

William Dunlea

The Voice of Erin

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Jim Mc Keon



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Foreword

When the staff of St Mary's Road Library organized an exhibition on the life of William Dunlea, early in 2008, it was clear from the reaction, both to the exhibition itself and to the recitals of his music which took place while it was on, that his memory is still very much alive.

The man popularly known as the 'Voice of Erin' not only in his native Blackpool and Cork, but in Britain and the United States, still casts a long shadow. The reception to the St Mary's Road celebration convinced us that the time is right to bring his story to a wider audience. When the respected biographer and author Jim McKeon was asked to write this story, he responded with his customary enthusiasm, and immersed himself in the project. Jim has, I'm sure readers will agree, done justice to Dunlea's colourful life. Around the same time as the exhibition was first mooted, Cork City Libraries launched the Cork Music Archive, to collect, document, preserve and make available Cork's musical heritage. This book is one of the first products of the Music Archive.

So much of Cork, and especially Blackpool, comes together in William Dunlea's life – the passion for opera and for emotional and flamboyant singing, a devotion to hurling, and cultural and political nationalism. Born in 1911, when Cork was still a city economically and militarily integrated into the British Empire, and coming into adolescence as the new state was coming into being, his life throws an illuminating spotlight on Cork and Ireland in the 20th century.

Liam Ronayne
Cork City Librarian

From *A Nocturne for Blackpool*

by Theo Dorgan

The ghost of Inspector Swanzy creeps down Hardwick Street,
MacCurtain turns down the counterpane of a bed he'll never sleep in,
unquiet murmurs scold from the blue-slate rooftops
the Death Squad no one had thought to guard against.

The young sunburned hurlers flex in their beds, dreaming of glory,
great deeds on the playing fields, half-days from school,
while their slightly older sisters dream of men and pain,
an equation to be puzzled out again and again.

Walloo Dullea, homeward bound on the Commons Road, belts
out airs from *Trovatore*,
the recipe as before, nobody stirs from sleep
and 'Puzzle the Judge', contented, pokes at ashes—
"There's many a lawyer here today could learn from this man".

extracted from "A Nocturne for Blackpool". First published in *The Ordinary House of Love* (1991) and republished in *What This Earth Cost Us*. Dublin, Dedalus Press 2008. Reproduced with the kind permission of the author and Dedalus Press.



The Cork tenor, William Dunlea, once said “If you pass Cork you’ll pass the world.” Sunday night, 12 January 1941 was to be that night, the turning point in his career. Still in his late twenties, he was beginning to make a name for himself. The Opera House was packed to capacity; many were turned away. The audience was tense, expectant and excited. This was a concert to honour William. At last the lights went down. There was a hush as the curtains swished back and he appeared and walked to the centre of the stage. As the pianist gently led into the first song there was a ripple of applause followed by a deafening silence, a nervous, collective holding of breath, as William gave a superb interpretation of Schubert’s ‘Serenade’.

The audience’s reaction was explosive. Then he sang an apt choice – ‘You will Remember me’– which nearly brought the house down. Yes, this was the night of nights. There were other excellent performers that night but William was the star. He had them in the palm of his hand and he knew it. When he sang his last song on this magical night they wouldn’t let him go, and kept stamping and shouting, “We want more.” It was 11.45pm. They got more; it was a feast. He sang another twelve songs before he finally ‘escaped’ and they reluctantly let him go at 12.45am. That night he sang like an angel and looked like a god. Yes, he passed Cork. He was a great Irishman, a proud Corkman but a quintessential Blackpool boy. He once said he’d rather be appreciated in Cork than in Carnegie Hall. But where did all this begin? How did all this start? Take my hand and we’ll stroll back thirty years to the humblest of beginnings.

When Bill Dunlea senior married his sweetheart, Clara Whooley, they were both 24 years old. The happy couple settled down at 10 Brocklesby Street, a narrow street on the verge of Blackpool in the Northside of Cork city. The street was named in honour of Edward Brocklesby, the Mayor of Cork in 1723. The Dunlea's eldest son, the first of ten children, was born here on Friday 10 February 1911. On the following Monday he was christened William, after his father, by Fr. Russell at the North Cathedral. Fr. Russell had also married his parents. Cork at that time was a bustling city of 80,000 people, at the head of one of the finest natural harbours in the world. The village of Blackpool lay nestled between the lofty heights to its north where the housing estates of Farranree, Gurranabraher, Churchfield and Knocknaheeny now stand, and the sprawling slopes of Mayfield and Ballyvolane to the south. It was a warm and friendly area; everybody knew everybody else and doors were never locked.

At that time Ireland was under British rule and Blackpool was a hotbed of political passion. Even the place names had a political nature: Thomas Davis Street, O'Connell Street, Gerald Griffin Street, John Redmond Street and Great William O'Brien Street. The Dunlea household was a staunchly Republican one. There was never a dull moment in young William Dunlea's life and he was a fascinated spectator at the colourful neighbourhood skirmishes. Charles Parnell, although dead since 1891, was still an Irish political icon. John Redmond was a devoted Parnell follower and nationalist; William O'Brien was very anti Parnell. The local Quarry Lane 'mob' was called the O'Brienites. Several hundred of them, often led by the Quarry Lane Band, would gather at one end of O'Connell Street around 6pm every evening shouting "Up William O'Brien," and wait for the arrival of hundreds of Sunbeam girls, the Redmondites, who marched through Brocklesby Street with the impressionable William following in their wake. The rival groups met at the



Cork's Northside, 1920's.

Image courtesy of the Irish Examiner.

other end of O'Connell Street. The Redmondites were known as the Molly Maguires and used to chant "Up the Mollies". The O'Brienites had one great fighting man, Connie Flynn, who was in and out of jail. They used to sing to the air of 'Clementine', "He's our darling. He's our darling. He's our darling, Connie Flynn. He is in now, but you'll see now. We'll have him out again.". Many of the Sunbeam girls wore black stockings with holes in them. They waved their shawls around over their heads like flags as they sang, and some of them brandished big sticks. The RIC had the impossible job of restraining the O'Brienites while the Mollies were herded towards the city centre. Things were inclined to get out of hand and end up in a free-for-all, with many a head being broken. The men were bad but the women were worse. They regularly beat the men to a frazzle

and the unfortunate RIC were caught in the middle.

It must be remembered that the first twelve years of William Dunlea's life were without doubt the most exciting, frenzied, exhilarating yet frightening and traumatic twelve years in Irish history. In quick succession came the First World War, the 1916 Rising, the tragic deaths of Lord Mayors MacCurtain and MacSwiney, the arrival of the Black and Tans, the burning of Cork, the War of Independence, the Civil War and the death of Michael Collins. Times were tough, there was very little work, and long queues of men enlisted in the British Army and sailed off to war with an innocent optimism. At least they got a uniform, three meals a day and a weekly wage. How little did they know? Most of them never came back.

The Famine and the widespread emigration which followed it had halved the population of Ireland which appeared to languish under British rule. The Gaelic Revival, little by little, sparked interest and pride in all things Irish. Young boys from Blackpool and other working class areas were encouraged to attend An Grianáin in Father Mathew Street to speak Irish and mingle with the likes of MacCurtain, MacSwiney, Sean O'Faolain, Daniel Corkery and Frank O'Connor. This new spirit of defiance was a factor in the 1916 Rising, as was the fact that British military resources were stretched by England's involvement in the First World War. Confined to Dublin, as it turned out to be, the Rising stood little chance of success despite the heroism of individual volunteers. In Cork Tomás MacCurtain had a thousand men waiting in torrential rain ready to act, but, confused by the contradictory orders he received from the IRB and Eoin MacNeill, he had little choice but to dismiss most of his men. Some volunteers occupied the Volunteer Hall, later Saint Francis Hall, in Sheares Street but handed over their arms to the British in an agreement worked out with the help of the Bishop and Lord Mayor of Cork.

The execution of the leaders of the Rising angered the

people and fostered a hostile attitude towards British soldiers. Bill Dunlea senior, who was now 29 years old, was an active member of the First Cork Brigade. His wife Clara often carried guns in the children's pram from one safe house to another.

After Sinn Féin's victory in the 1918 election and the setting up of the first Dáil in 1919, the War of Independence began in earnest. Tension grew with each ambush and each reprisal. Blackpool was a cauldron of political passion. The situation in Cork came to a head in 1920, surely the most eventful year in the city's history. On 30 January 1920 MacCurtain was elected the first Republican Lord Mayor of Cork. Sadly, his term of office was to last only seven weeks. At 1.15am on Saturday 20 March, his thirty-sixth birthday, he was murdered in his home, practically across the road from the Dunlea household. Members of the RIC, with blackened faces and socks pulled over their boots to muffle the sound, smashed in his front door, ran up the stairs, shot MacCurtain in front of his young children, and ransacked the house. As he lay mortally wounded on the bedroom floor his last words were, "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." His assassins ran quickly off into the night spraying bullets at the houses near Brocklesby Street. Word of the murder spread like wildfire. Doors were locked. Children were kept indoors. People all over Blackpool were frightened, confused and shocked. That weekend Cork was a city of mourning. Strangely, two days before his death MacCurtain had received a threatening letter saying, "Prepare for death. You are doomed." The message was written on official Dáil Éireann notepaper which suggests that British intelligence had somehow acquired nationalist notepaper.

The coroner passed a verdict of wilful murder against British Prime Minister, Lloyd George. On the following Monday, Cork came to a standstill during the funeral. The docks, shops and factories were closed, and there were no trams or newspapers. MacCurtain's killers were known to the Blackpool volunteers

but they fled to different parts of the country. Revenge was demanded. RIC Inspector Swanzy, who allegedly was one of the murderers, was transferred up north. It took months to track him down to an RIC barracks in Lisburn. A local man was given the job and, on 22 August, as Swanzy left church, he was gunned down with MacCurtain's own revolver.

The British Government felt that Rebel Cork was getting out of control and they intended to do something about it. First a strict curfew of 5pm was enforced on the city. Anyone caught breaking the curfew was shot. Then Lloyd George sent the Black and Tans to Ireland five days after the MacCurtain murder. They set up headquarters at Empress Place on Summerhill. They were recruited largely from the ranks of the unemployed and included some WWI veterans. The Tans quickly gained a reputation for brutality. They carried bull-whips and frequently lashed, terrorized and robbed innocent people. They were sent to several specific trouble spots. Cork was one such place. The Tans were despised and were a law unto themselves. Anyone who stood up to them was quickly and violently dealt with.

At noon on 30 March Terence MacSwiney was unanimously elected Lord Mayor of Cork. After an emotional speech he finished with the immortal and often misused quotation: "It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can suffer the most who will conquer." On Thursday 12 August he was arrested on charges of sedition, court-martialled and sentenced to two years in Brixton Prison. In protest he went on hunger strike. For the next ten weeks the eyes of the world were on Cork as he suffered a slow, painful death. One day 40,000 people said the rosary for him in the Grand Parade. Even 30,000 English workers demanded his release. It was not to be. On Monday 25 October he passed away after 74 days fasting. The tension during that October was unbearable. The British Army received word that its soldiers would be shot on sight. The deaths of Michael Fitzgerald and Joe Murphy after hunger

strikes of 68 and 76 days didn't help. The Lord Mayor's body was brought back from Brixton and laid out in the City Hall. Bill Dunlea senior and his comrades joined thousands to pay their respects but as they filed past the coffin they were shocked by the gaunt hollow-cheeked features of MacSwiney. His death had a huge effect on the city and brought a dramatic escalation of the tit-for-tat violence.

The Black and Tans went berserk. In one week 24 towns were badly damaged, looted and burned. On 21 November they fired recklessly into the crowd at Croke Park killing twelve people. A few days later, the First Cork Brigade, led by Tom Barry, ambushed a convoy at Kilmichael and killed 16 members of the Auxiliaries. But every time the Tans were hit they retaliated with a vengeance. By December the War of Independence was raging out of control and Cork was the eye of the storm. There were 12,500 British troops in Cork alone. The streets were a bloody battlefield. On Saturday night 10 December six volunteers attacked a lorry-load of Auxiliaries near Dillon's Cross, killing one before making their escape. The reaction of the Black and Tans was instant and savage. They swept into the city centre and systematically burned building after building. The fire brigade was fired on and its hoses were slashed, and an ambulance carrying an injured fireman was spattered with bullets. All through the night they looted and burned pubs and shops as they made their way to the City Hall, the symbol of Republicanism, and set it alight. At first the British blamed the IRA. Then they accused the people of burning their own city. The media stated that the City Hall caught fire and flames from this accidentally set Patrick Street ablaze. To back up this theory, an English newspaper printed a diagram of Cork with the City Hall conveniently relocated in Patrick Street. In that night of madness, many were shot and wounded. One Auxiliary was killed at Dillon's Cross early in the night. At 2.30am the worst atrocity occurred when a lorry-



The day after the burning of Cork, December 1920.

Image courtesy of the Irish Examiner.

load of Black and Tans attacked a house in Dublin Hill, not far from the Dunlea home. Jeremiah and Cornelius Delaney were asleep in the upstairs bedroom. Wearing handkerchiefs over their faces, the Tans opened fire. The young brothers were mortally wounded. They were accused of being involved in the earlier Dillon's Cross attack. The Tans claimed that they found a cap at the attack scene and, with the help of a bloodhound, traced it back to the Delaney home. This claim was untrue. The Delaney boys had no part in the Dillon's Cross ambush.

The next morning people flocked in from far and near to see the still-smouldering rubble. The effect was traumatic. They just stood there in silent disbelief. The City Hall was gone. Nearby, what was once the beautiful old Carnegie Library was now a grotesque skeleton; a desolate, black shell with only one wall remaining. The loss of the library stock and the City Hall records were terrible losses for future historians.

Although the cleaning-up and the rebuilding were to take a long time, life in the city went on pretty much as usual. With the strict curfew the social scene in Cork was very dull; dances, get-togethers and musical events, which were hugely popular, were held in hotels on Sunday afternoons. They generally finished at four o'clock so as to give the patrons enough time to get home before the dreaded five o'clock curfew. Courting was a dangerous pastime. A young man had to see his girl home and then be fairly lively in getting home himself by curfew – or he was simply shot. It seems in Cork at that time you did not commit sin; you achieved it. The Black and Tans would sometimes grab a passer-by and force him to sing 'God Save the King' at gunpoint before sending him on his way with a flurry of bullets. Many young men learned the words of the English national anthem in case the necessity arose.

William was often caught and badly beaten for no reason, and he had clear memories of his father hiding a gun in the oven in case his house came under fire. At other times the Tans would tie some unfortunate on to the top of their armoured car as a shield for the night. The volunteers in Blackpool had a habit of dropping hand-grenades on the roof of these vehicles. The Tans were now finding it difficult to cope with the volunteers' hit and run tactics. The West Cork Brigade, especially, darted here and there, striking at the enemy, sleeping in cowsheds and safe houses. The IRA in Cork tied down a large section of the British army; one-third of the British forces in Ireland were stationed in Cork.

William Dunlea was just ten years of age when, out of the blue, a cessation of violence was dramatically announced on 21 July 1921. Cork sighed with relief. The guns were put away and a tremendous feeling of euphoria swept across the city. Boys and girls could once again stroll in peace and freedom through the streets, down the Marina, up the Mardyke or swim in the nearby Lucy's pond. People cycled out to the countryside

for picnics or down to Crosshaven for a swim. Roadblocks disappeared and the fear of searches and beatings was gone. People could attend dances and concerts and stay out all night if they so wished. The Black and Tans were still around and unpleasant but at least there were no shootings. However, this idyllic situation wasn't to last very long. Throughout that summer the gap in the Nationalist movement was widening.

In December a delegation led by a reluctant Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith went to London for talks. After much bargaining they signed the treaty and agreed to accept a twenty-six-county Ireland. The following month, after a dramatic debate, the Dáil voted 64 to 57 in favour of this treaty. If four members had changed their votes Irish history would have been drastically changed. For the next six months the country held its breath while a bitter war of words unfolded before it.

