Irish dance and Irish music, he passed on to his sons.

## ONE OF THE GREAT

In my school days, I frequently heard mention of Frank Roche of Elton, and of the Roche Collection of Irish Music. By that time Frank was spoken of in a way that made me associate him with Bunting, Petrie and P. W. Joyce, that is, with collectors of Irish music, long dead and gone. I knew, of course, that Frank lived, but I assumed that he must be a very old man, for only the passage of very many years could have earned him a place among the great. Imagine my surprise then when, at the Co Feis in Bruree, on June 25, 1950, a sprightly, rather small-sized man, who spoke Irish with great fluency, was pointed out to me as the great Frank Roche. He looked at least twenty years younger than he really was that June day eleven years ago, when I had the pleasure of first making his acquaintance.

## APPROPRIATE CHOICE

I met him on a number of occasions after that, and he corresponded with me from time to time, until falling eyesight made letter-writing too difficult for him. He sent me a considerable amount of material which I published in this column and, also, in the Irish column of this paper, when I had

the double task of filling both columns. My last meeting with him was at the unveiling of the memorial to Staker Wallis at Martinstown, on Sunday, June 19, 1955. He introduced the speakers that day. And the choice of such a chairman added further to the honour being paid the memory of the gallant man we were commemorating. And the choice was appropriate, too, for it was Frank Roche who collected and preserved for posterity in his published works that lovely, keening air called "The Lament for Staker Wallis"

## LIFE-TIME DEVOTION

Cáit Ní Chuis of Rathanny plays the lament beautifully. Cáit is a member of the Knocklong branch of the Comhaltas. And Frank Roche was patron of that branch up to his death. His indeed was a life-time devotion. A long life-time, too, for he was almost 95 when he died.

He was active in the Irish Ireland movement before the dawn of the present century. I have been told that he organised a féis in Killaloe away back in the year 1900. Douglas Hyde, it seems, had a tremendous regard for him. Apart from playing the violin and piano in a masterly way, Frank was a recognised authority on Irish step dance and adjudicated in the Irish dancing competitions at the Thomond Feis for a period of something like thirty years.

## COLLECTIONS OF IRISH MUSIO

A cultured man of many activities, Frank has ensured lasting remembrance with his magnum opus, his four-volume Collection of Irish Music. His brother John collaborated with him in the Collection, but the great bulk of the work was Frank's. The first three volumes contain Irish airs and dance tunes; the fourth Irish airs and Fantasies. Incidentally, Frank did most of the publishing at his own expense and, as was to be expected in work of that kind, lost money in the venture. But, as anyone who knew the man is aware, what he did was for love of things Irish and not for profit. Among his friends he numbered the great musician, arranger and composer, Carl Hardebeck, with whom he collaborated on a few occasions. Both men had much in common, for Frank was always a one to utter a fervent "Amen" to Hardebeck's "Creed" of—"I believe in God, in Beethoven and in Pádraig Pearse."

## GAEILGEOIR

In the newspaper reports of his death it was stated that Frank was a native Irish speaker. That is not correct. He learned his Irish in the early days of the Gaelic League; but he learned it so well that he was frequently mistaken for a native speaker. It could be said of him that he was a whole Irishman. Yet his patriotism was in no way narrow-minded. His love of music, which stopped short at no national boundary, made that impossible. He was well aware of the importance of the revival of the Irish language. As well, he fervently believed in freedom for all Ireland; but, he asked: "What good would a 32-County Republic be if we lost our Irish tongue and our Irish mind and became merely a pale shadow of that other nation across the Irish Sea?" Frank's views on the importance of Irish found expression, not only in remarks like that just quoted, but even more so in the pains he took to acquire a mastery of the language and the readiness with which he spoke it ever afterwards.

## TRANSLATION

He translated all 23 stanzas of Darby Ryan's marathon "Galbally Farmer" into Irish. How good a translation he did may be seen by comparing any stanza of the original with the same stanza in translation. He is what Darby wrote:

One evening of late as I chanced  
for to stray,  
The Town of Tipperary I struck  
on my way,  
For the praties to dig and to  
go by the day,  
I hired with the Galbally  
Farmer.  
And here is Frank's rendering of  
it into Irish:  
Tharla le déanaí agus mise ar  
strae,  
Go dtánag go Tlobrad geal  
Árann cois tsléibhe,  
Na prátaí do romhar dó ar scil-  
ling an lae,  
Réitios le scrabhdóir ón mbeár-  
nain

## TYPICAL OF ALL THAT WAS BEST

Frank Roche was typical of all that was best in that wonderful Irish Revival movement that transformed the soul of Ireland in a few decades. He brought to that movement all his talents and enthusiasms, his music, his knowledge of Irish, his love of Irish culture. Ba dhuine é den sean saol Gaelach a éireoldh arís, le cúnamh Dé. Solas na solse dá anam!

**ROCHE** (Eiton, Knocklong, Co. Limerick) — July 11, 1961, at a Limerick hospital, Frank; deeply regretted by his brother, sister-in-law, nephews and nieces. R.I.P. Remains will be removed to Knocklong Church today (Wednesday) at 3 o'clock (O.T.) ex Limerick. Funeral tomorrow (Thursday) to Arthenacev Cemetery at 12 o'clock (O.T.) after Office and Requiem Mass.