

# THE COUNTY TYRONE SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

By James McElroy



The story of the County Tyrone Organization in New York City for the past 100 years is well documented from 1890-1955 through James McElroy's *Red Bricks and Green Bushes* (1955) and from 1956 to 1990 in detailed minutes of the Society activities on a month to month basis. The organization can truly claim that "weather" was one of the factors in its formation, since the Blizzard of March 11, 1888 caused the economic life of New York to come to a halt. It brought together many Tyrone people who in the next two years drafted plans for a "County Tyrone Club." On September 27, 1890 it was incorporated as the "County Tyrone Association." On May 5, 1938 the organization was amalgamated, bringing together the County Tyrone Association and the County Tyrone Young Men's Society, S.P.B.

The following is a reprint from Chapter 12 of McElroy's book. [The library of the Irish American Society of Nassau, Suffolk and Queens in Mineola has a copy of *Red Bricks and Green Bushes*.]

The continuously increasing cost of hiring a band, particularly a pipe band, for the St. Patrick's Day Parade, which had become almost traditional with the Association, focused attention on the frequently repeated suggestion that the Association sponsor its own band. This suggestion, intermittently advanced during 1931 and 1932, was pressed with vigor in 1933. The opposing argument of high initial cost and insufficient funds was partly nullified by the report of a substantial surplus in the treasury, while the opposition that was advanced on the grounds of maintenance costs was discredited by pointing out the large Memorial Fund that was raised during the worst depression years. Besides, the proponents were able to point to some younger organizations, with less resources, that had organized and were maintaining their own bands.

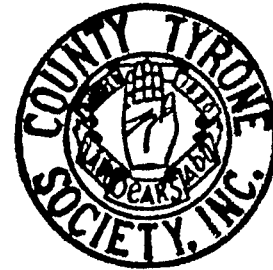
At the regular meeting held on September 16, 1933, a motion was proposed by John McGlade, and seconded by Thomas McSwiggan, that a committee be appointed to investigate and report on the approximate cost and advisability of organizing a pipe band under Association auspices. The motion was carried and the following committee was appointed: Thomas McSwiggan, Chairman, Bernard McIlvanny, Thomas Rogers, Patrick Meenan, John Hagan and John McGlade. A discussion developed as to whether the bagpipe or warpipe was traditionally a Celtic musical instrument. The committee thereupon procured the services of Henry O'Hagan, Counsellor, who headed an exhaustive research into the historical use and authentic antiquity of the Irish warpipe. Convincing evidence was discovered to indicate that the Cuisleanach, as the one-reed warpipe was known, held a position in martial and sports-field music equivalent to that of the Harp in the assembly hall. The warpipe was a favorite instrument of competition at the Ard-Feis of Tara where once the "Nine Pipers of Brega" (ancient province of Meath) won national distinction and renown. The Book of Armagh is said to contain references to the inspiring music of the Píob Mhór and a seventh century Celtic

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manuscript preserved in Trinity College, Dublin, contains similar references. The ancient instrument had one reed pipe only and a chanter. The representation of a piper on the North High Cross of Clonmacnois Abbey portrays a one reed pipe. Most Irish chieftains including the O'Neills and O'Donnells included pipers in their retinue. The Irish pipers were well known to Europe in the early and middle ages, and were regarded as the inspiration for the valor of Irish troops by leading them into actual battle with their stirring music.

At the November 1933 meeting the committee reported on the antiquity and authenticity of Irish warpipes and submitted an estimated cost of \$1,500 to equip and put a pipe band on the street. The committee was authorized to organize, equip and train a pipe band provided no appropriation over \$100 be made except by consent of two-thirds of the members and no appropriation to exceed one-third of the Association's funds. The equipment was to be the property of the Association and to remain in the custody of the officers.

The uniform adopted for the band was the traditional saffron kilt and plaid with doublet and vest, black cap with saffron tassel, black sporran of seal-skin, shoes with silver buckles, and green hose of special design. The uniforms and ornamentation were imported because of difficulty in procuring authentic colors and designs.



The well known John T. Sabiston, leader of the famous Lovat Pipe Band of New York, was engaged as instructor. On March 10, 1935, the Band made its debut in a broadcast over Radio Station WABD to which the association members in regular meeting were listening in. The long and arduous work of the committee and the members of the band was rewarded by the glow of pride and satisfaction with which the first offerings of the band were received. Laudatory letters poured into the radio station and to the Association. One week later the Tyrone Association proudly marched behind its own pipe band, for the first time, in the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

The band won second prize for pipe bands at the [United] Irish Counties Feis in 1935, the very year of its debut, and went on to capture first prize at the Feis in the years 1936, 1937 and 1938, and the Daily Mirror Championship Folk Festival Trophy in 1939. The band, under the careful guidance of Thomas McSwiggan as Pipe Major, has continued its championship stride through the years. It has long been famous in musical circles for its superb Decca Record recordings of Irish patriotic and sentimental marches, airs and melodies.

