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FATHER MATHEW HALL, CORK AND FEIS MAITIU

Sometime during the last quarter of the nineteenth century the members of the Total Abstinence Society attached to Holy Trinity Church used a nearby building in which they could meet for recreation. An old register, which has the first entry dated January 5th, 1896, shows that at the time there were over 300 male members in the Society.¹ Fr. Thomas Dowling was President.² On January 30th, 1907 the present Hall was opened in what was then Queen Street. It was a great advance on the old premises because now there was a good auditorium and plenty of rooms to cater for the many activities which had developed. There was a billiard room, a card room and a reading room; weekly lectures were given during the winter season as well as occasional plays and concerts. For a while attempts were made to run pictures - it was called a Picturedrome - but it never took on. The Christmas Pantomines became popular; the cast was drawn from the Hall members and the money made helped to defray general expenditure. In 1914, 'Aladdin' had a particularly long run and foreshadowed the many years of 'Panto' for which the Hall became famous. At different times members organised dramatic societies, bands, orchestras and choral groups; classes were held in cookery, sewing and needlework, gymnastics and first aid. For outdoor recreation they had hurling, football and cycling. Teams were entered in the Cork County Championship and local leagues. On Sunday September 28th, 1928 the senior hurling team was defeated by Mallow in the semi-final of the county championship. For many years Bob Shearman represented the Hall on the County Board (G.A.A.). In fact, from the beginning the members related well with the G.A.A. which frequently gave permission to run tournaments in aid of the Hall. One such tournament was played on Sunday July 12th, 1908 in which Dungourney, Captained by the famous Jamsie Kelleher played Erin's Own, Kilkenny, in the old Cork Athletic Grounds.³ Total receipts for the match came to £80 - 15 - 9 - at the time regarded as quite satisfactory. Some County Conventions were held in the auditorium of the Hall and for a while the weekly Board meetings took place in one of the rooms.

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Reconstruction under Fr. Mathew Flynn O.F.M. Cap.

Income, of course, was always one of the problems; so much so, in fact, that the Hall was nearly always in debt. That debt, considerable at times, - almost £2,000 om 1912-⁴ never dampened the enthusiasm of the Hall administration or curbed their activities. At times sports were organised for the members and one evening in the summer of 1909 they organised an evening regatta and band Promenade on the Marino. There was always, of course, the annual excursion to which everybody looked forward. Lismore Castle was quite a favourite. Arrangements were previously made with the authorities in the Castle, then a special train would leave Cork for Lismore at 10 a.m. and return from Cappoquin (!) at 7 p.m. The fare was 2/9 per head. The only regular income came from billiards and cards - in those early days about £2 a week - and that was supplemented by membership fee,⁵ the rent from occasional letttings of rooms and what may accrue from profits on stage shows. The income was hardly sufficient to meet the running expenditure and certainly would not cover any serious expense. That was why it was so difficult to carry out any improvements in accordance with the progress of the times. In fact, it was not till the 1940's that any major work of reconstruction was undertaken. When Fr. Mathew Flynn became President in 1943 he, with great courage and foresight, rearranged the auditorium and furnished it with theatre seating, put in a new balcony and improved the stage facilities. It was not easy to meet the debt incurred but the burning of the old Cork Opera House (1955) left the newly conditioned Father Mathew Hall as the only regular theatre in the city. Naturally business bloomed. Companies like the Southern Theatre Group, Carol Clopet Productions etc. had fixed tenancies; local producers like James Stack and J.N. Healy did all their work there so that, taking the Feis and Pantomime into account, there usually was not enough dates to meet demands. After the re-opening of the Opera House in 1965 fortunes sank; matters became so difficult that were it not for the introductions of regular bingo it would have been extremely difficult to make ends meet. These Bingo Sessions, well handled by Paudie Atkinson, not only eased the financial burthens but made it possible eventually for Br. Paul O' Donovan to repaint, re-construct and re-condition the building into a

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first class theatre and social hall. At present the Everyman Playhouse group have a limited licence on the auditorium. Before starting in 197 they reduced the length of the theatre by creating a much needed coffee-bar at the entrance. Extra lighting was installed, and a permanent apron put on to the stage. Their tenancy has been an asset so backed by Government grants they seem likely to stay.

