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# An Irishwoman's Diary

HAND-knitted socks of wool home-spun in the Antrim Glens: picture how far and how happily one could walk in these. Picture, too, the pleasures of sitting down to griddle oat cake, potato cake and soda bread. These were things for which prizes were once offered at the Feis of the Glens.

More ascetic students competed in music, and in stories, history and song in Irish. Some competitions were confined to students of Antrim Irish. Another was for unpublished songs, prayers, stories and accounts of old customs; if these last were kept in some attic, a crock of gold awaits some student of Ulster Irish.

Tomorrow week (February 28th) will be the 80th anniversary of the founding of the *feis*. The subscribers' list is like a Who's Who of the Protestant gentry of the north-east.

The story is told in the *Glensman* of June, 1932. It is re-issued in the *Glensman* volume published by the Glens of Antrim Historical Society. The writer, whose pen-name is "Benmore," saw the beginnings of the Gaelic League in Belfast, the class in rooms in Queen Street under Mr O'Shea, Conan Maol, T. P. McGinley, Ethna Carbery (then Miss Anna Johnston) and Miss Alice Milligan.

Michael Cusack, founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association, came north about 1893 to organise a Gaelic Day. Dublin sent a Gaelic football team to demonstrate the game in the presence of some of the finest athletes in the country, like Kiely of Carrick-on-Suir, Co Tipperary and Leahy of Charleville, Cork. Then the O'Neill Crowley Gaelic Club was started in 1895, its meeting place being in Donegall Street.

"Between 1895 and 1904 the late Francis Joseph Bigger, on learning of the establishment of Gaelic League branches in the Glens, made visits to these parts", Benmore says.

"He brought with him Irish dancers, pipers and fiddlers and made my home in Glenarm his headquarters. Memories of those wonderful nights remain with me as never-to-be-forgotten events."

#### **Hurling Team**

In 1904 the first hurling team was formed and the S. O'Neill Club was presented by Mr Bigger with a banner of pure Irish linen. Next, attention was paid to the language, those interested being Miss Dobbs, Miss Ada M'Neill, Miss R. Young, Mrs Annie M'Gavock, Miss Coghlan, Miss B. MacDonnell, Miss Johnstone, F. J. Bigger, Roger Casement, John Clarke,

*Eoin MacNeill*

Stephen Clarke, Hugh Flatley, Joseph Duffy, Denis Maguire, Denis Black and B. O'Donnell.

Discussion took place on the feasibility of holding a Glens Feis and finally, at a meeting in Cushendall on February 28th, 1904, it was resolved to hold one the following summer.

Eloquently, Bigger explained the purpose of the meeting: the stimulation of Irish language, pastimes and literature, not forgetting the propagation of rural industries, these aims to be in accordance with purely national sentiment irrespective of class or creed.

June 30th was fixed as the date and Miss Barbara McDonnell was, with one voice, elected the first president. Miss Ada M'Neill, Cushendun House, was appointed secretary. (Miss M'Neill's brother was later Lord Cushendun.)

"Subscriptions poured in, notably from the Most Rev Dr Henry, Bishop of Down and Connor; F. J. Bigger, Roger Casement, Thomas Casement, Dr St Clair Boyd, Thomas Concannon, Sir D. Dixon, Dr Douglas Hyde, Colonel McDonnell, Mr Ronald M'Neill, Sir Hugh Smiley, Mrs Silvertop, Mr Francis Turnley, Lord Macnaghten, The O'Neill, Lisbon, Lady O'Neill, Lady Miller

**Brilliant Scene**

"Mr Bigger spared no expense to make the scene a brilliant one, one that lives still in the memories of many. The splendid, unselfish enthusiasm of those days in the Glens shines down the years. There was no strife, and no petty criticisms; everyone worked hard and well.

"June 30th broke to find an unending stream of vehicles coming all roads to Cushendall. The O'Neill War Pipes, led by O'Reilly from Armagh, gave of

their best. It was a great day. Words, mere words, cannot describe how young Ireland's pulse beat. All creeds, all classes were there.

"The vast throng was got into position, with pride of place given the Gaels of Glenarm followed by Cushendall under the banner of the Clan MacDonnell; M'Quillans, M'Alisters, M'Keowns, O'Doghertys and other septs representative of the whole Glens made a procession extending for three miles on the road to Glenariffe."

Then, Miss MacDonnell took the chair and Sir Horace Plunkett, who opened the *feis*, appealed for greater interest in Irish industries — the duty of every Irishman and Irishwoman — and noted gladly the prolific production of the Glens, from boat-building to basket-making, toy models and boot-making.

### **100 Competitions**

"John McNeill, the famous Professor of Gaelic, spoke on the language. The competition subjects listed in the schedule numbered 100 and covered the entire field of native industries, vocal and instrumental music, dancing, Irish history, etc, etc.

"The historical and literary subjects dealt with were: Sean O'Neill, Sorley Boy MacDonnell and Oisín. Historical notes on Glens ruins and monuments were encouraged."

The late Rev Canon Dudley Janns, the rector of Glenarm, and Benmore contributed to these subjects, the former taking first place. Benmore also contributed a play, "The Fate of Shaun O'Neill", which was afterwards staged at Glenarm, meeting with considerable commendation.

The late Mr Joseph Duffy, Cushendall, contributed an exhaustive compilation of Gaelic place-names in the Glens.

"Another big feature was the attendance of R. L. O'Mealy with his famous Uilleann Pipes and Mr M'Curdy, the piper from Rathlin. All culminated in the hurling match between the Shauns, Glenarm, and the Faughs, Carey, on the beach at Red Bay, when the latter were victorious in carrying off the shield."

Dan Dempsey, still an active Gael, refereed, and the umpires were the Rev Patrick Magill, Roger Casement and Daniel Magill.

"Thus was the Glen Feis established", Benmore recalls. "It left a memory that will never be forgotten and lit the Gaelic flame still burning brightly in Antrim's storied Glens".

This year's Feis of the Glens will be held on July 1st next.

#### FILEEN O'BRIEN