It will be of interest and may even cause some surprise to learn that reference to the Tyrone Pipe Band appears in the Congressional Record. The circumstances attending this event are so closely associated with the Tyrone Association as to merit record-



Pipe Band of the County Tyrone Society

ing the following pertinent excerpts from the remarks of the Hon. Martin J. Kennedy of New York in the House of Representatives on Thursday, May 7, 1936, in connection with the Centenary Celebration of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America:

*"Mr. Speaker, by your permission speaking for the Congressional Record:*

*"The founding of the First Chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America in 1836, and the memory of its members who defended old St. Patrick's Church against Know-Nothing mobs in 1844, was commemorated in the City of New York on May 3rd, 1936.*

*"Twenty-five hundred persons attended Divine Services in the Cathedral where Cardinal Hayes presided. . . Every state in the Union was represented in the march from St. James' Church to old St. Patrick's Cathedral. . . Ten thousand persons lined the route of march. . . A mounted police escort was followed by the famous Green and Tan costumed County Tyrone Pipers Band. . . A bronze tablet commemorating the founding of the Order in May, 1836, was erected at St. James' and another tablet was erected in St. Patrick's. John J. Sheehan, Chairman of the St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee, in an inspiring talk stated that religion and patriotism were inextricably joined throughout Ireland's history. . ."*

We have already noted that President Niblo was reelected for six successive years, through 1937. The highlights of his long and successful administration were the liquidation of the Carrickmore Memorial project; the procurement of the Association's first two-pole banner, and the organization of a pipe band under Association auspices. These were all costly projects undertaken during an era of national economic depression, thus necessitating courage, determination and boundless faith. The principal supporting officers of the President during this period were John Hagan, Vice President; Patrick Meenan, Treasurer; James

McCullagh, Recording Secretary; Peter Rogers, Corresponding Secretary, and Peter McSwiggan, Financial Secretary.

In addition to the numerous fund-raising events necessary to finance the undertakings described, many other activities of lesser involvement made for a full-time program. Among these was active participation by the Association in an American citizenship program sponsored by the United Irish Counties Association for young Irish boys and girls, necessitated by a general tightening-up of the naturalization laws.

Numerous appeals for financial aid were received during the early thirties from various public and private charities due to the continuing depression, practically all of which found prompt and sympathetic response from the Association.

An outstanding social event was the visit by His Eminence, Cardinal MacRory, Primate of Ireland, in February, 1935. A committee of five represented the Association on the General Committee of Welcome, and later at the public reception.

An outstanding anti-social event was the presentation in February 1937 of a motion picture titled, "The Plough and the Stars," an adaptation from a scurrilous play of the same title caricaturing the Irish people. The Association strongly protested the presentation and picketed the offending theatre. The presentation proved a box office disappointment.

In 1937 the Association made a departure from the customary routine ceremony in deciding to make the installation of officers an occasion of celebration and good will more in keeping with the significance of the event and the traditional hospitality of Tyrone. The January meeting, therefore, was designated a social meeting for the installation exercises and numerous guests were invited by President-Elect Niblo, including Joseph F. McLoughlin, President of the United Irish Counties Association (as Installation Officer); John Walsh, County President, Ancient Order of Hibernians, and John Sheehan, Chairman of the St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee. Following an appropriately

ceremonious installation, the members were regaled by informative and inspirational talks by each of the guests. Processional and recessional music by the pipe band added an ancient traditional touch to the occasion.

Peter McSwiggan, who had served several terms as Financial Secretary, and as Vice President during the year 1937, was elected as fifteenth President of the Association for 1938. The following board of officers were his elected aides: James McCullagh, Vice President; Harry Hagan, Treasurer; Michael Bradly, Corresponding Secretary; Thomas McBride, Recording Secretary; Bernard McIlvanny, Financial Secretary; John Doris, Sergeant-at-Arms, and Thomas Rogers, Trustee. The installation exercises were conducted according to the pattern of the previous year at the next regular meeting following election.