Then, on 22 May, William Dunlea and the young men of Blackpool and Dillon's Cross witnessed something they never thought they'd see, the British Army leaving Cork. The British soldiers streamed quietly out through the front gate of Victoria Barracks as the Irish Army marched in through the back gate. An officer solemnly hauled down the Union Jack and in a final act of British defiance cut down the massive flagpole so that there was no place to hoist the tricolour. They watched in silence as the British Army, complete with flagpole on a horse and cart, filed past Dillon's Cross, down Summerhill and out of Ireland. Centuries of British occupation were over.

But there was a growing anger amongst the Republicans. The heroics and expectations of the 1916 Rising and the dream of a thirty-two-county republic were well and truly buried. The guns started to reappear. In frustration, the IRA took over the Four Courts as its headquarters. At the end of June, under pressure from Downing Street, Michael Collins bombarded the Four Courts with guns borrowed, ironically, from the British Army and so began the Civil War. It was fought with bitterness

and disfigured by atrocities and was one of the blackest periods in Irish history. The Free Staters were better equipped and more organised and edged successfully bit by bit further and further south towards the Republican stronghold. With the invasion of Cork by sea and the death of Michael Collins in an ambush at Beal na mBláth the Civil War was over. The death toll had reached almost 700 and over 12,000 Republicans had been interned. It took Ireland some time to lick its wounds and get back on its feet. It must be remembered that just a few short years ago Cork city had been practically burned to the ground, and it was now in the throes of rebuilding.

The first dozen years of William Dunlea's life had been a non-stop roller-coaster of daily shootings, murders and bombings. Normal life had not been easy. But, like the rest of the youngsters and their families in working-class Blackpool and the wider Cork city, despite all the difficulties, they had no other choice but to get on with their lives. He lived next door to Blackpool Boys' School known affectionately as the 'Brocklesby Street Academy'. He was five years old when he first attended there on 13 March 1916. His father, a Dublin man, was listed as a fitter. The varied occupations of his classmates' fathers provide a telling social commentary on that area at that time. They were mostly soldiers, sailors, Goulding's labourers, spinning masters, cattle dealers, tram men, engine drivers, cellar men, RIC sergeants, coach builders, boat men and travellers.

The school had a fine reputation for singing. Every Wednesday afternoon was devoted to singing classes. Headmaster, Ger Hurley, a Labour T.D. with a pronounced limp, took charge of these classes with gusto. It didn't take long to find out that young William Dunlea had an exceptional voice. This also would have been due to the fact that every day he sang at home, accompanied by his mother Clara, a Cobh

woman, on her melodeon. She could also play the harmonica. His father, a fine baritone, could also play and he often joined in with them. William said his father was “the best baritone I ever heard.”. At that time, in the twenties, life was slow, satisfying and simple. Yet Cork was unique and distinctive in its own way. Everybody sang, walked and talked about their heroes from hurlers to singers and beagles to bowl-players. Intimate, colourful and loquacious, it was a great place to live. There was no television, radio or phones so concerts, operas and theatre had a magnetic mass appeal. It was not unusual to see a different opera or Shakespearian play on every night, or concerts in numerous different venues around the city and county. The standard was incredibly high. The Carl Clopet Drama Company was a regular visitor and this talented group would perform a different play every night for a week, and every performance was sold out.

Then, in November 1920, came one of the biggest events ever to hit Blackpool. Just a stone’s throw from Brocklesby Street, with great pomp and ceremony, a new cinema was opened. It was a basic building with hard wooden seating, and gloriously called the Lido. For the next 45 years the Lido would become the Mecca of young and old for miles around. There were two shows a night, seven nights a week, and it was bursting at the seams every night. If you survived the unmerciful crush to get in you’d get over anything. At first there were the silent films before moving on to the talkies.

Every night the packed audience was gripped and totally engrossed in animation, and they were very serious, and vocal, as the on-screen plot unfolded. They were very personal about the behaviour of the different characters in the film. The bad guy was loudly hissed with a genuine hatred and the hero constantly warned of any impending danger by shouts of, “Look out, boy” or “Watch your back”. And there was rousing applause when the hero won out and the villain got his



comeuppance. Also, there were the short serial-type films where the storyline continued every week. In many ways these serials were the forerunners of the modern-day soaps. Some weeks a brief trailer, a dramatic cliff-hanger, was shown where the hero was in serious danger, usually about to be attacked by a deadly rattle snake or in the process of being swept helplessly over Niagara Falls. Other weeks the helpless heroine was in deadly danger but, in the following episode, she was always saved by the handsome hero. This was an invitation, a carrot, so that the audience had to return and see the outcome. The admittance fee was two pence but it is another social statement to note that the management accepted an empty jam jar as payment. Glass was very scarce and a local jam factory agreed to exchange two pence for each jar. It was a common sight to see a long queue of young men with their precious jam jars under their arms. It shows how inventive the youngsters of that time were when occasionally, when money was scarce, and the entrance fee or jam jar wasn't available, half a dozen of them might rustle up the two pence between them. One was selected to pay up and go in while his cronies were left waiting and ready outside a chosen door. At an agreed time and signal, the boy inside,

under cover of darkness, would discreetly press down the exit bar on the appointed door and open it out. His waiting friends would quickly dash in, scatter and hide in the packed audience, while the house lights flashed on and, in the uproar, several male ushers with large torches searched for the culprits and very often ejected several innocent patrons. Eventually the lights went down again, normality was restored, and the film resumed.

Without doubt, the westerns were the most popular. Again, the good cowboy was always saved from danger by the anguished warnings of the patrons. It worked every time. After all, he had to stay healthy so that, at the end, he could ride off into the sunset. After the film everyone scurried home through Blackpool, riding imaginary horses and shooting imaginary Indians. If one was seriously well-off and had three spare pennies they could buy a big bag of chips in the nearby chip shop for two pence, and six rock-hard toffees for a penny which would last until the following day. It shows the poverty of that time that most of the young boys were barefoot, and even went to school barefoot. In many old photographs, even in winter time you'll see boys with no shoes yet, paradoxically, they all wore caps.

Back then, pleasures were simple. Most weekends, especially on Sundays, families strolled out to a nearby beauty spot called the Glen. This natural phenomenon, shaped like the letter 'V', was a green valley covered with a plethora of wild flowers and furze bushes. Meandering along its bottom was a rough stream which was banked up with sods like a homemade dam. Practically everybody from Blackpool to Dillon's Cross learned to swim there. This was the playground of their youth. They swam, played games, football, hurling, read, talked, sang and held simple picnics.

There weren't many clubs in existence in Blackpool other than Brian Dillon's, The Commons and Thomas Davis. St Anne's was at the top of Shandon Street. A local hurling club

was founded in April 1916 and aptly called Glen Rovers. With its striking green, black and yellow jersey, it was to become one of the greatest club sides in the history of the G.A.A. It was decided that green and yellow were to be the club colours but there was a last minute change and black was added to honour the dead of the recent Easter Rising. After much minor success the Glen turned senior in 1926. They reached their first senior county hurling final in 1930 but were beaten by a star-studded Blackrock team. Four years later they won their first senior final. William was at that game and he could be heard all over the ground cheering on his beloved Glen Rovers. He saw only one team and if ever they lost it brought tears to his eyes. But they didn't lose and, remarkably for such a young club, went on to win the next eight county finals in a row – 1934 to 1941. Ballincollig eventually beat them in the 1942 semi-final. They then bounced back to win five more: 1944, '45, '48, '49, and '50. The retirement of his great friend, the mercurial Jack Lynch, in 1950 brought an end to the last link with the eight-in-a-row team but as one star retired another, Christy Ring, emerged and helped the Glen to win another five county titles: 1953, '54, '58, '59, and '60. In 1964 the Glen won its 20th senior hurling title and they were the first team to win the newly formed Munster Club Championship. From such a humble beginning this club has won 25 county minor hurling titles and between 1934 and 1989 it also won 25 senior hurling titles and regularly, down through the years, the backbone of many All-Ireland winning Cork teams consisted of Glenmen.

Older players best remembered are Con and Din Joe Buckley, Paddy 'Fox' Collins, Paddy Donovan, Jim Young, Dave Creedon, Josie Hartnett, John Lyons, Joe and Vincie Twomey, Jack Lynch and Ring. The more modern heroes are Tomás Mulcahy, Denis Coughlan and that great full-back Martin Doherty, and many more.

From his earliest days 'til the day he died, William Dunlea

was a fanatical Glen Rovers follower. Sadly, in recent years, through social changes, the success rate of the once big-three city clubs, the Glen, Blackrock and St Finbarrs, has dramatically diminished. It is interesting to note that Blackrock were recognised as the kingpins of club hurling but St Finbarr's won the two county finals before and after the Glen's eight-in-a-row. One final against the Glen attracted 34,000 people.

In 1922, when William Dunlea turned eleven years of age, he got a part-time job with a local coal merchant. Every day, for a few hours after school, he would shovel heaps of coal into bags, weigh them, and sell them to the neighbours. On Friday, at the end of the week, when he got his wages, he strode up the Commons Road, head high, chest out, like a millionaire and handed over the money to his mother. She was often heard to say, "He was the best boy ever reared."

That same year Father O'Flynn, an ex-pupil of the school himself, happened to attend one of the singing classes because he was interested in the workings of children's voices. He was immediately impressed by William's singing ability. By now the boy had picked up the nickname 'Walloo' and he was to be affectionately known by this name all over the city and county. At the time colourful nicknames were more prevalent than in the present mainly to differentiate between members of the generally large families, or workers in factories, with the same popular Cork surnames like Murphy, McCarthy, O'Donovan or Coughlan. At other times the nickname was the opposite of the person's physical appearance: a huge man would be called 'Tiny' or a small timid man 'Butch'. Many Murphys were automatically called 'Spud' and others named for hair colour or height: 'Black Mick', 'Big Mac', Paddy 'Whack', Willie 'Walloo', 'Macker' or Jimmy 'Josser'.

Fr. O'Flynn arrived at the North Cathedral in 1920 after being chaplain at Our Lady's Mental Home for eight years. He was immediately called 'Flynnie' and he became a legend for his

way: if a woman was ill or a little down and out, he'd regularly call around and wash and dress the children and see them off to school. Or if a drunken husband was beating his wife he would physically sort him out. There were countless tales of him removing his collar and dishing out justice with an iron fist.

Fr. O'Flynn saw something in William's voice and, for the next two years, he took him under his wing. The first lesson was on breath control and the utter importance of using the diaphragm. He used to insist that the pupil stand behind a chair, bend completely over it, touch his toes, and go through the scales in that position. This was a difficult undertaking but it greatly developed the diaphragm, and William repeated this exercise all through his adult life. Posture was also important and when a pupil sang a song he had to stand dead straight against the wall. To remind the singer to open his mouth as wide as possible his first three fingers were placed in his mouth. This was very awkward but it was a huge help in eliminating the flatness of the vocal delivery. Lack of diction was a general problem in young working class boys. Fr. O'Flynn had a unique way of dealing with this. He placed a handful of marbles in the pupil's mouth for long periods and put him through his paces. After struggling through several songs the marbles were removed. This practice was instrumental in attaining the required standard of diction. All his professional life William Dunlea had perfect diction. Every word he sang could be clearly heard in the back row; even if it was a tender aria in a big venue.

'Flynnie' invited William to join the North Cathedral Choir. Later, this choir acquired a fine reputation when it came under the guidance of Professor Fleischmann who was the choirmaster. They sang at the special children's mass every Sunday morning. William loved singing with the choir but one day his world came tumbling down around him when the professor gave him a letter to give to his father. When his father read the letter he shook his head and told his apprehensive son to go to bed. The

boy cried all night. The next morning he was told the bad news; he had to leave the choir; his voice had broken. Every night he still went to choir practice but he listened down the lane outside the back window as the choir practiced.

William's term at Brocklesby Academy was uneventful yet he did win one prize. One day the teacher told his class that he would give a prize to the boy who told the biggest lie. One by one the boys told their stories. When it came to William's turn he stood up and said, "Mister O'Leary, sir, this day I was bowling out the Blarney Road and I threw one 28-ounce bowl so far that by the time it stopped rolling it was worn down to a 16-ounce bowl." The teacher gave him first prize.

William was thirteen when he made his confirmation at the North Cathedral in May 1924 and he left school six weeks later on 30 June. By now he was an expert on his mother's melodeon or, as he called it, his gadget. It went everywhere with him. He took to playing many instruments very easily, and he was also an excellent painter. When he couldn't get work in the factories of Blackpool he'd go hunting or bird-catching but, most days, himself and his pals and his gadget would go for long walks out the country, singing all the way, usually visiting Murphy's Rock for a swim. (He later boasted that he taught local actor, Joe Lynch, how to swim there.) Then they'd make their way across the fields to the river running under the Eight-Arch Bridge. Some cold winters they'd skate on that same river. Then it was out the Mallow Road, under the One-Eye Bridge and turn for home with William, like the pied piper of Hamelin, leading his chorus. If they felt hungry one of them would unearth a raw turnip, peel it with a pen-knife, and share juicy slices of turnip all around. Other times they'd do likewise with a few carrots or, depending on the season, pick sloes or blackberries. Just before reaching home they'd sit on the ditch and harmonise until they ran out of songs. The favourites were Caruso, John

McCormack and a selection of Moore's melodies.

Although William was an accomplished hurler, swimmer, cyclist and footballer, he excelled at the noble art of bowl-playing, and went on to win several tournaments, one when he was into his sixties. He was blessed with the required physique to attain a high standard; he was tall, with long arms and a muscular upper body, and he spent endless happy hours bowling with his friends along the winding roads of Ballyvolane, Waterfall and the Blarney Road. He had a fine approach and delivery but as he released the bowl he had the unorthodox habit of turning his head sharply to the right. Once, during a score at Nash's Boreen, just as he threw the bowl, an inquisitive cow stuck its head out over the ditch to see what all the commotion was about. The flying bowl struck the unfortunate animal in the head and killed it. For years, in the Fair Hill area, William was called, 'Kill the Cow'.

The one unifying thread running through the pastimes, hobbies and sports of the people of that time was that they cost nothing to participate in. Being poor was a common bond. Lady Poverty was a constant companion and she seldom lowered her ugly head. Everyone was equal as they scratched and struggled to stay above the breadline. There were no jobs or money and even less education. Yet it was a hugely exciting place to live and a genuine love and neighbourliness always prevailed. In these present, heady days of the Celtic Tiger people, especially young people, must find it impossible to comprehend how family life survived seventy years ago in Cork. The city was being rebuilt; slums and tenements were common. With large families, it was normal to see up to six children sleep on a mattress in a small room. Toilets, even outside toilets, were rare and, many times, the family bathroom consisted of a bucket on the landing. Yet everyone accepted this situation and got on with their lives, and humour and initiative were never very far away.

In the intervening years since the troubles had ended a



Blackpool National Prize Band 1927.

Back row: Mr Flynn, Ds. Cronin, hon treasurer, M. Mullins, C. McGuckin, D. Sheehan, Ds Sheehan, Wm Dunlea.

Second back row: E. Murphy, Wm. Dunlea, J. O'Callaghan, Jas Dunlea, A. Butler, J. Joyce.

Third back row: P. Barry, T. O'Leary, D. Mulcahy, M. Keogh, D. Mulcahy, E. McNamara.

Front row: M. Mason, P. Cronin, vice president, J Kenefick, Joe O'Leary, Jas. O'Donoghue, M. Mahony, D. Murphy, hon secretary, Jerh. O'Leary, Ds. Carroll, T. Butler, bandmaster.

plethora of bands had sprung up all over the place. Every street seemed to have its own brass band. William's first band, he joined it with his brother Jimmy, was the Blackpool National Prize Band where he quickly learned to read music from an early age. He was a gifted musician. He could play almost any instrument he picked up: the drums, saxophone, clarinet, trombone, piccolo, euphonium, mouth organ and, of course, the gadget. His musical versatility was priceless in those spartan times. He could play one instrument for a band up the Mardyke one day, another instrument for a band down the Marina on the next day and yet another instrument for a different band in Fitzgerald's Park on the Sunday. He received the princely sum of a half-crown for each performance. When he wasn't playing he'd enquire where certain bands were playing. The most popular places were the bandstands up the Mardyke

and down the Marina – two idyllic venues. He could listen to a good brass band all day, and he often followed them as they marched around the city. The Butter Exchange and The Barrack Street bands, two of the best and oldest in Ireland, were the most popular.

