



*Uachtaráin: Diarmuid Ó cathasaigh*  
*Saoithe: Paddy Daly, Niamh Parsons, Ann Riordan*

# The Sweet Nightingale

New Series, no 15, September 2020

## Special Presidential Issue: Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh

As we celebrate the Twentieth Anniversary of the Howth Singing Circle in these bizarre and dangerous times, it was decided that we would elect Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh as our new Uachtaráin to succeed the late Willie O'Connor – or Willie D. as he became known.



*Diarmuid in song with Fergal Costello in the Pier House and applauding Niamh Parsons in The Abbey Tavern*

Diarmuid is a Saoi of the Howth Singing Circle but it is absolutely appropriate that he now become our President. Diarmuid is one of a handful of people that can claim to have been with the Club in every one of its twenty years. He began by being much-respected as a singer - go háirithe amhráin i nGaeilge – and dramatic deliverer of recitations. Indeed, who could ever forget those occasions when the lights would suddenly go out in the Pier House as Diarmuid announced that Dangerous Dan McGrew was firing two shots and to – accompanying screams of terror and excitement from a shocked audience – a cannily concealed Dave O'Connor would twice fire Diarmuid's starting pistol?

Then I ducked my head, and the lights went out, and two guns blazed in the dark,  
And a woman screamed, and the lights went up, and two men lay stiff and stark.  
Pitched on his head, and pumped full of lead, was Dangerous Dan McGrew,  
While the man from the creeks lay clutched to the breast of the lady that's known as Lou.

Diarmuid has, of course, contributed to preserving and carrying traditional Irish culture for far longer than the two decades of the Howth Singing Circle. He was closely associated with singers and musicians in every county, especially when his job as a salesman took him around the country, his itinerary no doubt calculated to coincide with Fleadh, seisiún or calling in on some musical pal. His knowledge of songs in Irish and English is second to none. Much of his footnotes he gathered at source from the song-writer or air composer or from the singer or musician who is most associated with the piece. He delights in variations of songs or in contrasting the Louth version of the song or tune with that heard in Sliabh Luachra or an Antrim Glen.



*Diarmuid leading 'The Parting Glass' at two Annual Dinners – left in Aqua with Jock Burns (concertina), Ann Riordan (Bean an Tí), Brian McCarthy (banjo), John Kelly (fiddle) and Jimmy Kelly; and right, in Ivan's, Jimmy Good (sound), Seán McKeon (pipes), Liam O'Connor (fiddle) and Antoinette Daly*

A beautiful singer, for many years Diarmuid was a stalwart at the weekly sessions of An Góilín Traditional Singers' Club in Dublin but his voice is equally recognisable in Gaoth Dobhair, An Rinn, Ros Muc or Corca Dhuibhne. Again, he searches out old versions of songs, researches their provenance, delights in the subtleties and nuances of the Irish, variations from each Gaeltacht. But then, he is steeped in gaelic literature having served for years on Bord na Leabhar Gaeilge and Áisíneacht Dáileacháin Leabhar (ÁIS) (the Books Distribution Agency). Once in a bookshop in Kemper (Quimper) in Brittany, the bookseller asked a Howth Singing Circler where they were from. They told him they were from a fishing village north of Dublin, to which he replied, 'Ah - Howth! Ensuite, vous devez connaître Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh!' They were proud to admit that they did. The book dealer knew Diarmuid through various Celtic language agencies and, of course, in exchanging books in Irish, Scots Gaelic, Manx, Welsh, Cornish and Breton.



*Diarmuid with Declan Fay, Anne and Niamh Parsons, and Johnny Nolan, stalwarts all; and right, Diarmuid with Cyril Guinan, Aidan and Joyce O'Hara and Áine Bean Uí Chathasaigh*

A favourite singer of Diarmuid's is Darach Ó Catháin, for many as good as any there has been. Once, at the seán-nós competition at the Meath Fleadh, Diarmuid won and Darach, then living in Rath Cáirn, was only runner up! Nuair a míníodh an toradh, dúradh le Darach gur 'toisc go raibh a fhuaimniú bocht' (when the result was explained, Darach was told it was because 'his diction was poor!'). It was

typical that Diarmuid told this story against himself but equally typical that he held Darach in the deepest respect. Diarmuid lay the foundations upon which Stiofáin Ó hAoláin and Daire Ó Baoill have developed our annual Oícheanta Gaeilge. Is léir an grá atá ag Diarmuid don teanga agus a dhíograis i leith amhránaíocht seán-nós. Is cúis áthais dom ní amháin a chuid amhránaíochta féin a chloisteáil ach féachaint air agus é ag éisteacht go géar le hamhránaí, bileog súile, ag bualadh gáire.



*Diarmuid and Colly Moore presenting Howth Singing Circle song sheets and copies of The Sweet Nightingale to Nicholas Carolan, Director, Irish Traditional Music Archive in The Pier House; and Diarmuid accepting Robert Kelly's beautifully crafted wheel with Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill in the background*

A noticeable characteristic of Diarmuid's – and one that has typified his contribution to the Howth Singing Circle – is his welcoming and encouraging hand to singers and musicians, particularly young performers or those clearly unused to or unsure about performing. When the idea for a Young Singer in Residence was mooted, Diarmuid was an immediate enthusiast and displayed great encouragement to Ruth Clinton and Cathal Caulfield, our two Young Singers. Diarmuid brought many news ideas and occasions to the Howth Singing Circle, his Harvest Basket becoming an annual celebration of the end of summer and the beginning on a new season for the Club



