

## RECOLLECTIONS OF MY TIME IN THE LONDON GAELIC LEAGUE CHOIR

by Mary Warrenner (née MacCarthy)

I had two periods of involvement with the Gaelic League Choir in London, on either side of the year 1961 when I was working in Ireland. So I sang with the choir in 1959 and 1960 and again in 1962, 1963 and 1964. I was 18 years old in 1959 when I joined and 23 in 1964 when I left. In September 1964 I married and moved to Leicester, where I still live.

I first got involved with the choir because I had joined the Irish Club in Eaton Square and was trying out the activities on different nights of the week to see which I liked best. It turned out to be the choir on Thursday evenings. We rehearsed in a room on the first floor containing a mellow sounding grand piano. Mr Séamus Purcell was our choir master and under his strict tutelage we progressed. As well as training the choir, Mr Purcell gave some tutoring in voice production to a few of us who turned up an hour early - and I was amongst this group. At the time I worked in Baker Street and later Woburn Square, so came straight from work.

My memories surround two areas - what we did as a group and individual friendships. We saw quite a lot of each other as we rehearsed every Thursday evening, with additional rehearsals on Sunday afternoons if something extra special was coming up.

Singing as a group was mainly in Irish Gaelic with some Irish songs in English; once a year we learned two songs in Scottish Gaelic as well. Song titles included *Rós Déanach on tSamhraidh*, *An Chuilfhionn*, *Eibhlín a Rún*, *Eamonn an Chuic* and the Lark in the Clear Air.

We sang at concerts in assorted parts of London - I remember Highgate, Camden Town, missing singing at something organized by the Lord Mayor of London because I had the measles on the big day, an annual concert at the Eaton Square Club with wellknown Irish soloists, a similar type of concert at a charity concert in Drury Lane theatre, our first attempt at being recorded with a rendering of *An Carabhat*. This 45 rpm record went 'off' quite quickly but originally it had sounded good.

Recollections about the choir also bring into mind boyfriends who came and went. However, my most romantic type of memory concerns the journey to and from a concert on the Essex side of London. It was snowing, it was Christmastime, the choir members were scattered through a crowded London suburban train, and we started singing. And we sang all the way from Ilford to the centre of London, encouraged by our fellow passengers.

Apart from concerts and rehearsals, there were competitions. In London, we competed with the Scottish Gaelic Choir at the London Scottish Mod. Part of the requirement was mastering set choir songs in Scottish Gaelic known as *Poirt a Béal*. *Poirt a Béal* is singing dance tunes instead of having an instrument. We had some



Irish Gaelic *Poirt a Béal* as well. One year, we won the Mod and one of the perks of winning was being a guest of honour at the New Year Caledonian Society celebrations - what a night! The inclusion of *Poirt a Béal* in our repertoire meant that, on occasion, some of the choir sang while eight others could dance something like a 'high caul cap' as an entertainment. Individuals in the choir who had been trained specially by Mr Purcell also took part in the Mod competitions for duets and quartets. The year we won, I believe our performance went out on a Scottish radio programme.

The choir became good enough to consider taking part in the Dublin Oireachtas, which was held in October. I definitely took part in 1963, and possibly in 1962 as well but my memory blends the two years. I know we competed against the Cork choir which had made records - and did very well. We were marked highly for our diction although only few of the choir members could read Irish. Some of the choir were Italian, others English born. One choir member had a gold *fáinne* and she was appointed in charge of diction. No matter what other part of Ireland one came from, her pronounciation of words and syllables was the one we had to use while singing. We went to watch a hurling match at Croke Park, as a group; Radio Eireann recorded us in studio conditions. Most choir members stayed in the Four Courts Hotel although I stayed with an aunt in Phibsborough.

In the choir, the girls wore white dresses and green sashes with tara brooches pinned to them at the left shoulder; our menfolk wore dress suits. For the 1963 visit to Dublin, things went a bit wrong. Several choir members' luggage went from Heathrow to Amsterdam instead of Heathrow to Dublin. Included amongst the lost luggage group were a couple in the choir who had just married and were starting their honeymoon with the Oireachtas - they were subjected to quite a lot of banter because of their luggage going to Amsterdam. The luggage eventually turned up just in time for us to go on stage suitably attired.

There were other social occasions. Being interested in music generally, some of us would queue up for the Proms. We had coach outings to the south coast where we swam, got sunburned and generally enjoyed ourselves - casually entertaining all and sundry where-ever we stopped en route. One time Aer Lingus held a dance in Camden Town and offered free tickets to the choir and to some young men in a Kensington hostel for young workers. One of the male members of the choir (Joe) was staying in this hostel. He introduced me to a young man of my own age (21 at the time) who became my husband two years later, although not an Irish man.

The year 1964 saw a number of us married. Of the people I was most friendly with, some moved back to Ireland, we went to Leicester, Aileen went to Bristol and others stayed in London. Eileen Adams, the choir secretary, I remember most particularly; Eileen was the organizer of everything, the enabler of so much that happened. I remember too a young man called Seán O'Reilly (who went back to Ireland) with whom I sang a duet in the Mod; Seán and myself joined two others, Colm and Bernie (who married and went back to Ireland) to sing a quartet at concerts. The lad who introduced me to my future husband also married a girl from the choir (Joe and Kathleen) and they too went back to Ireland.

Not long after moving to Leicester, Geoff and I became friendly with a music student who was interested in the fact that Mr Purcell had used tonic sol-fa for teaching us and I loaned him my music from the choir. Unfortunately he never returned it.

My memories of the choir are happy ones. I know the choir went from strength to strength after we left London. A choir member called Sheila became conductor when Mr Purcell retired, the choir dresses were changed from white to dark green, and a successful recording was made on an LP with other Irish artists

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for Tony Murray, University of North London, Irish Studies Centre,  
166-220 Holloway Road, London, N7 8DB. Tel (0171) 753-5018.

cc Nessian Danaher, Irish Studies Workshop, Leicester.

Mrs Mary J. Warrener  
BA MPhil