

Frank Ryan

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Frank Ryan's Youth

By unknown author

He was born in Fermoy, Co. Cork on October 5th 1900. His father Cornelius Ryan was a butcher from Kilworth and his mother Bridget O'Keeffe came from Curraglass, Co. Cork. When Frank was about three years of age the family moved to Tallow, a small town on the boundary of Cork and Waterford. He was only a young boy of five years old when his father died of pneumonia in 1905. He attended the National School in Tallow until the age of twelve.

His mother remarried when Frank was ten years old. As a young boy he joined the church choir in Tallow. At the age of about twelve or thirteen he was sent to Lismore C.B.S. Early in 1908 Miss Corcoran, the teacher in the girl's national school, began teaching music in Tallow. At that time every child was sent to her to learn piano or violin. Frank learnt the violin there. Miss Corcoran presented seasonal concerts to show the musical abilities of her pupils, much to the pleasure of the local Tallow people.

They had a school orchestra of about thirty five girls and boys in which Frank Ryan played second violin. As a member of this little orchestra Frank was treated to many interesting and one could say exotic outings.

One such occasion which he never ceased to forget, was the night they visited Lismore Concert House by pony and trap to play for the Duke of Devonshire.

My grandfather, Frank, unfortunately had to leave school prematurely at the age of fourteen years and he took his place in the family business. However, his musical education continued and flourished. He joined the local brass band of twenty two instruments and was Principal Cornet player. They were trained by a retired British Army Bandmaster, Mr. Malcolm. However, the parish priest did not agree with this band and they broke up after some time.

He was a great supporter of the Irish Volunteer Movement around 1914-1916 and took part in it at about the age of seventeen. Due to this involvement his singing took a back seat.

Frank was appointed Battalion O.C. in Tallow. He related many interesting stories of his military exploits during this time, to his family in later years. One interesting story is how he became the first Irish man to shoot down an enemy plane.

One Sunday in July 1920 an enemy plane (English) came down at Garrybrittas about four miles from Tallow. Frank heard the news as he worked in the butcher shop. He left the house and grabbed two revolvers hidden under a tombstone in a graveyard behind the house. He met a friend named Pat Ronayne and the two of them raced to the landing place of the plane. A big crowd had gathered around the plane. The pilot was among the crowd and another man dressed in British naval uniform. Pat Ronayne seized the sailor and Frank held the pilot. Neither men were armed. Frank searched the plane and then prepared to destroy it. He stuffed it with hay and set fire to it. The fire didn't catch so he shot at the petrol tank and it blew up instantly. Frank and the crew made history because they were the first national military to destroy an enemy aircraft.

Another remarkable story is told about Frank. One night as he was on his way back to the hide-out in Glasshouse, Curraglass he noticed the "Black and Tan" truck approaching along the road. Aware that he had been seen he thought frantically what he would do. He turned his hat back to front threw down some stones off of a wall, took out his two sets of false teeth and began building the wall again. When the British came along they shouted at him "have you seen Frank Ryan?" He pretended to be deaf and asked them to repeat but they just cursed and said, "forget the drunk fool" and carried on along their way.

The War of Independence created great problems for the Ryan Family. Frank was on "the run" and so lived in a dug out for two years. During this time also his stepfather was arrested and imprisoned in Spike Island. Because of this the family business had to be closed for nine months leaving his mother and two sisters, Anna and Kathleen very badly off.

Frank eloped with Josephine Beecher and they were married in Dublin in 1922. The truce came and for Frank it was the end of his soldiering. He did not take part in the Civil War that followed. He turned to resuming his business and his deep love of music and song.

As a result of the glowing press reports he was pitchforked into singing and hence became the greatest box-office draw in the country. In 1938 he sang on the BBC's "In Town Tonight" programme following some rave notices in the British Press after a concert in a packed Albert Hall, London. Twenty years earlier at the age of eighteen he was such a rebel in the War of Independence that the British had a price on his head. Now he was being cheered to the echo as he toured all the Granada Theatres of England with John Madin at the organ.