There was very little work and William found it difficult to tie down a decent job but he continued to work odd days in the building line, as a painter or in Gouldings. Then he started as an apprentice for a blacksmith down the side of the Cork Opera House, a building he would be famously associated with in years to come. He liked the work but the money was poor.

The year 1926 turned out to be an eventful year for him; De Valera founded the Fianna Fáil party and William became a devoted follower. He also discovered Glen Rovers when they went senior that same year. They had a small clubhouse on Bird's Quay just off Thomas Davis Street. In reality, it was a large room with a corrugated shed at the back. He was beginning to get a bit of a reputation and he regularly sang here for the lads. He was now playing minor hurling for them but never won any major honours. (He did win a junior football championship with St Anne's when he was 21.) Then one night he was introduced to a shy young schoolboy and they became lifelong friends. Jack Lynch was a tall, well-built 15-year-old when they first met. Born in the shadow of Shandon, he was still attending that great Glen nursery, the North Monastery. This school provided five captains of All-Ireland winning Cork hurling teams: Connie Buckley '41, Jack Lynch '42, Mick Kennefick '43, Pat Barry '52, and Tomás Mulcahy '90. Under the guidance of Br McConville, it provided a constant conveyor belt of star hurlers for the Glen, and Jack Lynch certainly was a star. Christy Ring was rated the greatest ever hurler, and rightly so, especially with his eight All-Ireland medals and eighteen Railway Cup medals. An interesting fact about Christy is that he donated



Jack Lynch leads Glen Rovers in parade before the 1940 County senior hurling final against Sarsfields. Glen Rovers won the game 10-6 to 7-5.

Image courtesy of the Irish Examiner.

his eighth All-Ireland medal to St Augustine's in Washington Street. Even today the medal can be seen on the chalice in that church. But Jack Lynch wasn't very far behind Ring. His record is mind-boggling; in his last three years at school alone he won five Munster College medals and was chosen on the provincial hurling and football teams. In the 1935 Harty Cup Final he marked Tony Brennan and, in his last championship game for Cork against Tipperary in 1950 in Killarney, he again marked that same player. The Harty Cup was a treasured trophy then; in 1945 thousands greeted the victorious North Mon team and cheered them along Patrick Street, up Shandon Street lined with blazing tar barrels by that fanatical de Valera woman, Molly Owens, and through the monastery gate lined with more tar barrels. With the Glen Jack won two minor county football, two hurling, and two senior county hurling medals – six major honours in three years and still a teenager. He went on to win eleven hurling county medals, two football medals with sister

club, St Nicks, and a Dublin football county medal with Civil Service. In 1939 he became the only man ever to captain his county in both codes in the one year; in 1944 he played, and scored, in three games in one day; he played with his club, Civil Service, in the morning and he then rushed to Croke Park where he played for Munster in hurling and football. Also, from 1941 to 1946 he won six senior All-Ireland medals in a row. He was a leader of men on the field and he went on to become the leader of his country off it. In his early days in that humble hall, or in Mollie Howe's next door, he could listen to William singing all night and he often liked to join in with him in a duet.

William was 20 years of age when he got his first long-term professional engagement. A new dance hall had been built in Killeens; it was called the Ben Hur. Every Sunday night there was ceilí dancing there from 8pm to 10.30pm. William enthusiastically provided the complete music for the night with his gadget. It was always thronged with happy dancers. Everyone just walked out, danced the night away, and walked back. The admission fee was four pence. There was a short interval where he put away his gadget and sang half-a-dozen songs. You wouldn't hear a pin drop during this performance. Generally, the patrons asked for a request and, by now, William had a fine repertoire, and usually obliged. One night a woman shouted up her request – 'She is far from the land'. William immediately shouted back, "And she couldn't swim a stroke" and then sang the song for the lady.

In his early twenties he was in great demand in pubs and clubs throughout the city and county. If he was lucky he might get a five shillings fee. He'd buy his father a packet of cigarettes, a chester cake for himself, and he'd give the rest to his mother. Unfortunately, with money being scarce, he was often paid very little or nothing for these appearances, but he loved singing, and generally patrons bought him a drink as a 'thank you'.

Some weekends he was a guest artist with the McNamara Band in the town hall in Passage West. Again he was paid with a steady supply of Murphy's yet he always brought the house down and left the audience shouting for more.

It took twelve years to complete the rebuilding of Cork city. William now worked as an apprentice welder with Merrick's in Parnell Place. The wages weren't great but at least it was a steady job with plenty of work. The new City Hall, across the river, was the biggest, and final, building to be finished. As Eamon de Valera laid the foundation stone on 7 July 1932, William was busy welding the bars all around it. He had grown into a sturdy, handsome six-footer, with a military bearing and a pencil-slim moustache. Several nights a week he played with different dance bands in a variety of venues around the city. One night he was playing and singing in the Redmond's GAA Club in Tower Street when he got talking to a pretty young girl. Later that night he walked her home just around the corner. But it turned out that it wasn't the first time he'd walked her home. Ten years previously he was following the Butter Exchange Band near the top of Barrack Street when he noticed a little girl who seemed to be lost. He asked her if she was alright and eventually saw her safely home to Stephen Street. Now, after a whirlwind romance William married Margaret Casey in the South Chapel on 16 April 1933. They were both 22 years old. The happy couple settled down in Old Spangle Hill, a stone's throw from Brocklesby Street. He gave up the welding job and tried his hand at everything including the building line and a wide range of jobs for Cork Corporation which had just started the housing schemes for Spangle Hill (now Farranree) and the vast suburb of Gurrabraher. While working there the foreman banned him from singing on the job because if he ever broke into a song his workmates would all stop to listen to him. He was also involved in the digging of Shandon Street.

Every day his young wife would make sure to drop by and give him some cakes for his tea break. He also worked on the renovation of Holy Trinity Church and, some years later, on the chopping down of overgrown trees in Farrenferris College. He was now the father of two little boys, Eddie and Batt, and Batt would regularly visit his father's workplace, which wasn't very far away, and struggle home with a boxcar full of blocks for the fire. Eddie wasn't a very strong child, he suffered from pneumonia and, as a treat and to make sure the child had plenty of fresh air, his father would put him in the box-car and drag him all over the countryside, singing all the way. It worked because Eddie grew into a strapping young man.

If William Dunlea was busy working by day, he was even busier singing by night. He was now becoming more and more popular around the city and county, and he had developed a faithful following. He hadn't yet made the Opera House or City Hall but he was regularly performing at a wide variety of venues. It must be remembered that variety concerts were the most popular form of entertainment in Cork between the thirties and fifties; dancing and boxing matches were a close second. The Savoy cinema opened in 1932 and it was also a great concert venue. Later, the Capitol cinema was similarly popular. Likewise, the Assembly Rooms on the South Mall presented boxing matches and opera. But, whether it was the Glen Hall, the dance halls in Fair Hill or Passage West, the Arcadia Ballroom, initially opened as a roller-skating rink in 1924, or the White's Cross Coursing Club, he always gave his best.

William was as enthusiastic as ever when it came to bowling; he cycled up and down to Bandon for one score. By now, with plenty of practice, he had become an accomplished left-hander. He had his first notable victory, before a huge following, in the Whitechurch Tournament in August 1937. The principle score was between William, Crowley from Passage West and Barrett from Waterloo. Barrett, who held the record for the

road, was the favourite. From the start William was in great form going into a clear lead with his first bowl. By the time they had reached Cotter's Lane he had increased his lead to a bowl of odds on Barrett and two on Crowley. Barrett tried everything to catch up but William didn't give him a chance and eventually beat him by a bowl of odds with Crowley way behind.

In 1938, while peace reigned in Cork, storm clouds were gathering over Europe. Radio Éireann decided to hold a singing competition from their Cork studio which was then based at the old Women's Jail in Sunday's Well. It was called 'Newcomers' Hour'. William was singing one night in the Glen Rover's club when one of the lads suggested he enter the competition. Jack Lynch sent away for the application forms and William duly filled them in and posted them off. The city was awash with excitement as the heats took place. It was all live then. There might be only one radio in a street with the whole neighbourhood gathered round it. The volume was turned up full blast and the windows opened wide. Eventually William reached the final. That night Blackpool held its breath and there was a night of unbridled celebration when he won first prize singing that beautiful song, 'Trees'. Christopher Lynch from Limerick was second. Although he had been singing and performing for many years, and was still only 27 years of age, this was the first time he had received national and critical acclaim.

Things were looking up for William; his services were even more in demand, and he landed himself a good job in Fords. Again, it shows a sign of the times that, like his colleagues, he brought home a bag of unwanted cinders from Ford's to fortify the fire. As lower Gurranabraher and Farranree were not yet built he could be seen most evenings, bag on his shoulder, walking home through the fields.

Although he was delighted with the annual success of his beloved Glen Rovers the county hurlers were on a long eight-

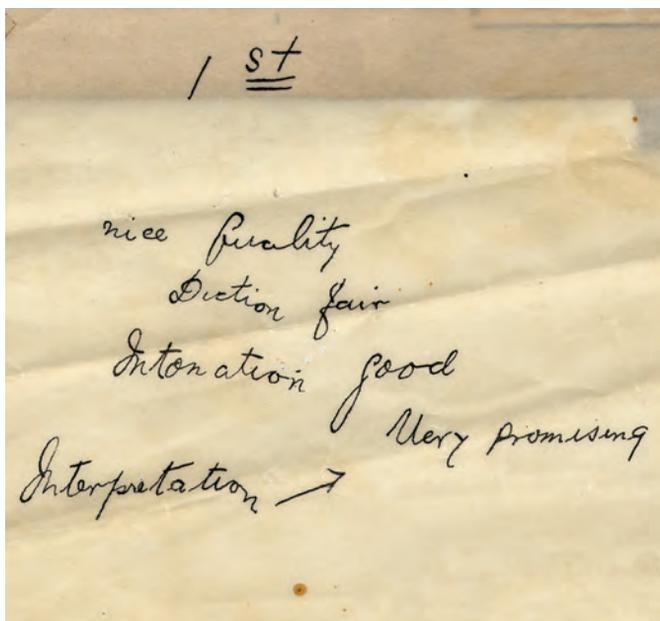
year losing run; they hadn't tasted All-Ireland success since 1931 when they eventually overcame Kilkenny after two replays. In 1939 there were high hopes for a fine Cork team led by Jack Lynch. William was at the first championship match where, after an exciting game, they got the better of Waterford. In the Munster Final against Limerick they were lucky to win with a last minute goal. Come September it was to be the old enemy, Kilkenny, in Croke Park. To add spice to the encounter, these two teams hadn't met since their classic battle in '31. It turned out to be one of the most famous of all finals. Firstly, on that day, World War Two broke out and secondly it will never be forgotten for its freakish weather. William was in Croke Park on 3 September cheering on his county in what was one of the worst storms in living memory. There was lashing rain and ferocious thunder and lightning during the match. Players and spectators couldn't make each other out let alone see the sliothar. It was heading for a draw when Kilkenny got a last minute point to break Cork's heart. Ironically, this result was to trigger off completely fluctuating fortunes for both counties. Kilkenny won nothing for the next eight years while Cork went on to enjoy the most successful period in their history.

William's name was now being bandied about as the next McCormack. For some time the nation had been on the lookout for a successor to the great Count John who was coming to the end of an illustrious career, and, sadly, was not in the best of health. Radio Éireann was delighted with the interest and the success of the 'Newcomers' programme so, with much prompting and encouragement from McCormack, it decided to hold a large scale 'Discover McCormack' competition, again held at the Women's Jail venue in Cork. McCormack said "I'm not the only pebble on the beach. There are good tenors throughout Ireland and the aim of the competition is to find them." Radio Éireann wanted to find the Irish voice

most likely to succeed McCormack. All the big guns, the full-time professionals from all over the country, were eager to participate. There was a huge interest in it as the heats got under way. Performances were again all live and, as an added interest, although it emanated from Cork, a listening John McCormack adjudicated from Dublin.

Again, as the competition progressed, it was the main topic of conversation all over Cork city. The standard was excellent and the excitement was unbearable as William reached the final. That night, sixteen tenors and thirteen baritones and basses sang their hearts out. Finally, John McCormack dramatically announced that he hadn't the heart to separate two of the singers and he awarded joint first prize to William Dunlea from Cork and Aodh O'Struibhlin from County Down, both tenors. The Down man thrilled the listeners with Schubert's 'Ave Maria' and William gave a magnificent rendition of 'The Song that Reached my Heart'. McCormack added, "I hope to be allowed

John McCormack and his adjudication notes.



at some future date to make a long and detailed comment on the whole competition and my reaction to it. All the tenors in the final were excellent and I couldn't separate the winners - Mr. O'Struibhlin and Mr. Dunlea who had a lovely voice."

Weather-wise, Sunday night, 19 November, 1939, was a horrible night, but he had a double celebration. He won the gold medal for his singing and his wife, Margaret, gave birth to his third child, a lovely little girl called Siobhán. He was soaked as he walked up to the nearby grotto in Sunday's Well where he knelt down and said a small prayer of thanks before floating home oblivious to the torrential rain. In effect, it was a treble celebration for Cork because Miss Rita Lynch from Macroom was awarded first prize in the soprano competition. Rita was a lovely lyric soprano and she sang 'The Last Rose of Summer' to win the gold medal. She went on to sing with Michael O'Duffy on St Patrick's Day in New York and with the Boston Pops directed by Arthur Fiedler, and she made several records in 1948.

McCormack was so impressed by the quality of William's voice that he planned to organise concerts throughout the country to send him to Italy to continue his musical training. Unfortunately, with the outbreak of war and the difficulty of travelling, all these plans were scrapped. Yet 1939 was a milestone in his career. He was getting more and more popular and was now singing regularly on his own half-hour Radio Éireann programme. For the next four years he topped the bill in every conceivable venue in Cork from the Savoy Cinema, City Hall and Opera House, to practically every village and town in the county with his sidekick and M.C. Dan Hobbs by his side. If it wasn't to aid the poor of Cork, it was the Boy Scouts, St Francis Church, St Augustine's, Presentation Convent, the Chamber of Commerce, or Youghal Boy Scouts. He also sang in Dublin at the Olympia Theatre, with Jimmy O'Dea and Maureen Potter and in Athlone, McCormack's home town.

The list is endless. The show in Youghal, for the Boy Scouts, was quite unusual. It was held in the Regal Cinema and the place was house-full; even the control room was packed. The idea was to combine a show with a film. William got a great reception especially for 'I'll Walk Beside You' and 'Mary of the Curling Hair' but the film, 'Old Mother Reilly', never turned up so William stepped in and sang another half a dozen songs.