Fr. W. ~~Mathew~~ Father Mathew Total Abstinence Social Club.
One effect of this development in the auditorium was that the ordinary members 'upstairs' became less involved in the theatre. Their traditional participation in the pantomime grew less, they lost interest in backstage management, and no longer acted as stewarts for shows or performances. At the same time membership was declining, declining, perhaps because, the Total Abstinence Sodality attached to the Church was running down. As far back as the 1930's Fr. Michael O' Shea was expressing disappointment at the lack of interest in membership. Due to his well-directed efforts a revival took place. It was maintained by Fr. Mathew Flynn but never seemed to have attained the momentum of the early days. Billiards and snooker, which were carefully nurtured by the devoted caretaker, Danner's - otherwise Patrick Tobin - were always popular and the 'card-school' never lacked its patrons. About 1956 or 1957 a football team was organised and during the 1960's when the Hall admitted boys and girls to form a Youth Club, an Athletic team and a Basketball team (girls) were added to the amenities available. In addition Table Tennis got a new lease of life and efforts were made to get together a gramophone circle. So intense were the activities at the time that it was decided to divorce the 'upstairs' interests formally from the theatre and form them into the Father Mathew Total Abstinence Social Club. A set of rules were drawn up and adopted in September 1968 at the annual General Meeting.

Social Club whose mainpurpose would be the promotion of temperance.

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The success of all these ventures, in spite of a declining membership, was due to the constant loyalty of a strong nucleus who devoted time and energy to the affairs of the Hall. There were there in the good times and the bad times, always ready to help when help was needed. One is tempted to mention names but in a short account like this it is better not. These men had the fundamental purpose of the Hall at heart and maintained a standard of conduct which was a credit to their Christian principles.

Mounting expenses were a matter of considerable concern, particularly when revenue from the theatre dropped. An alternative source of income had to be found, and found it was in Bingo. In the beginning the sessions were tentative and at times the prospects not too rosy but hard work and patience overcame all obstacles. The Sunday night Bingo, which is now almost twenty years in existence, has proved a valuable asset; by 1969 it had cleared the debt, was financing the current activities and providing the money for later development. No praise is too high to lavish upon those members, who Sunday night after Sunday night work to make the Bingo successful. One institution, however, which never faded but grew in strength from year to year was Feis Maitiu.

Feis Maitiu by Claire O' Halloran.
It was the evening of Saturday 23rd February, 1985 and the Fr. Mathew Hall was thronged for the official opening of the 57th Feis Maitiu. Fr. Mathew Hall-Feis Maitiu, this mixture of English and Irish is not inappropriate for a cultural event which includes competitions in both languages. Of course, for some years now the hall has also been known as the Everyman Theatre but for very many of the older citizens it will always be the Fr. Mathew Hall and at Feis time it reverts to its birthright. Every effort should be made to ensure the continuity of the name. It enshrines a long tradition of religious and cultural service.

The importance of cherishing our cultural heritage was the theme of the speech made by Mr Jim Mitchell, T.D., Minister for Communications who performed the opening ceremony.

Referring to the influence of such T.V. programmes as Dallas, Dynasty, Falcon Crest, he said they were beginning to represent a mid-Atlantic culture and we were in danger of losing our cultural diversity and our individuality. Certain prevailing values had been held down the years and we needed to retain, encourage and develop them. The Minister paid tribute to the Capuchin Community for doing so.