But it was during the years of World War II that he underwent his most trying times. Getting to places like Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Dublin was a major problem due to the petrol shortage. He was doing an opera in Cobh on one occasion and for fourteen nights he cycled the journey of thirty miles to Cobh, leaving his shop in Tallow at 6.00 p.m. and getting to Cobh at 8.00 p.m. When the opera was over he would get out his bicycle again and arrive home at about 2.00 a.m. A hard working teetotal, non-smoking life enabled him to take all this in his stride. He recalled one such story to the "Evening Echo" in 1963 which I will quote. "I was due to appear at an I.R.A. Commemoration Concert in the Savoy in Cork and as usual I got out the bike and cycled away taking my time. Tied up nice and neatly on the carrier was my dress suit for the occasion and just as I came to Carrigtwohill, down came the rain as heavy as you could get it. I was soaked and worse still so was my dress-suit. By the time I got to Cork I had no time to spare and had to go on stage immediately. I can assure you it was not very comfortable appearing on a stage before a packed audience and singing in a sopping wet suit. I don't think one member of the audience realised my discomfort on that occasion."

Yes, the war days had their problems for the singer who was fast becoming one of the most popular in Ireland and whose name was news everywhere. He was singing with the Dublin Operatic Society at the Olympia, he appeared with them in the Aberdeen Hall. He was guest tenor with the Limerick Operatic Society and sang in their "Lily of Killarney", which was completely booked out and called for a special repeat performance.

On St. Patrick's Day 1948 Frank Ryan marched at the head of the great New York parade. On this occasion Mr. Jim Farley introduced Frank and his wife to President Truman after the parade. Indeed this was a memorable event for Frank and his wife and they often recalled their feelings in the following years. Frank was also invited to sing in the Boston Gardens on this trip. President De Valera was arriving in America and Frank was asked to sing for him. Frank was a friend of De Valera's at the time, as they were both involved in the Irish wars. When De Valera saw Frank he is quoted as saying, "Well Frank you got here before me". Frank sang a selection of songs to a tightly packed audience of 12,000. He always cherished this event as a happy occasion.

Frank returned to Ireland soon after. He had to see to his business, which was being run smoothly by his sons, and fix his affairs, so that he could return again to the U.S.A., later that year as it had been arranged for him to sing in Carnegie Hall in October.

1950 saw Frank busy with productions of the Dublin Operatic Society at the Olympia Theatre. Frank also continued travelling from Tallow to London and Scotland to do concerts. One such concert was in Paisley, Scotland in 1951. It was a St. Vincent De Paul concert and Frank sang with soprano Janette Sclanders, baritone Alex Carmicheal and was accompanied by Scotland's leading violinist Horace Fellowes. In the 1950's along with his involvement in the Dublin Operatic Society and the Fermoy Choral Society, Frank kept up his interests in the G.A.A., and other local organisations.

On 27th August, 1958 Frank left for Belgium with Mr. Staff Gabreurs. He visited Antwerp and sang in Tongerlo Monastery. He then went to Hasselt giving enjoyment to those who met him by singing some aria or just a traditional Irish Melody. On the 4th September, he went to Brussels where he sang on the Radio. He also visited Ostend before he left for home on Sunday the 7th September.

His next major tour was to Malta and Rome in 1963. He went on a holiday, again with his nephew-in-law Fr. John Beecher. In Malta he sang few concerts but made one big programme on radio to be played on St. Patrick's Day. From Malta they travelled to Rome. Here he sang in a University and also met Pope John XXIII. He went to Bologna where he recorded another radio programme. He sang his way back to Ireland in Venice, Munich, Vienna, and Brussels. He sang also on home-ground, in Cork, for Mass on his return.

Frank continued singing and running his family business in 1964. Also he was making plans for his final trip to America which was to come off in 1965. In March Frank set off for America with the Feis Ceoil Singers. They had many engagements in Boston, Chicago and other major cities. This tour was a great success and Frank made life long friends with the Derry singers and all of the Feis Cheoil company.

Frank returned to Ireland unaware of the fact that his days were numbered.

He did his last concert in Fermoy, his native town, two weeks before his death.