His Bandon appearance had an unusual sequel to it; it ended up with him playing a bowling match in a dress suit complete with white silk scarf, surely the first and only time this has happened. This incident all started way back in his youth. After school himself and a friend used to sneak into the handball alley for a game in nearby Farrenferris Seminary. The head man, Dr Scannell, often caught them and frightened them off by firing a gun over their heads. This scared the living daylight out of them because they thought he was shooting at them. They sometimes left their coats after them as they scampered. Luckily they didn't know that Dr Scannell was actually an accomplished gunman. This amazing man was the first chaplain to the Irish Free State Army and, for the duration of the First World War, was chaplain to the Irish Guards. In 1918 he was awarded the Military Cross and the Croix De Guerre for his bravery, and the French Government also bestowed on him the Order of the Legion of Honour. A man of action, when the Methodist Church on Military Hill became available he stepped in, acquired it, and turned it into the Holy Family Catholic Church

In 1938 Dr Scannell became the parish priest of Bandon. One day he realised that his church was in poor condition and could do with a facelift. Strapped for cash, he remembered William of old and arranged an unusual charity event. He decided to put on a John McCormack film, 'Song of my Heart', in the local cinema - one showing in the afternoon and another at night - with an interval where William would perform. William was delighted to help out and, twice daily, accompanied by

local girl, Bridie Downing, he sang six old favourites: ‘Trees’, ‘Because’, ‘My Mary of the Curling Hair’, ‘Somewhere a Voice is Calling’, ‘When Other Lips’, and ‘The Song that Reached my Heart’. The cinema was packed and it was a huge success. After the matinee, with a few hours to spare, he sometimes paid a visit to the pub across the road from the stage door. One such day he bumped into an old friend and champion bowler, Red Crowley, whose son played with Glen Rovers. Red challenged him to a score out the road and, undaunted, William threw a ten pound note on the counter and invited him to ‘cover that.’ Locals quickly made up a stake of a hundred pounds, a lot of money in 1941, and the score began in a welter of excitement. It was nip and tuck all the way up the Clancool Road but William eventually just got there. The two men shook on it and William gave his usual impromptu couple of songs on the ditch. He had a habit of wiping his hands on his rear end just before he threw every bowl and, unaware of the marks this left, he was just about to enter the stage to sing, when someone noticed it and shouted, “Bill, Bill, your arse is all mud.”

It is interesting to note that many of William’s family and relations are excellent singers and musicians. When he was singing regularly in the Opera House he brought his nine-year-old son, Batt, with him on Saturday nights. Batt would take note of what he sang and then, later, choose the songs for the following Saturday night so that he wouldn’t sing the same songs twice. He did the same on Sunday nights with ten-year-old Eddie. Both boys were fine singers. At that time he was teaching Batt the first verse of ‘Oft in the Stilly Night’ as he was appearing in the Savoy. One night he brought the boy with him and put him up in the ‘Gods’. Later, as the concert progressed, William announced to the audience that his son, way up in the ‘Gods’, was learning ‘Oft in the Stilly night’. Suddenly an usherette appeared with her flash lamp and escorted the boy all

the way to the stage where he sang his one verse with gusto. After a deserved round of applause he was led back to his seat. One day William brought Batt into Dan Hobbs's shop to buy him a new jumper. The boy was delighted because Dan usually gave him a shilling for himself. Later they caught a packed bus home from Patrick Street. At the first stop a woman got on, recognised William and asked him to sing her mother's favourite song, 'Bless This House'. He duly obliged and he got a great round of applause. Another passenger stepped in and asked him to sing his father's favourite song. As the bus made its way out Blackpool, passing the unfortunate people by the bus stops with no one getting off or no one getting on, the conductor was getting more and more frustrated. By now it had gone up Spangle Hill, turned around by Fair Hill, still full up, and was heading back down the hill to town, with William leading a raucous chorus of 'Because'. Finally, the conductor had enough. He stopped the bus by the Blackpool Church, threw everyone off and told them to walk home.

In a way, during the Second World War Ireland minded her own business while war raged all round us. For five years she free-wheeled, trundling along in a time warp called the Emergency. Officially we were neutral but, in fact, we were neutral on the British side. Hindsight can be a wonderful thing. It was common knowledge that Churchill didn't get on with de Valera but it is interesting to dwell on the fact that secretly he offered the Northern six counties in return for the use of the Republic's harbours, especially Cork Harbour which was strategically vital to the British war effort. One can have mixed feelings about de Valera's refusal. If he agreed we would now have a 32- county Ireland but there is no doubt that Cork and its entire population would have been bombed to smithereens. In spite of being cut off from the rest of Europe people got on with their lives as best they could. There were widespread



Bishop of Galway, Michael Browne, with William in London, late 1940's.



rumours of impending invasions by the Germans and, some nights, there was a genuine fear when low-flying planes roared over the city. Sometimes mines were washed ashore and people were accidentally killed but, generally, there was a laid back, humorous attitude to the Emergency. There were cut-backs on everything, food was rationed, especially sugar and tea; the one spoon of tea often had to last for days, many an anaemic pot of tea had to last for a week, and working class families were hit hardest of all. With no job, on 1 July 1940, William enlisted in the Corps of Engineering in the Irish Army. Although he was now singing in the bigger venues like the Arcadia, the City Hall and the Opera House, with the shortage of money his fees weren't great. It was a fault of his that he would sing at the drop of a hat and he regularly performed for inadequate payment; and he now had a wife and three children to keep. The Irish Army had very little to do during the war. The soldiers were kept busy by long route marches or keeping guard on our coastline in case of invasion. One has to question what they would do to stop an oncoming fleet of German battleships. They spent most of their time cutting turf in the bogs at Nead. At least this was a practical way to help the war effort because trains had been converted to run on turf.

William and his comrades organised a musical extravaganza called, 'Roll of the Drum'. It opened at the Opera House on Monday 21 October, 1940. There was a cast of over 200 and it was billed as "The greatest stage production of our time". Soldiers in uniform were admitted at a reduced rate. It turned out to be a record-breaking success and ran for 101 performances. One critic said: "Hailed as the most spectacular show ever produced in Ireland, the much heralded 'Roll of the Drum' received a wonderful reception from the huge audience at the Cork Opera House last night. The show is utterly different to anything yet seen in Cork." It consisted of several

army bands and choirs dramatically backing up a wide selection of William's songs. However, his career as a soldier didn't last very long; on 12 December 1940, Private Dunlea William, No. 412402, resigned from army service. On 12 January 1941, a friend, Jack McCabe, organised a concert to honour William. It was quickly sold out and it turned out to be a never-to-be-forgotten night of entertainment. There was a variety of guest artists but William was the star turn. He was in sparkling form, but the audience was in better form; they wouldn't let him off the stage. Some of the songs he sang that night were: 'Just for Today', 'Somewhere a Voice is Calling Me', 'Serenade', 'Until' and 'The Cradle Song'. He sang an hour of encores, each one to a standing ovation. The following day a reporter wrote: "In all its history the Opera House was never nearer to being the scene of a riot by an audience than last night. It happened when William Dunlea, the now famous tenor, tried to leave the stage at 11.45pm. There was continual uproar until he said he'd sing a few more numbers." Eventually the curtain came down at 12.45am with the audience still shouting for more.

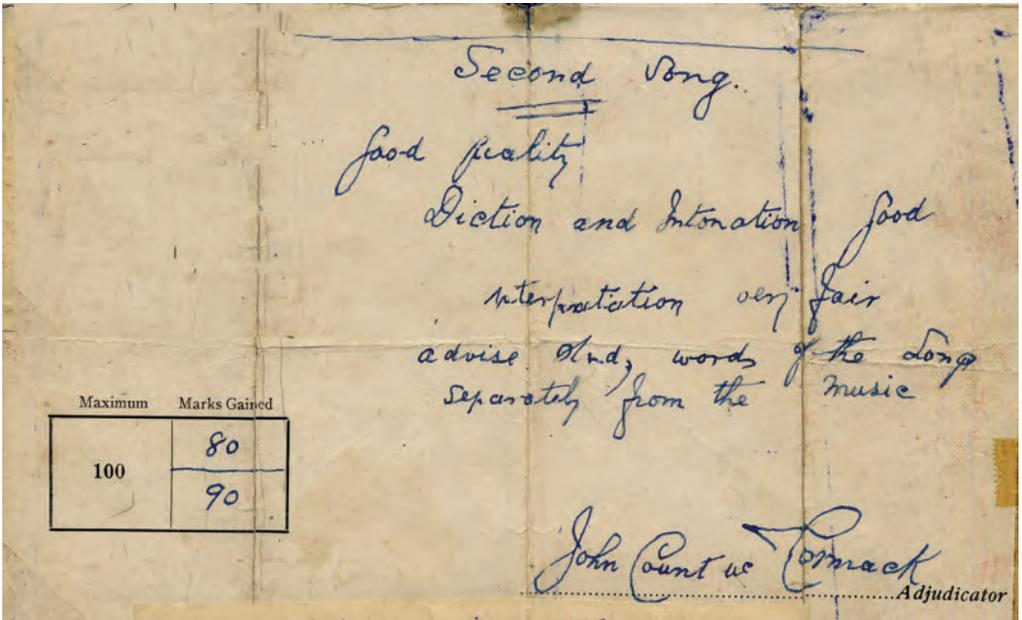
When William wasn't singing, or bowling, he was caught up with his beloved Glen Rovers. He followed them and Cork to every match. His fanatical vocal support sometimes got him into trouble. He never let up during a match; add a few drinks of celebration and half a dozen songs, and his voice was often too hoarse for his later concert. It must be remembered that these supporters went by foot, by horse and cart, or they cycled if they could get their hands on a bicycle. They were a determined, loyal and hardy bunch. Again, they sang the journey away, from West Cork to Kerry and Limerick to Thurles. For the All-Ireland in Dublin it took a weekend. Sometimes, if they ever got a puncture, they just stuffed the tyre with grass and ploughed on. Through the darkness of the Emergency the Glen and Cork lit up William's life. The Glen won five senior hurling counties between 1939 and '45, another hero, Christy Ring, arrived to

help the Glen in '41, and Cork won four hurling finals in a row - 1941-'44.

Throughout the Emergency life was difficult especially for large families, which were then the norm. Not alone were food and clothes rationed but travel was severely restricted. A permit had to be obtained to travel to or from England. Even sporting commentaries on radio were carefully monitored. The weather couldn't be mentioned in case the enemy might gain an advantage. Then, in 1944, the Irish Government made an announcement which was to make huge social changes in the country - children's allowance was introduced. The fact that a mother was to be paid for each child was revolutionary at the time, and that she was to be paid money, although not a very great amount, whether her husband was working or not, was unbelievably reassuring for many mothers. William Dunlea made a decision in 1944 which in many ways changed his life. With his army days finished and the Emergency coming to an end, he decided to enter the Feis Ceoil – the National Music Festival – held at the Metropolitan Hall, Dublin. Count John McCormack, who was near the end of his illustrious career, was adjudicating. The Feis Ceoil had been going strong since 1897 and there had always been English judges but, this year, with the travel restrictions of the war, McCormack took over for the first time. The standard was very high all over the country – basses, baritones and tenors like Michael O'Duffy, Patrick O'Hagan and Joseph Locke. As the competition unfolded the excitement grew with every heat. There was a carnival atmosphere in Cork, especially in Blackpool, as massive audiences listened in to every available radio. There was an outpouring of joy and relief when William made the final. Friday 9 May was the big day. Each contestant had to sing two songs. William was in top form and gave impeccable performances of both the first song, 'The Song That Reached My Heart', and the second, 'The Flower of Finae'. Everyone felt he was the best of the 26

entries but when John McCormack walked across the stage and shook his hand the place went wild with delight. The scorecard showed he was awarded 170 marks out of 200. The tar barrels were out again and Blackpool sang into the early hours of the morning. Joseph McGee from Derry and Henry Cummins from Dublin were second and third. McCormack told him there was only one winner. He especially praised his imagination and interpretation of his second song but he was more interested in where he'd got the first song. William replied, "It is a song my father used to sing to me. My cousin, Nellie gave me the words." As McCormack congratulated him he said, "You did something very unusual here tonight. You told a story in a song which is a very difficult thing to do." In effect, McCormack himself had been doing just that for most of his life

If Willam Dunlea was popular before winning the gold medal, he was hero-worshipped after it, and when John McCormack died



John McCormack's adjudication notes.



the following year there were daily comparisons between the two singers. They had similar voices, perfect diction, phrasing and breathing technique. Obviously, McCormack was world famous; William was not. Some objective authorities on opera and singers, and there were many, thought that William had a better quality in his voice. I agree with this. Many disagree. There is no doubt that, at 34 years of age, he had the world at his feet if he wanted it. That was the all-important question; if he wanted it. He once said, "I'd rather be appreciated in Cork than in Carnegie Hall." Maybe that sums up the man. He was a home bird. If that is a fault then he's guilty. He also said that he was a prince in Cork and he could have been king of Ireland. This is true; he most definitely was a prince in Cork but his critics again ask why should he settle for king of Ireland when

he could have ruled the world? His critics also accuse him of being happy as a big fish in a small pond and allowing alcohol to interfere with his career. Down through the years genius and alcohol have sometimes been the most amicable of bedfellows. Let him who has not sinned throw the first stone. This was also said of George Best and Alex Higgins. There are many stories about his drinking and, down through the years, legs have been added to colour these stories, and there has been a black humour about most of them. There were occasions when he had his fair share of Murphys on his way to a concert. A close relative said, "Bill's biggest fault was he couldn't say no." Once, he sang in the first act in a village hall but the parish priest wouldn't let him go on for the second act. Maybe this was understandable; the charity was for the Total Abstinence Society. His brother-in-law, John Murphy, always looked after him. He was his minder, agent, adviser, chauffeur and manager, and always did his best to make sure he turned up on time. He often had two bookings on the one night and they wouldn't let him off the stage in the first venue. Unfortunately, one thing sometimes led to another, and when William, with John's help, made his belated entrance at the second venue he could be the worse for wear. Yet, every time he went on he'd bring the house down, often singing for two hours. Also, against that, for many years he was a pioneer and didn't drink for long periods. And there is another side to the man that is not generally known; he never refused to help a charity. He said that God gave him a gift and he intended to use it. He couldn't say "no" and many organisations took advantage of his generosity. A deeply religious man, he loved to help churches and convents and, with his love for the GAA, he never once refused to help any club all over County Cork. With his film star looks and flashing smile he was now an iconic figure in Cork. He did so much charity work for convents the nuns sent him down to get his teeth done and they paid the dentist as a 'thank you.' When his daughter-in-law first visited

his house she thought a photograph of him on the wall was Clarke Gable.

Paradoxically, there are similarities and vast differences between McCormack and William. McCormack also won that same gold medal in 1903. Audience reaction was not allowed at the Feis Ceoil then but when McCormack, who that night was last of fourteen tenors, finished his song there was an enthusiastic burst of applause, and the adjudicator walked on to the stage and said, “There is only one winner.” (McCormack said the same to William.) It was said that he beat James Joyce in that final. This is not true. Joyce, whose father was from Cork, won the bronze medal as a tenor in 1904. McCormack’s future wife, Lily, won the gold medal in 1902, singing in Gaelic, but didn’t meet her husband-to-be until they toured together the following year. His career really took off, at 26 years old, when he went to the US. He was the first artist to record, ‘It’s a Long Way to Tipperary’. Very hard-working and totally dedicated, he did 95 concerts in one year. It just shows what can be achieved; in thirteen years he grossed five million dollars; even more than the legendry Caruso. He became a United States citizen in 1919, and with his strong support for the Irish cause, he lost most of his UK audience, but he returned in triumph five years later at the Queen’s Hall Concert. He gave a long farewell tour in October 1938 opening in Cork’s Savoy Cinema on 2 October before a packed and appreciative audience who came to hear him sing for the last time. He sang a wide variety of songs from ‘Panis Angelicus’, a song he had sung before a million and a half people at the 1932 Dublin Eucharistic Congress, through several encores, to his final song, ‘Just for Today’. He walked to the edge of the stage and said to the audience, ‘It’s hard work for a grandfather, you know. I’m 54 since June and I think I should retire while people are saying, “why” instead of “why not.”’ Then it was on to Limerick, Dublin and Belfast before ending with a final farewell concert at the Royal Albert Hall on

27 November 1938. It was a night tinged with sadness. He sang twelve songs finishing with, ‘When I have sung my songs’, and then proceeded to sing fifteen encores (like William) including, ‘Believe me if all those endearing young charms’, and ‘The Rose of Tralee’. Just before he died, at just 61 years of age, on 16 September 1945, he wrote, “I live again the days and evenings of my long career. I dream at night of operas and concerts in which I have had my share of success. Now, like the old Irish minstrels, I have hung up my harp because my songs are all sung.” Compton McKenzie said of him, “He told a story. He painted a picture with his voice.” (McCormack said the same of William.) Critics of William Dunlea have a point; Count John McCormack worked hard, made hundreds of records and millions of dollars, but he never had the pleasure of throwing a bowl out the Blarney Road on a sunny summer’s evening.