*Cyril Guiney. Laurence Bond, Willie O'Connor, Tom Lantrey, Mary Doyle, Cian agus Séamus Ó Súilleabháin and Ann Riordan join Diarmuid in 'The Parting Glass' in the Angling Club*

For many years, Diarmuid ran events in the Holybrook Hotel where singing, dancing and music were the high class order of the day. It was but one of many of his multi-faceted activities to promote and enjoy traditional music, song, dance and story telling. In Howth, he was often the only singer as gaeilge in an evening, with favourites 'Thugamar Féin an Samradh Linn' and 'Mo Ghile Mear'. He often produces obscure versions of songs or long-lost translations rooted out of his vast library, songs always relevant to the date, a commemoration or centenary or having a Howth connection. He collected anything to do with Howth and knew many of its more celebrated residents like Colm Ó Lochláinn. If you ever need the provenance of a song – in English or Irish – Diarmuid is your man and you will receive detailed notes, including those answering questions you did not even ask! In the days when the Cock Tavern held great sessions led by piper Leo Rickard and – when he was ashore – the

legendary Bull Moore – Diarmuid demonstrated his command of the mouth organ, not an instrument regularly heard playing traditional music and even less so when leading sets of tunes. He can surely ‘make the harmonica talk’.



*Diarmuid performing one of the best versions hear of Robert Burns ‘Ae Fond Kiss’ at the Annual Howth Burns Night, Catriona Crowe sitting in appreciation – Rabbie looks weel tricket tae; and Diarmuid in reflective voice in the Abbey Tavern*

Originally from County Louth, Diarmuid and his wife Áine have contributed hugely to the Howth community. Active in the Church where Diarmuid sings and plays harmonica on regular occasions, he is also a central figure in the Howth Peninsula Heritage Society - <http://www.howthheritage.com/> He has delivered numerous lectures and typically trawled through local newspapers and the minutes of the Howth Town Council to recover the history of the people and their activities. Diarmuid can be found in any progressive activity in the town – for to locals it is a town not a village – where his energy and ideas are welcomed.



*Diarmuid with Andy Burke playing tunes in the Abbey with Eugene McEldowney looking on; Gerry O'Connor, Helen Lahert, Walter Kennedy, Eddie Phillips and Laurence Bond with Diarmuid after a Singathon for St Francis Hospice at Sutton Methodist Church; and a familiar sound, Diarmuid playing a fascinating medley*

Returning to Diarmuid’s skill in delivering recitations – be they Robert Service’s Yukon adventures or Florence M. Wilson’s ‘The man From God Knows Where’ – it is rare to see a room held in stasis as Diarmuid changes the mood with a drop in his voice, that familiar flick of the head, an emphasis that catches its audience by surprise. Even though the room may have heard the story umpteen times before, like his pal Micil Ned Quinn from Mullaghbawn, it does not matter because the delivery is always fresh and exciting. Another favourite, one that reflects his love for Howth, is the poem ‘Tommy Swan’s Dog’, an episode in the many adventures of the old Evora Bar!



*Diarmuid at the Annual Dinner in The House with, l-r, Antoinette & Paddy Daly, Niamh Parsons, Francy Devine, Áine Bean Uí Chathasaigh, Walter Kennedy, Ann Riordan, Gerry O'Connor and Laurence Bond, Isla Fitzgerald back to camera  
Diarmuid at the Annual Singathon for St Francis Hospice at Sutton Methodist Church, l-r, Noel Kelly (Pipe Major, St Lawrence Howth Pipe Band), Fergus Russell, Niamh Parsons, Willie D. O'Connor, Tony Fitzpatrick, Ann Riordan, Eugene McEldowney, Luke Cheevers, Gerry O'Connor, Helen Lahert, Walter Kennedy, Eddie Phillips and Laurence Bond*

In addition to knowing every county in Ireland – together with its lore and legend – backwards, Diarmuid and Áine are well travelled from Alaska to Brazil, Scandinavia to Beijing, Russia to New York and many places in between. The pity it is, in C.J. Boland's words that Diarmuid oft recited, that – as they were never in Mullinahone – they could not say they had ever travelled at all!

And I'd rather be strolling along the quay,  
And watching the river flow,  
Than growing tea with the cute Chinees,  
Or mining in Mexico.

And I wouldn't much care for Sierra Leone,  
If I hadn't seen Killenaule,  
And the man that was never in Mullinahone  
Shouldn't say he had travelled at all"



*Diarmuid in full flow on our Walk – 'Down By Yon Flowery Garden' – in the National Botanic Gardens and Willie O'Connor*

Before we finish with 'The Parting Glass' as Diarmuid has done at the close of virtually every Howth Singing Circle session over the last twenty years, let us celebrate his many achievements and, in asking him to become our President, recognise the amazing energy and commitment he has brought to the HSC which he has promoted far and wide. He has brought an informed perspective on traditional music, many new friends and guests through his extensive contacts around Ireland, and a dimension to our activities that has reflected his unique, dynamic and generous personality.



**Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh, Uachtarán, Ciorcal Ceoil Bheann Éadair,  
táimid ag beannú duit!**

**Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh, President, Howth Singing Circle,  
we thank and salute you**

## **Next Zoom Session, Comic Songs Thursday, 5 November 2020 at 8pm**

**Launch of Young Singer in Residence Cathal Caulfield's  
*Tales of Humour, Wonder & Woe***

**launch by Críostóir Mac Carthaigh (NFC), Annette Munnelly  
& Liam O'Connor (ITMA)**

**for Zoom codes contact [rioann@gmail.com](mailto:rioann@gmail.com)**

