

JOHN McCORMACK

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian

In May 1903, a curly-headed 18-year-old from Athlone submitted a last minute entry in the tenor competition at the Dublin Feis Ceoil - an annual competition in music and song. He hadn't the money to enter until a friend paid his entrance fee, another bought his music, and Dr. Vincent O'Brien, Choirmaster of the pro cathedral in Dublin, taught the young man the two competition pieces - Handel's Tell Fair Irene and Thomas Moore's the Snowy Breasted Pearl. Between these generous men, young John McCormack was literally pushed into a life of music. On the day of the Feis, the nervous young McCormack was the last of 14 tenors to perform. At the end of his performance, the audience rose with a thunderous ovation, despite the fact that applause was forbidden. It was a demonstration never before seen, and the judge said, *'There is no need to tell you who the winner is, you have picked him'*. The next day all of Dublin was buzzing about the young man from Athlone who had captured the coveted gold medal with his inspired singing.

Born to sing on June 14, 1884, John was one of six children. He loved music, but all his family had pleasing voices, so no special attention was paid to him at home. Naturally intelligent, he won a scholarship and graduated Sligo College. Through his years of education, John always found time for the school choir. After graduation, his father secured a clerical position for him in Dublin, but John was miserable doing clerical work. Two friends: Dudley Ford and Frank Manning took him to Dr. Vincent O'Brien who gave him a place in the pro cathedral Choir at 25 Pounds per year. That was all the encouragement he needed. Young McCormack walked out of his office job, and never returned.

It was these men who supported John's entry into the Feis where he scored his first triumph. Among John's admirers at that Feis was a young lady named Lily Foley, who won a medal herself for singing in Irish. After the Feis, 16-year-old Miss Foley and 18-year-old John McCormack found themselves engaged to sing at a number of concerts, and a lasting friendship developed between them. Then, Mr. James Riordan arrived in Dublin to engage artists to appear at the Irish Village at the St. Louis World's Fair. Both John and Lily were selected to join the finest entertainers in Ireland who would represent their country's musical heritage at that prestigious event. The journey to America, and the months spent amid the glamour and glitter of the St. Louis World's Fair was like a trip to fantasy land. *'An awesome spectacle'*, Lily later wrote, *'for our young Irish eyes.'* All went well at the Fair until the management decided to put a stage Irish comic on the bill. Young McCormack protested the addition as demeaning to the Irish and resigned. He returned to Ireland, and the pro cathedral where he was welcomed with open arms.

His golden voice remained the central attraction in the choir until John, again through the generosity of friends, went to Italy to study and improve his God-given talent. Miss Foley remained ever in touch, and eventually the talented young songstress became Mrs. John McCormack. Together they enjoyed a life that saw John McCormack become an international star. They owned a Hollywood mansion, a Park Avenue apartment, a castle, a stable of race horses, a roomful of Rembrandts, and 12 Rolls Royces. John received the title of Papal Count, yet remained as unspoiled as the day he first entered the Dublin Feis.

He was the highest paid classical musician in history receiving more than \$2,500,000. a year in days when you could keep most of it. His more than 600 recordings sold into the hundreds of millions in his lifetime, and still sell to this day. He sold out the 7,000-seat Hippodrome 50 times, and brought SRO audiences to their feet with his solo recitals in the largest theaters and arenas across five continents. He was hailed by the Germans as a peerless Lieder singer, proclaimed a master of bel canto by the Italians, and made a Chevalier of France's Legion of Honor for his interpretations of Debussy and Faure. He was also regarded as the greatest Mozart tenor of all time, his astonishing ability to sustain long phrases on a single breath astounded box holders from Covent Garden to the Metropolitan. Constantly teamed with top prima donnas, he sang with Melba, Tetrazzini, Destinn and Farrar. The press coverage he received was only matched by silver screen idols Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, and his hold on the affections of a world beyond music surpassed even that of his good friend Enrico Caruso.

Through it all he remained a constant devotee of the music of his native Ireland, and was never reluctant to sing them whether requested or not. As one writeup noted, *'through his ravishingly beautiful performances of the traditional*

ballads and folk songs of a nation struggling against poverty, famine, and oppression and striving for a place of its own in the world commonwealth, John McCormack achieved immortality as the voice of Ireland's history and fate, the personification of Gaelic romance and fantasy, and the cherished idol of his people everywhere.' Shortly after his death in September, 1945, his wife Lily found these words written in a memo book on John's desk. *'I live again the days and evenings of my long career. I dream at night of concerts in which I have had my share of success. Now, like the old Irish minstrels, I have hung up my harp because all my songs are sung. Thank God for recordings, for his voice is not lost forever.*