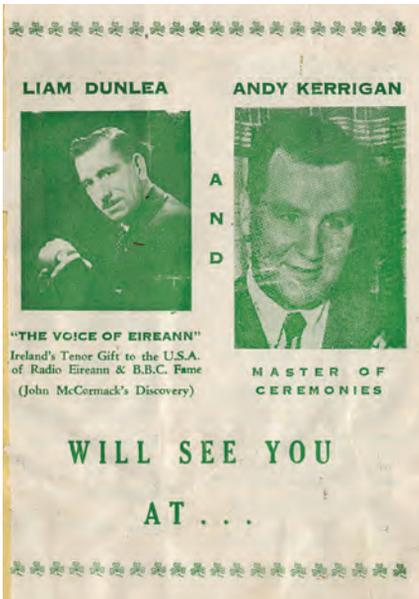
One night someone who was to influence his life heard him sing and she was highly impressed and felt she could make him into an even better singer. He was immediately invited to attend special singing classes by the famous German voice teacher, Madam Anna Catriona. This once leading soprano of the Carl Rosa Opera Company ran a strict studio in the South Mall. He attended here three times a week for almost two years. She was a hard-working no-nonsense tutor. Some of her teaching methods were eccentric but effective. To improve William’s diaphragm she had him trying to move a heavy grand piano by pushing it with his stomach as he sang. She also took on some promising young talent. One such pupil, Kathleen O’Keeffe, was a beautiful soprano who later sang duets with William. Another talented young eighteen-year-old, Eily Gilmore, paid five shillings for a weekly half-hour class. There were high hopes for her, even a move to Italy for more training, but her worried father was reluctant about such a young girl going abroad on her own, and, sadly, her musical career never materialised. The two girls also had the impossible task of moving the piano



Dino Borgioli, the famous Italian tenor and voice coach.

with their diaphragms. At the end of 1945 Madam Anna felt she had taken him as far as she could and wrote to an old friend about the possibility of coaching William even further. Sadly, she died three years later and, for years, on the anniversary of her death, William got a mass said for her. This dedication in the *Examiner* is typical: “In affectionate remembrance of Madame Anna Catriona. On her soul Sweet Jesus have mercy. Mass offered. God’s greatest gift, remembrance. (Always remembered by her fond pupil, William Dunlea)”

Dino Borgioli, once the most sought after tenor in the world, invited William to train at his world-famous studio in London. This was a huge compliment because Borgioli only took on seriously talented singers. He was an amazing man whose vocal range went away above top C at his ease. He had a law degree before following his dream of being an opera singer. Also, like William, he was a fine painter. Toscanini discovered him and brought him to La Scala where he sang with all the greats of that era including Gigli and Tito Schipa. His version of ‘Spirto Gentil’ by Donizetti from the opera ‘La Favorita’ is considered by experts to be the definitive performance of the aria. His methods and classes were long and torturous. The development of the diaphragm and perfect projection were his pet goals. For hours he had an apprehensive William singing at a



line on the wall with his back to him, constantly reassuring him that everything was alright, and then he'd have him lying on the ground doing vocal practices with a heap of heavy books on his stomach. Eventually he 'broke' William's voice into a higher level, an improved and more flexible shape. He ordered him to give up cigarettes and put him on a strict diet of greens, olive oil and raw eggs; he used to smell his breath before every lesson. Many pupils couldn't take Borgioli's harsh regime and William felt like giving up many times but he was a stubborn man, and stuck it out. By now the power in his voice was noticeably stronger. Once, a fellow singer said, "If Bill Dunlea was only whispering a song in a room, the windows would be rattling." And, to me, he was right up there with Ezio Pinza with his breath control and the length he could effortlessly hold a note.

England in 1946 was just getting over the horrors of World War Two. London had suffered the brunt of the bombing but people had an air of hope and optimism for the future as they went about their business. His brother, Joe, put him up at Kensal Rise in Northwest London. As with any sprawling city there was plenty of work. At first William worked in the building line and as an interior decorator until he got on his feet. It didn't take him long to make his mark. He sang mainly in the many Irish pubs and in places like Dagenham, with its Ford's factory, which seemed to have more Corkonians than Cork. He was now known as 'The Voice of Erin' and posters of him called him 'Bill' or 'Liam'. London was a great shop window for any singer trying to make a name for himself. The British Broadcasting Corporation was quick to appreciate his talent and stepped in and offered him a contract. For the next three years he became a household name singing in the Palm Court Hotel programme on BBC Radio. People all over Cork got great pleasure out of religiously tuning in every Sunday morning to hear their favourite son singing arias from operas, Italian love

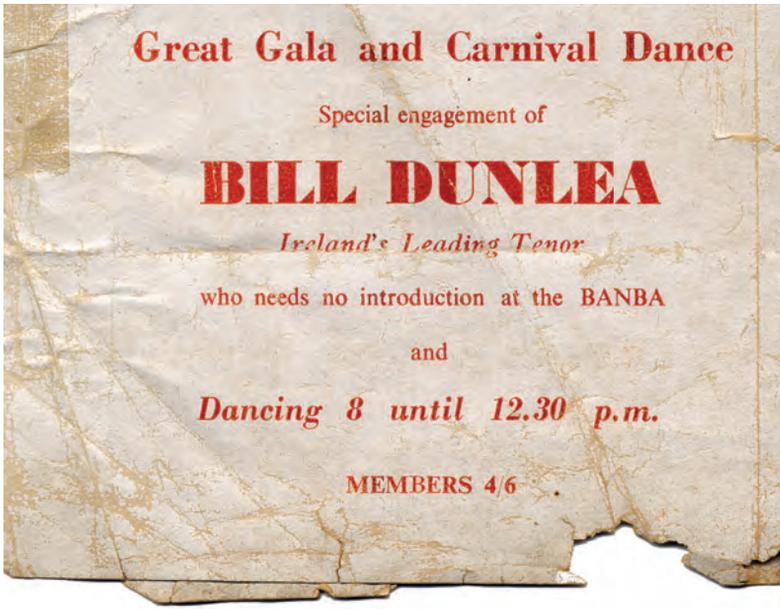


Above: William with his close friend Michael Gannon owner of the Banba in Kilburn, London.

Right facing page: From a poster for the Banba - 'Bill Dunlea' billed as "Ireland's Leading Tenor".

songs and, especially, Irish lullabies. Again, he never refused any charity: on 3 July 1946 he sang in Piccadilly to help war victims and on 2 September he arranged a concert at Acton Town Hall to help blind soldiers. But he particularly liked to help any Irish charity and his appearance was guaranteed to fill any hall. One night he met fellow Cork man, Jack Doyle, the Gorgeous Gael from Cobh, a man who would also fill any hall. They sang a few songs together and became good friends. Jack married the movie star Movita, and they once sang at the Savoy in Cork where they had a blazing row and she stormed off the stage. Eventually, she left him and married Marlon Brando. At the age of nineteen, Jack drew 90,000 people to see him fight at The White City. He was disqualified for hitting below the belt in the second round and banned for six months. At this time he was earning 600 pounds a week for singing on stage.

William was a regular attraction in a wide variety of clubs: the Kilburn, Shannon, St Patrick's; one of his favourite venues



was the Blarney Club on Tottenham Court Road but the best, biggest, and most popular was the Banba in Kilburn. He became close friends of the owner, Michael Gannon, and the manager, Mayo man Tom Melody. Tom had a heart of gold and had a great reputation for helping out any Irishman down on his luck. The Banba was the doyen of Irish clubs with a very high standard of entertainment. Jimmy O'Dea, Maureen Potter, Joseph Locke, Patrick O'Hagan (father of Johnny Logan) and William were regular performers. Old programmes show that William was always booked in the Hibernian Club, Dagenham, for the big nights like St Stephen's night and the Whit and Easter weekends.

Similar to Ireland, cinemas were hugely popular in England in the thirties and forties but, unlike today's intimate Cineplex venues, the cinemas then in London were enormous. The Gaumont State Cinema opened in Kilburn High Road 20

December 1937. It had a Wurlitzer organ which came up from the floor and, at the interval, the audience sang along with organist Sidney Torch. Although the average wage then was two pounds a week Sidney's weekly wage was 250 pounds. It was four pence to get in and capacity was 4004 seats plus 4000 standing. Men weren't allowed in without bow-ties. Well-known artists like George Formby, Larry Adler and Gracie Fields often performed there. In 1941 J. Arthur Rank bought the Gaumont empire – 251 cinemas. Approximately fifty had organs like the Kilburn cinema. Rank wanted a regular front man, his own celebrity, to entertain the audience at the interval, and help fill his cinemas. They were impressed by William and he got the job of travelling the length and breadth of England entertaining the filmgoers. They billed him as “Liam Dunlea of the BBC”.

The Savoy Cinema in Cork had something similar in the fifties and sixties. At the interval the Compton Organ rose up from the stage floor with Fred Bridgeman at the keyboard. As the words of each song came up on the screen the audience gave it everything. That same Compton Organ is still active in the University College Hall, Limerick. William was travelling a lot but, with his club work, his charity performances, his cinema appearances and his BBC slots, he was kept going. He hosted a very popular radio programme, ‘Friends to Tea’ in 1947 and '48 but he got into a spot of bother with the BBC. He was invited as a special guest to a staff dinner but his old Republican ideals came to the surface when he refused to stand for the English national anthem. Understandably, the hierarchy in the BBC didn't like this one bit.

William was now very popular all over England; he made three records with EMI, ‘The Song That Reached My Heart’, ‘Ave Maria’, ‘God Keep You In My Heart’, and the B sides were ‘The Rosary’, ‘O Sole Mio’ and ‘Because’, but the highlight of his career so far was when he was invited to sing at the Royal



"The Voice of Ireland" - William at the Gaumont Cinema in Cricklewood, March 1950.

Albert Hall. He was part of an all-star cast which included the world famous soprano and Oscar-nominated actress, Grace Moore. Sunday night, 26 January 1947, before 6,000 people in the Royal Albert Hall, was an experience he would never forget but the very next day tragedy struck. Grace Moore died, at just 48, when her plane crashed near Copenhagen.

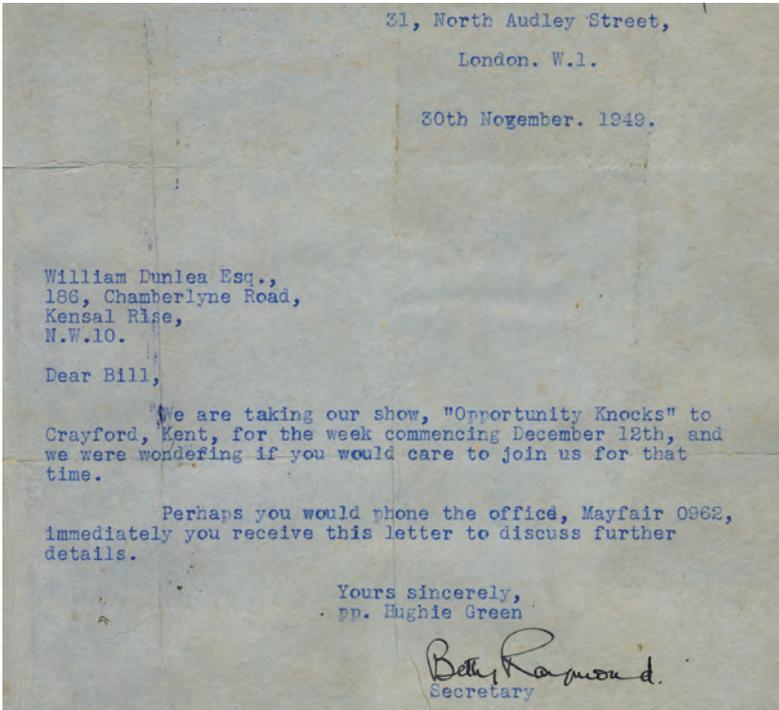
On Saturday 1 January 1948 he had an unusual booking in the Banba. He shared the bill with James Bernard who was just back from an American tour. At 36 inches, he was billed as the world's smallest tenor. That year he met and became great friends with Irish actor Dermot Walsh, who appeared in a string of fine films. Riding on a wave of success William entered two singing competitions, both in the tenor section. Later in 1948 he won the gold medal in the All-England finals and, on 11 June 1949, in the North London Musical Festival, he won first prize in the open tenor, and first prize in the closed tenor, singing 'The Moon Complaining'. Immediately after this success Hughie Green offered him a spot on his radio show,

‘Opportunity Knocks’. The immensely popular Hughie Green was given his own radio show, at fourteen, by the BBC. At 15 he was the highest paid child star on radio. On 30 November 1949 he wrote to William: “Dear Bill, We are taking our show, ‘Opportunity Knocks’, to Kent for a week and we are wondering if you would care to join us for that time. Perhaps you would phone the office to discuss further details. Yours sincerely, Hughie Green.” At the time this was the biggest show in Britain. It gave dozens of budding performers their first step on the road to stardom. By 1950 his heavy schedule was beginning to get to him. He was in constant demand, seven nights a week, and at every charity event in London. His cousin’s words were never truer: “Bill’s biggest fault was he couldn’t say ‘no.’” The Westcroft Tenants Association, in Cricklewood, was strapped for cash and the Rev. Lariston wrote to William asking for help. Now living nearby in Cricklewood, he immediately arranged a concert at their social club, on 31 May 1950, which did very well and the day was saved.

The following month, saying goodbye to all his old friends, he sailed home to Cork. He missed his family and he was lonesome for Blackpool. He was barely a week home when he was back with his old show on Radio Éireann. It shows how popular he was when listeners were writing to newspapers constantly complaining that his programmes were too short. They wanted more. He got great pleasure in a once-off performance in the Mecca of his youth – the Lido. The patrons were engrossed in a film one night when suddenly everything ground to a stop and the lights came on. There was a blare of hisses and whistles. Then the manager escorted William to centre stage where he sang three songs and left again to thunderous applause. The lights went down, the film resumed and all was well again.

He was now 40 yet he had superstar status in Cork and he dressed accordingly; never less than immaculate and, with his

The Voice of Erin



film star looks, he stood out in any crowd. One Sunday he was following a bowling match in Waterloo when the score had to be stopped to allow a farmer pass with his herd of cows. William got out of harm's way by climbing up on a high ditch. Someone shouted out, "Walloo, give us one song while you're up there, boy." It was said that he'd sing "at the drop of a hat" so he immediately obliged with 'Because', and followed with several more from his makeshift stage. Everyone wanted to hear him and there was a stampede by both sets of followers in his direction. Not alone did the herd of cows come to a standstill and the farmer had to turn around and go back home, but the bowlers gave up and the score was cancelled.

Cork was notoriously intimate, still a big village, and a difficult place to hide. Even the smallest incident grew legs and was immediately magnified a hundred times by word of mouth. Yet people forget how professional William Dunlea was when it

came to preparing for a show. Days before the event he could be seen bent over a high chair at home and going through the scales in this difficult position, and he diligently and carefully picked his repertoire for an upcoming performance. He practiced each song until it was perfect. Very often, he called to Frank Murray, a friend, in the Common's Road. Frank had a piano and, with windows wide open, they would meticulously go through William's songs. The delighted neighbours, sometimes there would be hundreds of them, gathered round and enjoyed the free concert. In a radio interview he explained his thoughts on this, 'Every song had to be to perfection or not at all. I wouldn't sing one song better than I'd sing another even though you may think so. You may like one song I'd sing better than you'd like another one and you'd say that was my favourite song but no, I took them all... It's the very same as playing with a band. Every bit of music you play, it must be the same.'

He was constantly in the news. Even if he went to a match it was reported in the papers. One Sunday he attended a hurling match between Muskerry and his beloved Glen Rovers. The next day there was a report in the *Examiner*: "WILLIAM DUNLEA was present at the Glen Rovers – Muskerry match in Cork on Sunday, as also were his father and grandfather, and his own son. Four generations of Glen supporters."

