

Drogheda's rich history of brass bands

Sean Collins, 18 May 2023



Drogheda Brass Band pictured on the steps of St. Peter's Church

Drogheda is home to two of the best brass bands in the Country, the Drogheda Brass Band and the Lourdes Brass Band. In his most recent article for Drogheda Life, Sean Collins tells us more about the proud history of these and the many other Drogheda bands that have entertained the people of the town.

Growing up in Drogheda in the 1960's, the first two bandsmen I was aware of were my neighbours Barry Cluskey and Christy Smith, both dressed smartly in the blue uniforms of the Drogheda Brass and Reed Band for St. Patrick's Day.

Both had joined the band in 1952, along with Christy Kennedy and Tony Wynne.

There are many families in Drogheda with associations with the bands, some now in their fourth and fifth generations. Names that spring to mind are: Donnelly, Kierans, Balfe, Cluskey, Maher, Rooney, O'Connor, Collins, Blacks, McCormack, Shortt, Smith, Curran, Nash, Carter, Murphy, Floody, even Michael Plunkett, my old school pal, and many more.

In the mid-19th Century, in Ireland, Britain and in the United States, the main exposure most people had to major musical works of the day was through performances by military or touring bands.

Brass bands were a response to industrialisation, which produced a large working class population with political reaction. Many of these bands were sponsored by fraternal, trade union and various industrial concerns.

An advert in the Drogheda Argus on the 28th July 1838 announced a public meeting at the Linen Hall to establish a Drogheda Amateur Band Society. Instruments had been sourced in Dublin and it was expected there would be a popular local response.



By 1843 The Drogheda Catholic Young Men's Society Band with the Drogheda Trades Banners under Marshall, Patrick Long, performed at O'Connell's great repeal meeting at Tara.

In 1865 the C.Y.M.S. Band were noted by the District Inspector of the R.I.C. for playing "treasonable airs" at a Fenian rally in the town.

A Home Rule meeting in the town in 1871, was ably entertained by the Drogheda Brass Band, who also performed at the Great Nationalist celebrations in Belfast in 1876.

At the funeral of Colonel Patrick Leonard, a local Fenian hero, it was noted in the Freeman's Journal, the Drogheda Quay-men's Brass Band led the cortege. A Labour Day parade in Drogheda in 1882 was headed by the Drogheda Volunteers Brass Band.

When the Freedom of the Borough was conferred on Charles Stewart Parnell M.P. in April 1884, seven brass bands performed and while Patrick Long marshalled the parade as he had done in Tara in 1843, there was no Drogheda band named.



At the Parnell Banquet that evening in the Whitworth Hall, the Drogheda String Band entertained, under the baton of Herr Rothe.

In 1886, the Gaelic Independent Band [1886-1892] was established and also the Colonel Leonard Fife and Drum Band was founded. A Volunteer Brass Band was also noted under the baton of the aptly named “Mozart” Kent.

In 1893 a band competition under the auspices of the Colonel Leonard Fife and Drum Band was held at the Whitworth Hall.

The Drogheda Trades Brass Band was established in 1896 by Thomas Mangan of James St., a former Mayor and outspoken Nationalist and, the Drogheda Argus noted, a long-time bandsman.

All the major public events of the next ten years were attended by the Trades Band and the Colonel Leonard including the unveiling of the John Boyle O’Reilly Memorial at Dowth. However, by 1906 the Trades Band was defunct and the Colonel Leonard Band was in decline.

There was a major push to revive the Colonel Leonard Band in 1907. The Leonard band was traditionally based in Mill Lane. In 1910 the Colonel Leonard Fife and Drum Band decided to divide, and in the same year the Drogheda Brass and Reed Band were formed in a premises in George’s Square.



At the Home Rule Celebrations in 1914, the parade included, the Drogheda Brass and Reed Band, the St. Mary's Pipers Band, and the Colonel Leonard Fife and Drum Band.

At the taking over of West Gate Barracks in 1922, the parade included the Owen Roe O'Neill Pipe Band, a new band for Drogheda.

By the mid-1930s, the Colonel Leonard Band had ceased to exist and the Drogheda Brass and Reed was described as the people's band. It was also interesting to note that the Brass and Reed Band with Secretary Frank Boyle organised the first Drogheda produced Pantomime in 1949, "Little Red Riding Hood".

In 1959 the town saw the establishment of the Lourdes Boys Band which was founded by Jack Reilly with the support of Fr. Kevin Connolly. The band was innovative with a new approach, encouraging female members in the 1970s with Majorettes and baton twirlers new features at Drogheda Parades.

Tommy McCormack, Anna Floody, Jim Brady, Frank Hanlon, Eugene Smith and Jim Lambe were constant supporters.

In 1964 the "Reed" was dropped from the name and the Drogheda Brass Band was thus titled. In more recent times we now have the Lourdes Brass Band.

Drogheda is now blessed with having two of the finest Brass Bands in Ireland, all stemming back somehow to that meeting in the Linen Hall in 1838. I'm delighted to say Barry Cluskey is still playing the brass even though Christy Smith is gone to his eternal reward.