There was nothing spectacular about Frank Ryan's first visit to the United States in 1947. In fact, he was just one of the crowd who travelled to see the Kerry and Cavan football final in New York. On their arrival they received a warm reception. Frank was invited. It was a typical Irish-American reception; it had plenty of music, song and dance. Master of ceremonies was Judge Joe McDermot and there was a big welcome for the guest star of the night Jack Feeney, who sang a well chosen selection of songs old and new. Seated at the table among new-found friends sat Frank Ryan, unaware that one of his Kerry friends had passed a note to the M.C., requesting a song from the tenor from Waterford.

Frank was called upon and accompanied by the members of the New York Police Glee Choir he sang "Come back Paddy Reilly from Ballyjamesduff" which was a big success. It was over twenty minutes and several songs later that Frank left the stage. Sometime later he received a letter asking him if he could call to the City Hall to meet another Waterford man, Tramore born Jim O'Brien, one of the best known personalities of Irish-American affairs. Frank called and was asked to sing both American and Irish National Anthems at the reception for the teams which was being staged by Mayor O'Dwyer. Frank hesitated at first, not because he was not thrilled at the idea, but because he did not know the American National Anthem. Seamus O'Doherty and his wife Josephine Patricia Smith, a brilliant harpist, came to the rescue. Between them Frank mastered the American Anthem, and sang both songs well on the big occasion. All Ireland also heard him sing live, from the Polo Grounds via Radio Eireann.

That evening he had a call from the Commissioner of Police, Mike Nolan, who told him that Charles Laurie who was Musical Director of the New York Police Athletic League was very anxious to meet him. Frank met Mr. Laurie and he asked him to sing several songs. Some were difficult, some were easy but he sang them as Mr. Laurie requested. Mr. Laurie described the Irish Tenor as a new Caruso.

A day later, Frank met Mayor O'Dwyer in the City Hall and was asked to name his fee for singing the National Anthems at the Gaelic Football teams reception. He exclaimed, "I just could not see my way to ask for a fee for that, as a matter of fact I was proud to have been given the honour". From that day his name was honoured in the City Hall of New York.

His sudden illness brought enquiries from every quarter. The President of Ireland kept in touch personally by phone. On Saturday morning 7th July he died peacefully. Radio and television flashed the news at breakfast time. Ireland was shocked. It was unbelievable. He had never been sick in his life and was well known as the picture of health.

That morning he sent for his nurses, thanked them for all they had done, sang an aria from the opera Faust and died within minutes. He knew it was the end and was quite happy and prepared to go. The Dublin newspapers were on strike at the time, but the other papers, television and radio had his death as the main Irish news. A well known broadcaster and music critic had this to say,...what a voice he had, that completely unassuming, modest and so lovable a man, who following his Feis Ceoil success, went on to become one of Ireland's most Popular singers. Never can I forget the impact which that golden organ made on me when I first heard it. A world beater if ever there was one a voice fit to rank with those of the greatest tenors whom I heard during my opera and concert going experiences: Gigli, McCormack, Lauri-Volpi, Martinelli and Pertiler. Because he was to a large extent virtually untrained, Frank's singing naturally lacked the finer points of style. But the voice was so golden in quality, range and power to make one oblivious of the technical defects -defects, too, which were relatively slight; for Frank as a singer, was a "natural" for whom vocal difficulties which would have so sorely tried a fully trained singer did not seem to exist. His vocal range was, without the slightest doubt, phenomenal, as it did at least two-and-a-half octaves, with no loss of quality from top to bottom. Stories of what he could and did achieve in the production of the highest notes in the tenor register were innumerable. ...playing over the notes on the piano with one finger, he started to sing and wound up with a top D-natural -he had struck the wrong note on the piano but that meant nothing to him: a to D came as easy to him as a top C. Another occasion singing the role of Myles in "The Lily of Killarney" during the rescue scene by the lakeside, Frank was supposed to sing an E -the E above middle C. What happened?

In his excitement -for that was one of his first experiences of opera singing -Frank went up a full octave and banged out the E natural above top C! Frank achieved much and gave immense pleasure to many thousands of people by his singing in concerts, in opera, in churches, on the radio, television and on records. How much more he might have achieved if that wonderful voice of his one of the truly great voices of the century -had benefited from the long years of specialised training which Gigli, Martinelli etc, were given in early life.