He got a day job in Waters Glass in Winthrop Street. He enjoyed the work but he sometimes got into trouble again by singing on the job. All his fellow workers would stop work to listen and nothing was done until the song was finished. On 27 October 1951 he was the guest artist at their staff dance in the Gresham Rooms. He was billed as William Dunlea of BBC fame (admission 8/6 including supper and tax). One day a lady walked in to Waters and asked a boy worker, Bobby Quinlan, where she could find William Dunlea. Bobby offered to go off and find him. Later William told Bobby Quinlan that the

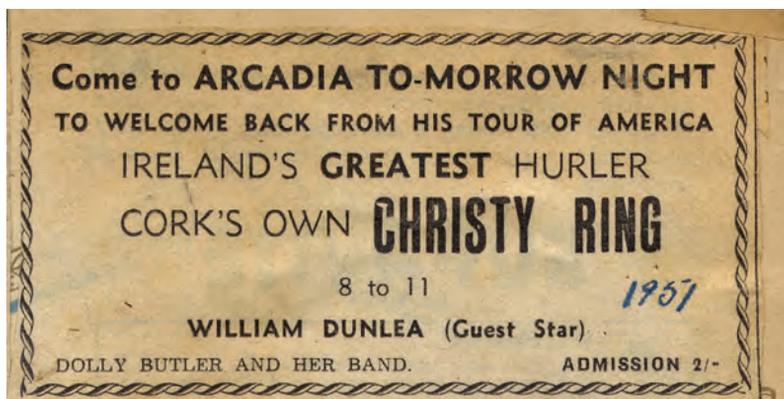
mysterious lady was Count John McCormack's widow, Lily. The next day she called around again asking if he'd once again call William. This time she gave the shocked Bobby a pound note tip. This was practically a week's wages. Lily McCormack was throwing out the idea of forming a committee to raise the money to erect a suitable monument in Athlone in honour of her late husband. William was all for it and offered to help in any way he could. She returned to Athlone to set the wheels in motion.

By 1951 Radio Éireann had doubled his time on radio and he did one 45-minute programme backed by the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra. All through that year he was topping the bill in various venues all over the city and county: the Capitol, Palace, Savoy, Bandon and Gaiety Cinemas, Fr. O'Leary Hall, St Francis Hall, Collins Barracks, Metropole Hotel, Ballincollig, CCYMS, Fort Camden, Monkstown, Mallow, AOH Hall, Fr Mathew Hall, and the usual blockbusters in the City Hall and Opera House. His highlight was when he was guest artist with the Dolly Butler band in the Arcadia to welcome back his old hurling hero, Christy Ring, from a tour of America.

Looking back to 1952 many of the popular venues at that time are no longer with us. There are four that spring to mind. That cosy little theatre in the vaults of St Vincent's Church in Sunday's Well. It was a great venue for concerts and, especially, Christmas pantomimes. William sang in the opera 'Maritana' in the Oratory at St Vincent's Convent, and he sang and played there many times at the Sunday night dances with the ever-vigilant nuns lurking in the background, hawk-eyed guardians of sanctity, armed with a ruler just in case the dancers got romantically inclined and too close for comfort. Many a passionate male was put to the sword by a flashing ruler. St Francis Hall, formerly Morrison's Hotel, near the Mardyke was also well-known for its ceilidhe and old-time waltzes. This drew a large rural element. The Gresham Rooms in Maylor Street



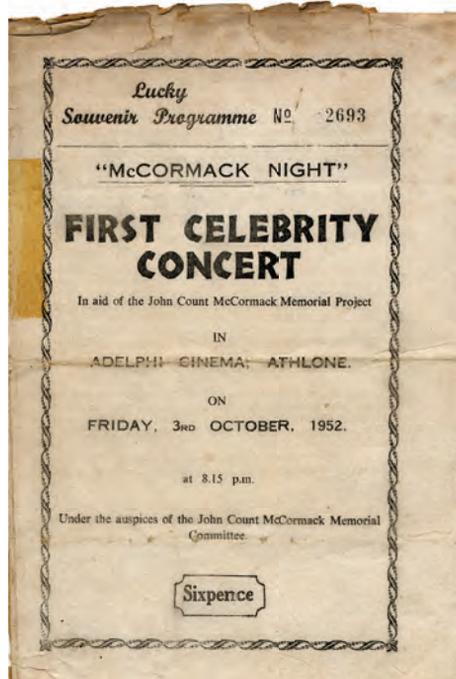
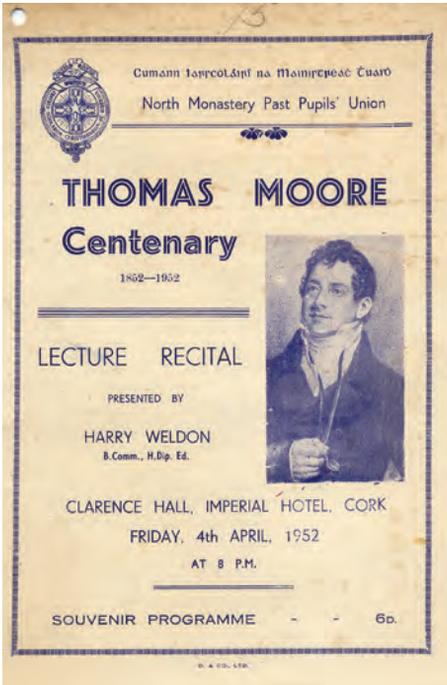
Four Generations of the Dunlea family. Rear: William and his father William.
Front: William's son Eddie with grandfather Patrick.



(now Smyths Toyshop) was a seriously posh ballroom. It had a special attraction for men because every nurse in Cork seemed to frequent the place. Sadly these venues, and many more like them, are no longer with us.

William's fame had spread and he was now singing all over the country with better bands in more up-market venues. On 23 January 1952, the Cork Chamber of Commerce, then at 27 South Mall, invited him to its annual dinner at the Victoria Hotel. The poor boy from Blackpool was suddenly somebody. On 4 April the North Monastery celebrated the centenary of Thomas Moore with a lecture recital at the Imperial Hotel. William was again honoured to be asked to sing four songs, accompanied by Mrs Violet Dwyer. That year he appeared on numerous occasions, and sang many duets, with his old friend, Kathleen O'Keefe. They frequently topped the bill.

One day he got a surprise visitor when Lily McCormack called to his home in Blackpool. She told him a committee had been formed in Athlone and a series of concerts was being arranged all over the USA for the John McCormack Touring Company. The tour would take twelve months and, as he had won the two gold medals, he was chosen as the main attraction, the McCormack talisman. It had been agreed that the concerts



William topped the bill at these two concerts.

were to be built around him. The dates were not yet finalised but he was to be ready to leave in the near future. He was excited but apprehensive about this. America was a long way away. But he was even more nervous with the news that his wife, Margaret, was expecting, nineteen years after they were married. In his own way William was very religious. He was worried about her age; she was 41, and he cycled out to the Lee Road every day, parked his bike, and walked out the road reciting the rosary, hoping that everything would be alright. His prayers were answered. On Sunday 17 August 1952, she gave birth to a bouncing fifteen pound baby boy. He was called Patrick after his great-grandfather. William threw himself into his work again. He now had seven children.

At last the McCormack project started to take off. The committee came to Cork to see William. They immediately

hit it off. He called them a “very nice bunch of lads.” With much fanfare and hullabaloo, he was invited to sing at the first celebrity concert in the Adelphi Cinema, Athlone, on Friday 3 October. This was the first step, in a long journey, to raise funds for the memorial. It was a case of keeping the good wine till last at the Adelphi. William was the fifteenth and final artist to appear and if the committee had any qualms about him representing it in America, that night he blew them away. He was magnificent. In the programme (cost 6d.) the committee gave a long flowery explanation of its intentions. This small extract gives you a taste of it:

“in every enterprise, however grand the cause, and however profuse the offers of co-operation, in the beginning a host of rather terrifying obstacles have to be overcome, step by step. In launching the John McCormack Memorial Project, it was well realised that it would have universal significance and members of the committee were fully aware that they were setting themselves a truly staggering task. While the nucleus would have to be set solidly in Athlone and the Midlands, the orbit of the committee’s activities would have to embrace the whole Nation, and many Countries abroad, depending absolutely on the success of its far reaching plans on cooperation.”

He left Athlone with high hopes and a thousand new fans and he finished out that year in a blaze of glory: Sunday 29 November a grand Gala Concert at Millstreet; midnight matinee 10 December with Jimmy O’Dea, Maureen Potter, Chris Curran, George and Donal Crosbie, and a host of others. It finished at 3 am; a few days later he sang with the No. 2 Army Band, on Sunday 21 December he headed the bill of Yuletide Revels in Fr Mathew Hall with a cast including Der Donovan and that great trouper Dan Coughlan.

The year 1953 was to become the most eventful year of William Dunlea’s life; his pending American trip was constantly hanging,

**MIDNIGHT
MATINEE**
AT
PALACE THEATRE
WEDNESDAY, 10th DEC.
(In aid of National Council
for the Blind)
STARRING
★ **JIMMY O'DEA** ★
MAUREEN POTTER
William Dunlea X
Josephine Scanlon
Chris Curran
The Lehane Sisters
Don O'Hare
Gertie Wine
Terry Cashman
George and Donal Crosbie
Norman Wailes
Humphrey Scannell
Jack Cronin
The Tiny Tots and The
Cute Kiddies
(by kind permission of
Eileen Cavanagh)
The Shandon Belles
(by kind permission of
Nancee Cavanagh)
Billy Browne and his
Band
Comperes: **Derry Fagan**
Tickets: Stalls 5/-; Balcony 2/6
ALL SEATS BOOKABLE

with great uncertainty, over his head. Typically the year started with a wide range of bookings and venues all over the country starting with a matinee for the boy scouts on Sunday 4 January in the Capitol Cinema where he topped the bill. The programme reminded us that the ageless Dan Hobbs was celebrating fifty years as a household name – performer/MC/comedian. William quickly made his way for a later show that night in Coachford Hall. His trusty partner, Dan, was again in action with him. Some of the advertising posters are important social reminders of the way life was at that time; one weekend in the Arcadia for a Freebooters FC dance, Dolly Butler and the Downbeaters were the bands. The poster, in huge lettering, screamed: BIG DIVERSION of TRAFFIC to hear William Dunlea (known to millions). At the bottom of both posters it said: FREE BUSES AFTER DANCE. On another poster for the Sunvale Social Club at the Gaiety, 23 February 1953, there was an extra incentive: FREE BICYCLE PARK. It just reminds us that if a fellow was driving a girl home it was on the crossbar of a bike. That February he seemed to be working every night; in the Arcadia for Na Piarsaigh, a then young club finding its feet, an all-star variety concert in Rossmore, a grand dance at the Gaiety, and a very special night at the Bantry Boys Club with a cast including

the comedy act, Neil and Tony Hegarty. That night was special for two reasons – one was that William was the only artist to sing without a microphone and, secondly, the evergreen Tony Hegarty, who was then a teenage comedian, performed his hilarious mime act of Figaro for the first time; he later appeared on the ‘Late Late Show’ with this mime. That night William was roped into appearing in several comedy sketches. He was a willing thespian. The Bantry Boys’ Club was a fine hall with a piano on stage and he fulfilled many invitations to sing in this special venue by parish priest Fr. Horgan. He never used a microphone at these engagements yet every one of the packed audience heard every word he sang. Fr. Horgan was another priest, like Fr. O’Flynn, who got things done yesterday. He didn’t like to hang around; he was known to sprint through Sunday mass in twelve minutes, but hardly anybody went to confession to him because he knew everybody in Bantry. When a woman finished confessing her sins he could be heard saying: “For your penance say three Hail Marys. Good girl, Mary.” Anonymity was non-existent which was inclined to be off-

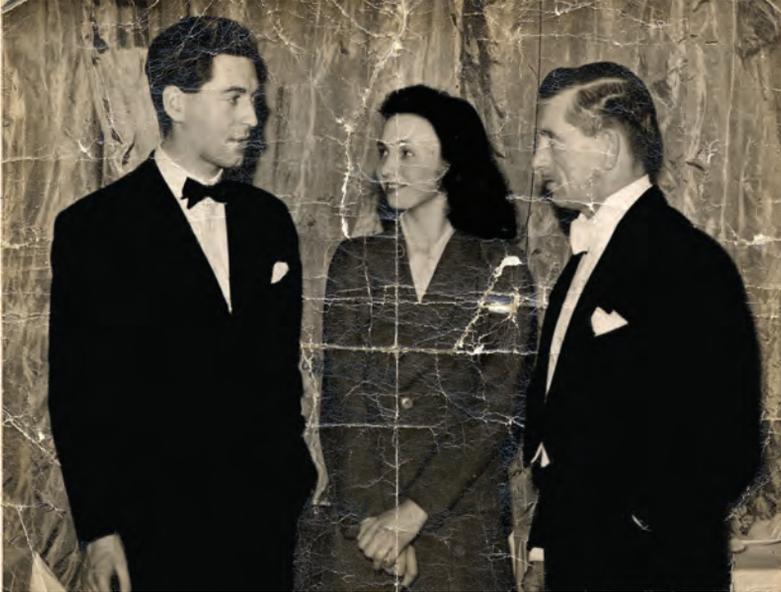
FLASH ADDED ATTRACTION:
Big Diversion of Traffic
To ARCADIA BALLROOM To-night.
TO HEAR **WILLIAM DUNLEA** (TENOR)
(known to millions of B.B.C. Radio Fans as the Voice of Erin)
WITH
The Down Beaters
Dublin's Newest and Gayest Orchestra.
DOLLY BUTLER and her Band.
BEAUTY CONTEST for Miss Cork 1951.
FLYING SAUCERS: THE NEWEST IN SPOT WORLD.
FREE BUSES AFTER DANCE.
Admission - 5/- (including tax). Dance 2.30

putting for serious sinners.

Fr. Horgan was also synonymous with the building, that is the physical building, of Gurrabraher's Parochial Hall; a man of great vision and enterprise, when he wanted something done he did it himself; he could be seen covered in dust, a man for all seasons, mixing cement, plastering walls or carting concrete blocks where they were needed. Whether it was on a scaffold or on the altar, he was a true man of God. Also, like Fr. O'Flynn, his idea of justice was firm and instant; any young men who were foolish enough to cross him or mess with him were caught by the scruff of the neck and swiftly shown the door, often with the aid of a large boot. Those days of common sense have long gone.

All through the early summer of 1953 the Sunday night concerts in Fr Mathew Hall were packed. William topped the bill and Paddy Cotter and the Hegartys were now regular co-stars. He was big news now, no matter where he went, and he dressed accordingly. He was a crowd-puller and if he wasn't in his usual evening dress and bow tie he'd be wearing a flamboyant suit and silk tie, even when bowling. The papers were full of great deeds during his special challenge match with Mick Wiseman from Templemichael on Sunday 28 June. They could hardly throw the bowl with the crowd. Although William was 41 he was an extremely fit man. The next day letter pages were overflowing with glowing praise: "he was well known for his great strength and never-give-in style and, in his younger days, he could loft a bowl eighty yards." It shows how fit he was when he cycled up to Limerick the next weekend for the Féile Luimní. He won the gold medal for tenors and cycled back home that night. In the early hours of the morning he called to his father's house in Rathpeacon Road to show him the medal. His father said, "I knew you'd do it, boy."

He was very attached to the Franciscan church in Broad



William with actor Dermot Walsh and his wife, London, late 1940's.