FR. MICHAEL O'SHEA, O.F.M. CAP

Unlike its Dublin counterpart which began in association with the Temperance movement, Feis Maitiu, Corcaigh, had a more specific cultural aim right from the beginning. Its founder and first President was Fr. Michael. I was fortunate to hear some personal memories of Fr. Michael from Mrs Kathleen Davis, one of the faithful band of workers who keep the Feis organisation moving smoothly and the one in particular who presides over tea and her own ~~homemade~~ cakes in the foyer. "An tAthair Michael" as she referred to him was "an outstanding character" with a sense of humour too. She remembered his "unusual, strong face, pleasant manner;" a certain "dramatic" quality about him; he meant what he said and he had "a beautiful speaking voice". They were very suitable characteristics indeed for the first President of Feis Maitiu and they come to mind as I look at a photograph of Fr. Michael in 1936 presenting The Capuchin Annual Cup for Male Choirs - "The grandest Trophy of the Feis" to Mrs R. J. Boylan whose Plain Songsters were the first winners. The "Capuchin Annual Cup" is now awarded for voice Production and for Popularisation of National Airs in Solo Singing.

Back in 1937 the singing adjudicator was Lady Harty. Right from the beginning the high calibre of the adjudicators ensured the interest of teachers and attracted competitions of ability and today that reciprocal relationship of first class adjudicators and high competitive standards is maintained under the vigilant direction of Bro. Paul O' Donovan and

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the Advisory Board.

One of the earliest and most famous names was Arnold Bax who came at Easter 1929 to adjudicate in the singing and piano department. He also made suggestions for improvements, took great trouble to select test pieces and for all this work would accept no remuneration. Fr. Michael and he became firm friends. He was delighted to have Fr. Michael write to him in Irish and looked forward to the time he would be able to reply in Irish which he eventually did.

Fr. Michael was succeeded by Fr. Maurice O' Dowd "a very good-looking man" (again my informant was Mrs Davis) and then there was Fr. Mathew. It was during Fr. Mathew's time that the first Cork Drama Festival was opened by the Lord Mayor Mr M. Sheehan, T.C. Very Rev. Dr. James proposing the vote of thanks spoke on lines very similar to those of Mr Jim Mitchell in 1985. Paying tribute to the memory of Fr. Theobald Mathew and the other Fr. Mathew who had conceived the idea of the Festival, Dr. James said, "It was a development of the Father Mathew Feis, a very striking development, because at the present day they heard so much criticism of foreign films. These were criticised because of their absence of moral standards and their false philosophies. But such criticism was of little value unless an attempt was made to substitute something for the attraction of the films (Cork Examiner, November 12, 1946). That first Cork Drama Festival in the Fr. Mathew Hall ran for a fortnight and the adjudicators were Miss Ria Mooney, then Principal of the gaiety Theatre School of Acting and Mr. Sean Neeson.

CORK YOUTH THEATRE

Another dramatic first took place during the Presidency of Fr. Nesson, again arising out of Feis Maitiu. Noticing the innate talent of many of the young competitors in the Dramatic Scenes, Fr Nesson felt they should get the opportunity of training and more scope for performance. He outlined his ideas to Claire O' Halloran, one of the teachers involved in the Feis who readily agreed to undertake the work involved. So The Cork Children's Theatre was formed

for young people in the 7 - 15 age group. It was later to be named The Cork Youth Theatre.

Fr. Nesson visited Primary schools in the city promoting the project and 38 children took to the boards for the inaugural production in November 1969. It was a full-length play entitled "Where do we go from here" and it ran for a week. The Evening Echo sponsored an Essay Competition in association with it.

Mrs O' Halloran was joined in the work by Mrs Judy Eades and in the years that followed they produced five one-act plays and two more full-length plays The Imaginary Invalid by Moliere and the first Irish Performance of Lord Arthur Savike's Crime by Constance Cox. The Capuchin Community sponsored the undertaking giving the Hall for rehearsals and productions and supported by Fr. Nesson and his successor, Fr. Senan the two directions worked on a voluntary basis.

