

1955

I SEARCHED THE TOWN FOR GIRL SINGER

Until Sir Compton saved the day..

By FRANK DOUGLAS

For eight hours on Saturday I searched Scotland's Capital for a girl who has been the talk of the ninth Edinburgh International Festival.

No, she is not a member of the Glyndebourne Opera Company, nor the Danish Ballet Company, nor any other official company.

She was one of the "non-players" with the enthusiastic group of Irish students—the Dublin University Players, part of the "fringe," who ended a week's run at the Lauriston Hall on Saturday.

She sang Gaelic folk songs to the accompaniment of her own clarsach, between the plays.

Her name is Mary O'Hara. She is a tall, freckled-faced 20-year-old girl from Dublin.

I had heard about her in Glasgow. When I arrived in Edinburgh I was told of her beautiful voice by Fr Christie, S.J., Mr Fred McGuire (manager of the city's C.T.S.) and by colleague Charles Smith.

With these opinions in mind, I was determined to meet this girl before I returned to Glasgow. If it had not been for Sir Compton McKenzie, I would never have succeeded.

Now I'll tell you how it all came about.

On Saturday I was officially on holiday, but like several of the 360 journalists attending the Festival, it was a "busman's" holiday.

In the early hours of Saturday morning your columnist raised a heavy head from an ever-so-comfortable pillow at the ridiculous hour of 7.30 a.m. to catch the 8.43 a.m. train from Glasgow's Queen Street for Edinburgh.

Unusual voice

Being a stranger to Auld Reekie, I had my colleague, John Donaghue, to act as "Cook's man."

And to fill in the background I took along with me "City Tours," a booklet written by Page 4 "Notebook" columnist, Pat Gordon.

My first appointment in the Capital was at Lauriston Hall. Here I spoke with Fr Christie, S.J., who has just returned from a tour of northern Spain.



MARY WAS THE TALK OF THE FESTIVAL

He is the man who has done so much to bring Catholic companies to the "fringe" of the Festival. Last year, Fr Christie invited the Little Singers of the Wooden Cross from Paris to Edinburgh. They were an immediate success.

This year it was Fr Christie who invited the Glasgow Marian Players to present "The Marvellous History of St Bernard" which opens to-night.

I asked Fr Christie if he had heard Mary O'Hara, this young singer from Ireland. He had. She has something more than a soprano voice, said Fr Christie. But what it is he could not properly define.

From Lauriston I went on to the Palladium to look up Duncan Macrae, star of "The World's Wonder," now doing good business "on the fringe." But he was out.

From the Palladium I went for lunch which, like a Continental one, lasted nearly three hours.

I still hadn't seen Mary O'Hara, so straight after lunch I retraced my steps to Lauriston Hall. But I had just missed her.

A little birdie told me that the Edinburgh playwright and author, George Scott-Moncrieff, could give me a clue. . . . So I had a call put through to his apartment—once the house of James Boswell, biographer of Dr Johnson.

Neither was he in . . . and by now I was getting frustrated. I was chasing my tail.

But I put two-and-two together and decided that George Scott-Moncrieff might be with his fellow-author Sir Compton McKenzie.

So around seven o'clock John Donaghue and I drew up at Sir Compton's Drummond Place home.

The door was open. We were given a typical West Highland welcome.

Trained by nun

Ushered into the spacious Regency drawing-room, we were given a drink and introduced to a Glasgow doctor, now practising in North Berwick, his beautiful wife and two charming children.

While we were sipping our drinks and talking of holidays (the doctor and his family had just returned from Arran), Sir Compton's secretary put on two folk-song records by an Isle of Barra girl for Miss O'Hara, who was with Sir Compton and Mr Scott-Moncrieff in the adjoining room.

Shortly afterward Mr Moncrieff appeared with Mary. My search was at an end.

In Sir Compton's workroom (a picture which appeared in this paper some months ago), surrounded by booklined walls and precious antiques, I had an exclusive interview with Mary O'Hara.

Apologising for keeping us, Mary unfolded her life-story.

She was born in Sligo but has lived in Dublin for the last seven years.

Since early childhood she was seen on singing. Tutored by a Dominican nun in Dublin, Mary started to make appearances on the concert stage and Radio Eireann. At 16 she took up the harp and combined both.

Over the air she sings folk songs and modern numbers. And . . . she's a part-time mannequin as well.

For when she was on stage between the four W. B. Yeats plays in Edinburgh she sang in a restrained soprano voice.

The hat-trick

"I could not concentrate on both my voice and the harp at the same time," said Mary. "Hence the softness of my voice."

"I honestly didn't know that I had anything special in my voice. I am glad to hear that the people enjoyed the interludes."

Shortly before she reached Sir Compton's home she had recorded songs for the B.B.C. in their Edinburgh studios. She is to make another recording, both of which are to be broadcast.

With this recording she has completed a hat-trick in broadcasting. She has sung on Radio Eireann, on the South African radio, and now the B.B.C.

For Glaswegians who have missed Mary, there is a good possibility that she will be returning to us in October to give a concert.

Before we took our leave, Mary told me she was worried, as Sir Compton had asked her to sing for him.

"What with two shows a day, the last one starting at 11 p.m., my voice is tired," she said.

But I am sure Sir Compton understood.

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