Lane, and he willingly sang at the closure of the old church. He confided in a friend, 'What God gave me, I gave Him back.' Then, on 14 July, he sang several songs, including Bizet's 'Agnus Dei', at the opening of the new St Francis church in Liberty Street. While it was being built bricks were sold to defray the cost and, it was said at the time that he bought most of the back wall of the church. He was a devout Catholic all his life, yet once he had a difference of opinion with a very well-known cleric and academic in UCC. He took William aside and said: "God gave you a gift, a wonderful gift. It is a beautiful instrument, but you should not be singing in places like pubs where cigarettes and passive smoking will damage your voice." William looked him in the eye and replied in colourful invective. He did a few charity concerts to fund his impending US tour but the departure date was dragging on. All was not well in Athlone and it was finally decided that he would do the tour on his own. He was to sail from Cobh on Wednesday 21 October on the Greek

super liner, Olympia. The plan was a series of concerts in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and San Francisco and, in addition, he was to make a number of broadcasts and television appearances as well as recordings. The tour was sponsored by Fr. C. J. Cosgrove of Brooklyn. A final send-off, a star-studded matinee, was arranged for the Savoy on Sunday 4 October. He prepared well for it and left home early to walk in Seminary Road, down Mulgrave Road and through Patrick Street, with his father by his side. Dressed as usual in an immaculate evening suit and bow tie, every head turned as he passed. There were long queues outside the Savoy. His father asked him to walk down as far as the Pavilion as they were early. Suddenly around the corner of Daunt's Square came a massive band blazing out a march, and carrying a huge banner wishing him 'Bon Voyage'. He didn't know who they were at first but then he realised they were a combination of the Barrack Street and Workingmen's prize bands, two bands he had played with. His father had set it up behind his back knowing how much his son loved brass bands. The cream of Cork talent was on show in an afternoon to remember, including Rita Lynch, Chris Sheehan, and Donald Crosbie and the audience wouldn't let William off the stage. He sang fifteen songs that day and he brought tears to many of his audience as he sang 'When I sit here remembering you'.

All through that October in 1953 he was very ill and he began to lose a lot of weight. To add to his worries news came filtering through from Athlone that there was trouble in the camp. After a series of squabbles, through apathy or uncertainty, the McCormack memorial committee couldn't come to an agreement on the impending US tour, and the whole project just petered out. Uncertain, William decided to still take on the tour by himself. On Tuesday the 20th Blackpool was awash with excitement. The new Glen Rovers club was opened with much pomp and ceremony. Although he was suffering from severe

stomach pain, William couldn't miss a chance to mingle with some of his heroes like Dave Creedon, Christy Ring and Jack Lynch. That nostalgic night Christy sang, Jack gave a blast of 'South of the Border' and William finished the night off with 'The Old Refrain'. He wasn't to know it then but it would be seven years before he'd see that club again. The next day himself, most of his family, and Dan Hobbs made their way to Cobh. Still very ill, he had lost three stone in weight, he had with him several references of glowing praise from John O'Sullivan, conductor, and Bernard Curtis, director of the School of Music, Bishop Lucey and Dan Hobbs as he boarded the Greek liner, Olympia. The bishop wrote: "I can confidently recommend him to the great American public as a good Catholic, a good Irishman and a good singer. His gifts of voice, character and personality should of themselves command success for him.

GRAND
FAREWELL CONCERT
TO
WILLIAM DUNLEA
(BEFORE LEAVING ON HIS AMERICAN TOUR)
SAVOY CINEMA, SUNDAY NEXT at 3
RITA LYNCH, CHRIS SHEEHAN, DONALD CROSBIE,
DON O'HARE, DICK DONEGAN, LEHANE SISTERS,
THE HASSON TROUPE
The MASSED BAND of the Workingmen's and Barrack
Street Prize Bands. Conductor—Mr. J. O'Leary
Accompanist Maureen Power, A.T.C.L.
FRED BRIDGMAN, A.R.C.O., L.T.C.L., at the Organ
PRICES 3/-, 2/6, 2/-, 1/6. Book now at Savoy

William Dunlea

Cork Municipal School of Music.
6. George's Quay. Cork.
5.Sept. 1953.

This is to state I have known Mr. William Dunlea, the great Cork Tenor for many years--all his life, in fact.

He has been gifted with a very sweet voice of a delightfully ~~sympathetic~~ sympathetic quality coupled with a remarkable clarity of diction which has made him a great favourite with Cork and Irish audiences generally.

I have followed his musical career with interest, and was very pleased to hear of his discovery by the late Count John McCormack in November 1939, altho' to us in Cork he was looked upon as a most promising tenor long before that date.

The name of William Dunlea is always a sure box-office draw at any Concert being given at the Cork Opera House or City Hall or at any Cork Theatre, at many of which he has appeared as the principal artist for the past number of years.

I understand he is going to the U.S.A. very soon on a Concert Tour. I am quite sure he will be a great success, especially amongst the Irish section of the American population. I wish him luck, and the pleasure of delighting the hearts of many Irish exiles with his lovely voice.

Signed-- *John D. Sullivan*
(Professor of Strings, and Conductor of orchestras,
(also Professor Theory and Harmony)

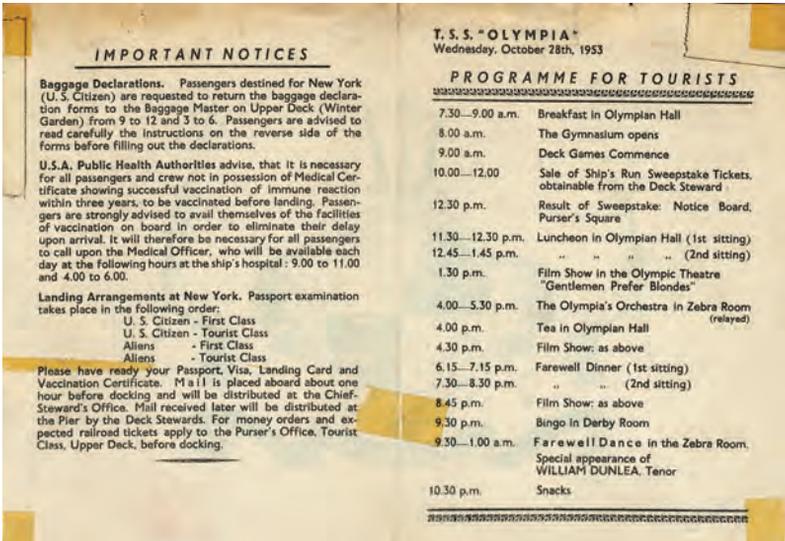
Reference from John O'Sullivan, the head of Cork School of Music, prior to William's US trip.

God be with him always and in all his ways, and be with too, those who gather to hear him." It is interesting to note that these four letters are dated September 1953, and they all wish him luck on the John McCormack tour. This shows how late the Athlone committee was in abandoning the memorial venture. The Olympia had just been built in Glasgow, and named the previous week. It could handle 1,356 passengers. By the time

the Dunlea clan waved him off it was after midnight and they had no way of travelling back to Cork. It was too late for buses, trains or taxis. John Murphy, brothers Joe and John Joe, sons Eddy, Batt and his young sister Claire, with her tight skirt and high heels, had a long lonesome walk back to Blackpool.

William was invited to dine with the captain but he was too ill and went straight to sick bay. American singer/actor Burl Ives was also a passenger. When William recovered a few days later they met and became good friends. He was well on the mend by the following Wednesday as he was officially entertaining in the ship's Zebra Room. The Olympia's programme suggests it was a very posh liner; there was something happening from 7.30am to the following 1am – breakfast in the Olympian Hall, gymnasium, deck games, sale and results of sweepstake tickets, two sittings for lunch, two film showings, ship's orchestra followed by tea, two sittings for dinner, bingo in the Derby Room, snacks and dance 9.30pm to 1am with special guest, William Dunlea.

When he arrived in New York a kind-hearted family, the Flynns, who lived in Peter Cooper Village, Manhattan, looked after him and put him up. He immediately joined the Corkmen's Association and became the lead drummer in their brass band. He showed great enthusiasm in his new environment and accepted every engagement; approaching Christmas he was top of the bill in three very successful concerts in New York, Scranton and Boston. He started working steadily in many of the Irish bars in New York. In January 1954 he was singing every Saturday night in O'Leary's Irish House near Broadway and the critics were giving him fine reviews. On Friday 5 February the Corkmen's Association arranged a concert at the Dauphin Hotel, Broadway, in aid of the building fund of the Leap Parish Church, Skibbereen. Again, it is a social statement to note that the concert posters pointed out that any patron who donated a pound to the fund would have his name read out from the altars



The U.S.S. Olympia's programme.

of the Leap and Glandore churches back in Ireland. William got another good review: "The highlight of the evening was Ireland's latest singing sensation, William Dunlea."

In early March a headline splashed across a New York paper: "FAMOUS IRISH TENOR TO APPEAR IN THE BRONX". He was guest artist for a special Irish dance night on Saturday 13 March. He attended his first St Patrick's Day parade in New York and as the colourful parade passed along Fifth Avenue he cried with emotion. Not for the longing of home but for the quantity and quality of the endless bands. They took hours to pass: the army bands, fire brigade bands, corporation bands and different high school bands.

He was now making quite a name for himself, and the 32 County Association of Ireland met and decided to put forward his name to represent Ireland in an international festival which was being held in Chicago. They entered him in the tenor solo, the all male, and the male and female section. In the space of a few hours he won all three gold medals. He said later that he felt like a winning Olympian and again there was a tear in his

eye, as they raised the Irish flag and played the national anthem. All through May he was in constant demand and did numerous concerts including a charity ball at the Manhattan Centre to try and raise 100,000 dollars to help renovate a school, a Thomas Moore Festival in Central Park where he sang the national anthem and, on Sunday 22 May he did another charity concert at the Sheraton Astor Hotel. On Saturday 12 June he sang for the first time on US television. He was an instant hit. On the following Tuesday the New York Television Daily said: "Ireland's tenor gift to the United State, William Dunlea, scored a terrific hit last Saturday night on WNYC. This boy can really sing."

He really had arrived in New York; he was now singing three shows a night, seven nights a week, at the upmarket Wienecke, which also featured dancing and a la carte dinner. On Monday 1 November he headed a star-studded cast in the 'Night of Shamrocks Show' at the 1,500 seater Yorkville Casino. There were six bands. The highlight of that year was an invitation to give a recital of songs for the prestigious Oriel Society at 4pm on Sunday 29 November. The Oriel Society had a touch of religious and cultural royalty about it and it was only artists of really established quality received an invitation to perform there. He was kept busy working regularly in both Wienecke – the audience's favourites were always 'Danny Boy' and 'Because' – and the Yorkville Casino where the admission was \$1.50, and \$2 box seats. One review called him, "The Cork thrush who magnetised the crowd." He made his US radio debut on Saturday 21 May on WNYC. It was a 45 minute show called, 'Hands Across the Sea' and it went down very well. It was to be the first of many US radio programmes.

The following month, although he was suffering from severe stomach pain, he accepted an invitation to head the bill in a New York concert. All the newspaper critics were there and it was a huge success. He sang twenty-one songs but, later on



On arrival in New York William immediately joined the Corkmen's Association and became the lead drummer in their brass band.

that night, he collapsed and was rushed to St Clare's Hospital. St Clare's was a Catholic hospital run by the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor. He thought it was his old gastric problem acting up again but, after x-rays, it was discovered that it was much more serious; he had a duodenal ulcer and a tumour in the stomach. The next nine months were to be the blackest period in his life. Doctor Madden, an Irish-American surgeon, performed a major operation to remove the tumour. It was a long and lonely recuperation, but worse was to follow. He lost his eye-sight and was totally blind for five months. In a later interview he gives a vivid description of how he felt at the time:

“All I was worried about was the home because when you're not making money you can't send anything home and I had a family. I was on the flat of my back and blind at that. The feeling I had at that time was I made several attempts to get out of the bed because if I could get to the window I'd have went through it. I'll be quite honest about it. It was a terrible sensation. My God, it was a terribly depressing time for me. It's very very bad and hard to be born blind but to be used to the country life and hunting and flowers and trees and all that and suddenly see nothing. There were two big minders on either side of the bed, twenty-four hours a day. I used to get restless, tormented, you know. At that stage I felt I wouldn't get my sight back. I was saying to myself, my God, am I going to finish my days this way but, thank God, it came back. I never looked back after that operation. When I came out of hospital it was like beginning all over again.”

One good thing came out of his time in St Clare's. When he was on the mend the Radio Éireann programme, 'Hands Across the Sea' approached him, and he sang a few songs for it literally from his hospital bed.

William realised that he was only supposed to do a twelve month stint in America and by now almost four years had flown

by, and his career took off again in a roller-coaster of success. He missed Blackpool and his beloved Glen Rovers. Any time he bumped into someone from Cork they were besieged by questions about home. He made two records in 1958, 'Because' and 'If I Can Help Somebody'. They were in great demand on Radio WBNX. Listeners were constantly requesting the station to play them.

Then his old Republican fervour rose to the surface when he got involved in a political row on an anti-British parade in New York. A crowd of 600,000 lined the route and many carried banners saying, 'England get out of Ireland,' and later William sang both the Irish and US national anthems. There are many stories of him sending money home to Ireland to support the Republican cause.

The work kept coming and he couldn't say "no." Before he knew it he was off on a demanding tour of concerts. The one thing that stood to him was that he loved singing, even to a fault. He would sing anywhere, anytime to anyone. And his name and fame was spreading even in a country the size of America. He sang in a concert in Carnegie Hall which was attended by Cardinal Cushing and Senator John F. Kennedy and he came to know Benjamino Gigli, Maria Callas and Fritz Kreisler at the New York Metropolitan Opera. Kreisler invited him to his home in Monrow and treated him to an impromptu performance on his violin. By then he had already met John Wayne, Marlene Dietrich, James Cagney, and Pat O'Brien, all old heroes of his from his days at the Lido, and he became a good friend of singer/actress Jeanette McDonald. She had appeared in many films, four of them were Oscar nominations for best film. The unlikely couple often arranged to meet and go for a walk and a chat in Central Park. And he was introduced to Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin one night in New York. The poor boy from Blackpool was definitely somebody.

He continued his tour of the States and was the lead tenor

in concerts in Boston, Chicago and San Francisco, but a visit to the Southern states left an indelible mark, especially Louisiana. He was to open the show leading softly into that lovely Stephen Foster ballad 'Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming' and then a black choir was to come in and sing the rest of the song with him. On opening night he led in softly to the song as planned but when the choir, a hundred powerful black singers, joined in it nearly removed the roof of the theatre. The show was repeated a few times but every night, when that choir sang, the hairs on the back of William's neck stood out.

On his return to New York he was invited to sing in a fund-raising concert in a State Home just outside the city. This was a special home for down-and-out artists. Out-of-luck and ill singers, dancers and actors were put up and looked after there, and twice a year there was a concert to help out. It usually went on all day and William was a more than willing contributor. That day he met the great Swedish tenor, Jussi Bjorling, and they became great friends. They soon discovered that they had a lot in common: they were the same age, born only a few days apart; they both loved to visit the local pubs of their native cities and sing to the customers, and they were both partial to a drop or two of whiskey. When William told Bjorling that, in Cork, this drink was known as the 'foxy lady' he got great fun out of it and, in Sweden, he loved the reaction when he called for a large 'foxy lady'. Also, both singers were a little fickle about catching a cold. Jussi had a dread of draughts and would immediately move if there was a hint of one. Similarly, William was conscious of getting his feet damp at a match. He always brought a large plastic bag with him, folded it up in a neat square, and stood on it to keep his feet dry.

The year 1959 was to be an eventful one for William. President of Ireland, Sean T. O'Kelly, had travelled over to America to receive an honorary degree at Boston College. Cardinal Cushing,





William singing the US and Irish anthems before a GAA match in New York, late 1950's

times with the Corkmen's Association Brass Band. Before one game he again sang the Irish and American national anthems, backed by a US Navy band. He was now almost seven years in America and had become a household name especially in Boston and New York. He still occasionally met Jeanette McDonald for a stroll around Central Park. She had followed his career with great interest. They often swapped gossip on these walks. She told him of Nelson Eddy and he told her about Christy Ring. He also met Jussi Bjorling when he could and they went for a drink together. William always insisted that there wasn't a tenor in the world who could touch Bjorling. He had everything.

In the year 1960 he again worked steadily. He was now living on East 20th Street. He stuck mainly to Manhattan. One night he was approached by some American film people about a possible film on John McCormack's life. They wanted to use his voice as McCormack's. He was all for it but Lily McCormack refused to agree to this. She insisted that recordings of her late husband's voice would be more suitable. The American money men didn't want this and after much squabbling the whole project fell apart and the film never got off the ground.