Unfortunately, the development of the Everyman Theatre bought about the end of the venture that had achieved in its few years existence a high standard of training and performance. Significantly too, the Cork Youth Theatre's production of the famous medieval morality play "Everyman" won the Festival Shield at what was to be the last Cork Youth Drama Festival held in 1971 in the C.Y.M.S. Hall.

I must end this period on a note of humour. I have in my possession an envelope, post-marked London 1970 and addressed to:

Fr. Nesson and Fr. Mathew Quay,
Capuchin Franciscan Friary,
Cork.

Quite a flight of "fanci",

In the latter days of his Presidency, Fr. Senan had as assistant Bro. Paul who then took over as president and effected a complete transformation in the organisation of the Feis. In addition, Bro. Paul has worked toward even higher standards, employing the best of adjudicators, promoting new competitions and securing financial support from the

from the Arts Council, the Cork Corporation and city banks and business firms. Back in 1948 when the Feis come of age, Fr. Mathew was sending out a letter calling for support for the Feis and the Hall and offering Associate membership of the Feis committee for a subscription of one guinea per annum. Nowadays the Feis programme carries a page with a list of the names of Patrons of the Feis. The minimum subscription rate has increased with the times.

CULTURAL EVENT OF IMPORTANCE

But if as Fr. Mathew said Feiseanna are not paying proportions they certainly yield fruit in more important ways and Feis Maitiu, Cork is one of the most important cultural events not just in the city and county but in the entire country; Indeed taking into account the range of competitions, the numbers of competitors and the general high standard of performance one might claim it is the most important. It's reputation has spread beyond our own shores and the Feis is now registered with the British Federation of Music Festivals. The first Cork Feis lasted for 4 days and had one adjudicator for 300 competitors in Speech and a little Singing. In the Jubilee Year there approximately 8,000 competitions. In 1984, when the importance of the Feis was acknowledged by the presence of the President of Ireland, Dr. Patrick J. Hillery who performed the opening ceremony there were 11,500 entries. In this its 57th year the Feis ran for 6 weeks and there were over 12,000 entries with classes in Singing, Piano, Brass and Woodwind, Recorders, Strings, Classical Guitar, School Bands, Irish Harp, Uilleann Pipes and of course Verse-speaking and Drama which section stands out above all others in the number of competitions and competitors. There were also special competitions and bursaries to mark the Cork 800 celebrations and European Music Year. The really significant thing of course is that standards have continued to rise also with some outstanding performances from prizewinners and high overall quality in all classes.

There have been losses. Irish dancing disappeared from the syllabus because of dissension among the dancing organisations.

The Prize-Winners concert disappeared for various reasons, none I feel insuperable and the situation should be reconsidered. The Prize-Winners Concert is a mandatory feature of other Festivals from the local Ringaskiddy Festival which runs 2 such concerts to the Feis Ceoil in Sligo and Dublin. This year too, the adjudicator in the Gaelic or Irish-speaking section commented on the low number of entries. Numbers had decreased. Here is an important area that needs more specific attention: a ^{revision} of the syllabus, careful selection of test pieces and more support from the schools. This is a challenge which calls for an immediate response. As Bro. Paul said at this years opening, the Feis must be forward-looking and continue to be a developing festival.

My memory of that thronged opening night (a phenomenon which alas does not continue on other evenings) and of the singing of Scarlatti's Jubilate Deo by one of the competing choirs seems an appropriate note on which to end.

NOTES AND SOURCES

1. Register of Members of the T. A. Society, Fr. Mathew Hall
2. Minutes of Meetings, Fr. Mathew Hall, Jan. 18th, 1908.
3. Ibid.
4. In 1913 the debt was £1,396 - 19 - 1: in 1914 it was £1,426 - 4 - 11.
5. Six shillings per year in the beginning.
6. In 1969 it was costing over £2,000 per year to run the Hall.