For months he had been thinking about a return to Ireland. He had been away too long and he missed his family, friends, Glen Rovers, and he longed for the pleasure of throwing a bowl out the Blarney Road. His pal, Jussi, had been ill for some time but when he died suddenly on 9 September 1960 it was a grim reminder of one's fickle fate. He was only 49 years old, the same age as himself. His death was a major blow and influenced his decision to leave the United States. The following month he packed his bags, said goodbye to all his American friends, shed a few tears, and boarded a plane to Ireland.

There was a buzz of excitement around Cork city. Rumour had it that William was coming home. The Dunlea family hired a

car and made its way to Shannon Airport. It had been seven years almost to the day. They waited on the tarmac and watched in awe at the sight of the giant airbus as it dropped from the sky and slowly taxied to a halt not very far away. By a complete coincidence, old friend and singer, John O'Shea, was also waiting to greet a passenger on that same plane; his mother's sister, a nun, was making her first visit home after more than twenty years in America. Expecting Sister Fidelma to emerge from the plane, he couldn't believe it when he saw William, royally dressed in a beautiful grey suit and red silk tie, make his way down the steps and dramatically kiss the ground. The king had returned from exile. After much chat, tears and laughter the party headed back to Cork. On the way home they decided to stop for refreshments at a hotel in Mallow where they discovered that some things never change. They weren't there five minutes when a woman recognised William and asked him to sing a song. He noticed that his sister Clare was a little annoyed at this invasion of their privacy but he smiled at her, said, "God gave me a gift and I'll use it whenever," and duly sang a song for the woman.

He was delighted to be back but he was fiercely disappointed at having just missed Glen Rover's third county final win in a row. Led by Christy Ring they beat UCC in a thrilling game after being behind by nine points at half-time. It was decided to hold a "Welcome Home" concert in his honour and Con Hannigan was the chief organiser. The City Hall was booked for Sunday night 13 November, and he roped in a star-studded cast including Con himself, John O'Shea, William's twelve-year-old nephew and name-sake who was billed as a "Golden Voiced Boy Soprano", and sang that night in his confirmation suit. Also, there were Ted Kent, Charlie Kelleher, Ann Brennan, Charlotte Byrne and the wonderful Paddy Hegarty was the accompanist. But panic set in. Cork hadn't heard its favourite son for seven years and the eleven hundred tickets were sold out two days

before the event. Con quickly stepped in and borrowed two hundred and fifty extra seats from the Central Hall in Academy Street and they were immediately snapped up. Several people brought along their own seats and they too were left in. That November night was yet another night of magic. The City Hall was bursting at the seams and they gave William a hero's welcome. It has been said that this was his greatest performance. They couldn't get enough of him and he obliged with twenty songs. Once again, most of the audience missed the last bus home.

For the next five years he did a non-stop conveyor belt of appearances all over the city and county from the Opera House to a village pub and the Savoy to a parish hall. He loved his trips to London for Patrick's Day. The All Munster Association often invited him over as guest of honour for the festivities. There wouldn't be a dry eye in the audience as he sang all about the dear little shamrock. Also, he was always roped in to sing at his relatives' weddings. His son Batt got married in the North Cathedral just a year after he came home. William sang at the mass and, very unusual for that time, he got a rousing standing ovation. And he still couldn't say 'no' to a charity event, especially to help the blind. He still remembered his plight in America and strongly empathised with anyone suffering from impaired sight. He



was sometimes generous to a fault. A neighbour's house was badly burned and, once again, William stepped into the breach. A fund-raising concert was immediately organised. He topped the bill in the Ardmanning Bar and led the packed house with a rousing rendition of 'Hear my Song, Violetta'.

But, very gradually, demands on him eased because of the huge social changes taking place in Irish life. All over the country, and especially in cities like Cork, people's attitude to entertainment and everyday living had also changed. Immediately before, during and after the Emergency and the Second World War there was a distinct lack of work and money. Poverty still lingered in the background. It was the norm. Nobody knew any different. But now we were in the middle sixties; almost fifty years had passed since the burning of the city, the war was a twenty-year-old memory, life was good and the concert scene was fading fast and deemed old-fashioned. Irish television had arrived with much pomp and ceremony on 31 December 1961 and this had a severe effect on the cinema business. Some cinemas, like the Lido, had to close down.

Although society was much more affluent people were still careful with their money; old habits die hard. Why pay to see a film when there was one on the television for free? Thrift had not yet passed away and, unlike the modern day, Cork patrons would always frequent the pub with the cheapest drink – even a penny cheaper. To add to that, the showband scene had arrived with a bang. Bands like the Clipper Carlton, the Dixies and the Royal Showband were guaranteed crowd-pullers, and performers like Brendan Bowyer, Joe McCarthy, Butch Moore and Dickie Rock were now hero-worshipped and major attractions. Elvis, Cliff Richard, Bill Haley and, eventually, the Beatles had all become the rage.

Pop stars were regular visitors to the city and Tom Jones, Roy Orbison, and the Rolling Stones were now filling venues like the City Hall and the Savoy. Rock-and-roll replaced the

concerts. Outside of the usual dance halls like the Arcadia and Majorca every rugby, soccer, GAA and boat club seemed to have its own weekly dance. On average, in the late sixties, there were two dozen dances every weekend, and many had dances on Wednesdays and Fridays as well. By now the cabaret and nightclub scene had blossomed and mushroomed all over the city and county. Alcohol had never been a factor to concert-goers; it had never been available and people couldn't afford it, but it was becoming more and more prevalent and expensive and there were later drinking hours.

As well as bowling William loved hunting up Fair Hill or out Ballyvolane with the Shandon Foot Beagles, and he kept as busy as he could by doing the odd concert usually with the help of Con Hannigan and Dan Hobbs. Most of these performances were spread all over the county rather than the city. He occasionally reappeared on Radio Éireann where he was still highly popular. One programme was particularly memorable when he sang in a live show, in front of a packed audience at the City Hall, backed by the Radio Éireann Orchestra.

He started working once more with the builders O'Shea's and Hornibrook's. He was kept busy for several years but with the hard physical work, his heavy smoking didn't help, he took a bad turn and was admitted to the North Infirmary. After tests it was discovered that he had a heart condition. It must be remembered that just a few short years before he had undergone a major operation in the US. Also, the loss of his sight, the uncertainty about his future, the worry if he'd ever see again, and the terrible stress involved, must have left their mark and contributed to his situation. While in hospital he displayed his prowess as an artist by painting all the statues in the different wards and, of course, by entertaining his fellow patients, and nurses, with a few songs now and then. He was a man who couldn't rest. The doctors sent him home and reassured him



Included in this group of bowlers from the '60's are Declan Mitchel, Sean Lee, Marty O'Sullivan, Batt Dunlea, Pat Lynch, Paul Lewis, Steve Yelverton, Francis Wallace, Denna O'Mahony (sheriff), John Farmer, Finbarr Casey, John Twomey, Con Kelly, Donie Sheehan, John Aherne, Mick Carroll, Mick Mintern, Sean O'Riordan, Jerry O'Donoghue, Denis Crowley, Michael Collins, Joe Fitzsimons, Jimmy Riordan, Michael Murphy, Wm Dunlea (Wallou), Dave Mulcahy, Jim Twomey, Frank McGrath, Kieran & Billy Murray.

that he had the heart of a lion but this heart condition was to plague him for the rest of his life.

He returned to the building line but he was nearly killed when he fell off the roof of Holy Trinity Church. Luckily he suffered only minor bruising. Although the days of the major concerts were long gone he was still in great demand. For instance, he sang at his son Paddy's wedding in Carrigaline in March 1974 but hastily disappeared to sing at another wedding in Dublin Hill before returning to Carrigaline again. He still loved the camaraderie and the friendly banter of bowl playing and he played every chance he got. The bowling was great but the post mortems after were even better. These could take place in The Bowler's Rest, Coughlan's or The Beehive, three venues no longer with us.

The following month when he won the Cork over-sixties Bowling Championship everyone in the bowling fraternity was



William with his old friend Jack Lynch and wife Máirín in a photograph Jack inscribed 'To my best pal Bill'.

genuinely delighted. But tragedy struck again. While coming home on the Farranree bus he suffered a severe heart attack and was lucky not to fall from the bus. He was rushed to the Mercy Hospital. The family was worried and feared the worst but he eventually recovered, afterwards he had to give up the heavy building work. He got a job as manager of Cleary's Bar in Blackpool. This was ideal; the work was easy; he enjoyed doing it, and he was among friends. Then his wife Margaret died suddenly in 1979. This was a terrible blow. All her life she had been a kind and hard-working woman, the rock of the family. She was sadly missed. The following year his father died aged 94. To the very end he remained a stubborn Republican. He adamantly refused to accept any medals or his IRA pension. He felt he didn't deserve it because we didn't achieve a 32-county Ireland.

These deaths created another problem; William's children had all married and flown the nest; the youngest Paddy was the last, and he hated living alone. He especially dreaded being alone at Christmas. He decided on a very unusual solution for

that time; he booked into the Sunset Ridge Hotel in Killeens for eight weeks. It shows how well-known he was when the last bus to Blarney would stop for him every night when his work in Cleary's had finished. The bus driver knew him well and dropped him at the hotel on the way to Blarney. It did likewise each day and delivered him from the Sunset Ridge to the bar. Many residents in the hotel thought he was the owner because he was frequently seen strolling around the foyer dressed in an immaculate dressing gown with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

All his life he dressed flamboyantly, even when he was in his eighties. Fr. Kelly in Blackpool once said to him, "Bill, you're the best dressed man in Blackpool." William replied, "I'm not. I'm the best dressed man in Ireland."

Later, he got a house in the nearby Madden's Buildings but when Christmas came around he booked into the nearby Cara House for a week. Madden's Buildings was perfect for him: it was minutes from Cleary's, in the heart of Blackpool, great neighbours, close to all his friends, the Plaza, a betting office, surrounded by a plethora of different pubs, and the church. He went to mass and communion every morning and he loved to relax Parisian-like on a bench in the Blackpool Plaza, read the paper, pick out his horses, reminisce with old friends about times gone by, and gaze wistfully across the road at the MacCurtain monument.

Twice a year a horse-drawn wagonette was hired out for the day. All his friends and neighbours piled aboard. William, with his gadget, was the sole entertainment and star attraction. They slowly made their way to the seaside, usually Crosshaven, and sang and danced the day away without a care in the world. It would be late that night when they made it back home in one piece, tired, hoarse but happy. Those simple times when he lived in Madden's Buildings were surely William's happiest: he had a non-stop stream of visitors. They always brought plenty

Facing page: William at his home in Madden's Buildings.



of books for him, especially cowboy books. He couldn't get enough of westerns. He read every cowboy book in the library. They were like mental chewing gum to him. Then the accordion was produced and the night would finish with a few songs. Other happy times were, with John Murphy at the wheel, when he visited all the hospitals, including St Joseph's and Our Lady's in the Lee road, the hospital for the blind, and Sarsfield's Court sanatorium. He loved to bring a little bit of happiness into the lives of some of the patients who may not have even had a visitor.

His presence in Cleary's Bar ensured a full house every night. On weekends the doors had to be shut early and there was generally a mighty sing-song, led by William and his gadget, late into the night. He had a magical pair of hands: one of many fine paintings done by him hung on the pub wall; he made beautiful glass creations and wood carvings; out of nothing, with a hammer and chisel, he made several finished headstones for friends, complete with relevant names and dates; he could pick up practically any instrument for the first time and had the ability to play it; he could read music at twelve years of age yet, for a man who drank enough Murphy's in his life, he couldn't fill a pint.

Late into his life he still hated being alone at Christmas. One Christmas when he had just turned eighty the Blackpool Choir decided to put on a concert for the patients in Cara House. The choir, under conductor Ger Manning, included William's two sons, Batt and Paddy. The patients were enjoying the performance and William, dressed in his pyjamas, listened intently as he sat on his bed in the background. Ger, an old friend, asked him to sing a song. He readily agreed and gathered the choir around him. "Right", he said, "I want no prima donnas and no shouting. Take it easy and follow me." He started singing softly 'Just a Song at Twilight' and conducted the choir as they joined in the chorus. At the end there wasn't a dry eye in the ward.

He gave his last public performance when he was 82. Typically, it was for charity. Music buff and friend, Jerry O'Callaghan, was organising a fund-raising concert for autistic children. It was arranged for Sunday afternoon in the Imperial Hotel. Even then he was still a star attraction. It shows how concerned and professional he was about his performance when he gave up cigarettes and drink for two weeks before the concert. The place was packed. The format was simple. Old friend Rita Lynch was present and Jerry played six of the records she made in London in 1948. He then introduced William to the waiting audience. William, the old pro, paused, looked around the hall, smiled, and said, "You're going to hear notes here today you wouldn't get in the credit union." He then sang six songs, finishing up with old favourite, 'The Song That Reached My Heart', a song that had played such an important part in his life. It was a performance filled with emotion and when Jerry thanked him and presented him with an old 78 record of his former tutor, Dino Borgioli, he broke down and cried like a baby.

Sadly, his next visit to Cara House was the beginning of the end for him. While visiting the bathroom he slipped and broke a bone in his shoulder and was shifted to the Orthopaedic Hospital. Unfortunately he was never the same after that and, as a last resort, he was put in the Woburn Nursing Home in the Lower Glanmire Road. Although his family and children saw him several times a day his stay here was an unhappy one. They did everything for him; he was taken out and brought home for family events like birthdays and anniversaries but for the next four years his health gradually deteriorated. Sometimes, on a good day, he'd love to reminisce and reflect on the good times. One day he was asked if he any regrets. He thought for a minute and said ruefully: "Ah, yes, I have but it would take too long to discuss them with you."

In early January 1998, he was removed to a private ward in the Mercy Hospital. On Sunday 11 January, with his family by

William Dunlea

his bedside, he peacefully passed away. Word spread quickly. There was a hush of disbelief, a silent sadness hung over the city. The chilling reality of life is death. The king was dead, long live the king.

William Dunlea's funeral was one of the biggest ever seen in Cork. The city, especially Blackpool, practically came to a standstill. People came from far and near to pay tribute to one of their greatest sons. In his time he was hero-worshipped. It was the passing of an icon; the end of an era. On that following Wednesday, 14 January, Blackpool Church was thronged with old friends and Church, State and GAA dignitaries. In death, as in life, he was a great crowd-puller. It was an emotional mass. His niece Harriet sang 'Ave Maria', sons Paddy and Batt sang 'Going Home' and 'At the End of the Day'. The congregation joined in the chorus and, at the end, gave a thunderous round of applause. The burial took place at the picturesque Dunbullogue Cemetery. The coffin was draped with the Glen Rovers colours and a Volunteer piper led him to the grave in a quiet corner of the cemetery. He'd have liked that. In the shade of a giant yew tree he was finally laid to rest.



Today, when William Dunlea's name is mentioned the words stubborn, republican, ubiquitous, generous, human, gifted and enigmatic spring to mind. His critics are still out there sharpening their daggers and sniping in the darkness. They say he was the voice of Erin when he could have been the voice of the world, and that he had a gift but he didn't do enough with this great gift. And he remained a Blackpool boy all his life. Yet they forget all the pleasure he gave to millions. He led a full life all his life. It was his choice. So be it! He is now in heaven mingling with the angels which is appropriate for a man who had the voice of an angel. When I close my eyes I see him with Jack Lynch on his right and Christy Ring on his left. He just finishes a duet of 'South of the Border' with Jack, and he turns to Ring and says, "Christy, remember that day in Limerick? What did you really say to Mick Mackey?"



Left: Mick Mackey and Christy Ring.

Facing page, left: William's sons Batt and Paddy with his sister Claire at St Mary's Road Library, January 2008, to mark the tenth anniversary of William's death.

Facing page, right: William's headstone at Dunbullogue cemetery.

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Jim Mc Keon