The new president found himself fully occupied with Association problems from the moment of his election. When elected President, he was already Chairman of a Journal Committee in connection with the Annual Ball, an assignment necessitating time, effort and patience. At that time also an organized series of protests and petitions were being instituted by the various County and other Irish organizations against the brutality and discrimination being practiced by the Ulster six county government. Most important of all, a division of long standing existed in the ranks of the people of Tyrone in New York, resulting from the existence of two separate organizations with identical aspirations and objectives. The situation thus created, while it undoubtedly had merit in developing a healthy competitive spirit, in the final analysis was detrimental to both groups.

For some fifteen years or more prior to 1938 an organization known as The Tyrone Young Men existed in the city, but information as to its officers or activities are not available to this writer. It appears its activities, while never vibrant, were entirely dormant about 1931 when another group of active and progressive young Tyrone men, imbued with a spirit of ambition, proceeded to establish an independent Tyrone organization which they named "The County Tyrone Young Men's S. P. and B. Society, Inc." This society, while organized in 1931, was incorporated in accordance with the Membership Corporation Law on February 25, 1933 (Document No. 3033, County Clerk's Office, New York County). The Board of Directors for incorporation were: Hugh McCann, Patrick McDermott, Patrick Gillen, James Kelly and David Morris. The County Tyrone Young Men's Society established a record of social, cultural and patriotic activity in a short period of time that is not excelled, if equalled, by any other Irish organization in the city.

Their club rooms were located in the Imperial Lyceum where the Society conducted regular monthly meetings, and special meetings when the urgency of business necessitated, which was frequent.

In addition to an annual ball, the Society conducted an Annual New Year's Eve Ball, which was an unique event in Irish social circles. An annual St. Patrick's Night Dance was held in the spacious Park Palace and was well patronized by the younger set from Tyrone and many other counties. Another unusual feature of the social activities was an annual "Moonlight Sail" up the Hudson, with Irish and American dance music and stage entertainment.

The Society organized, trained and equipped a fife and drum band of twenty pieces, nattily dressed in a military cut green uniform with garrison cap. The band, under the control and supervision of Director Thomas Conlin and later of Director Patrick McLoughlin and Drum Major Joseph McGurk, gave the Tyrone

Young Men a note of presence and distinction when on parade.

The energetic young Society was quick to avail itself of an opportunity to obtain one of the most beautiful banners ever to adorn and glorify the St. Patrick Day Parade. This unusual creation (actually made for artistic display by Irish artists) was procured by Thomas Conlin, an active member and a leader of the Fife and Drum Band, who made it available to the Society.

The banner has a surface 6 feet 5 inches by 7 feet 3 inches. On the front is a 3 foot picture of St. Patrick dressed in episcopal robes and mitre, standing on a rocky shore-line of Ireland. In his right hand he holds the shepherd's crozier with which he is crushing the head of a serpent, symbolic of his driving out the snakes. Underneath is the motto "Faith and Fatherland." On the reverse side is a battlefield scene depicting Chieftain Hugh O'Neill mounted on a black charger, engaged in deadly combat with the British General James Segrave on a white charger, commemorating the deadly duel at Clontibert, Co. Monaghan, June 6, 1597, when O'Neill intercepted and later destroyed the British forces retreating from the garrison post of Monaghan whereupon the two Generals settled their grievances personally with both armies as spectators. The picture inscription summarizes the result thus:

*"O'Neill's broken sword the battle soon ended and  
Segrave a corpse on the field he extended."*

The pictures on each side of the banner are surrounded with garlands of shamrocks, to an extent of seven inches, done in silver on an emerald green background. The County Tyrone identifying legend appears in 3 inch gold letters at the top of each surface.

The County Tyrone Young Men could neither be overlooked nor underestimated, in any parade, as they proudly stepped to the music of their band in the wake of their spectacular new banner.

In addition to the names of those who appear in the articles of incorporation, the following were among the more active and energetic leading officers of the Society: William Cox, Edward McKenna, Thomas Conlin, Patrick Quinn, Daniel O'Neill, Patrick McLoughlin, Peter McCullagh, Patrick McConville, Frank McGeough, James McCusker, Michael Morris, John Kelly, and the Chaplain, the late Rev. Francis J. Holland.

From time to time suggestions were made that both Tyrone societies should amalgamate and form one group. While there was no serious opposition to these suggestions, and a committee to that end had been appointed, little or nothing was done to bring about such desirable unity.

President McSwiggan, upon being initiated, notwithstanding the many other urgent Association matters, set about instituting preliminary steps designed to bring about consolidation. At the February meeting he reported that with Harry Hagan he had conferred with President Patrick Gillen and Patrick Quinn of the Tyrone Young Men's Society on the subject and that it was agreed to submit the matter to the respective organizations.

Upon the adoption of a motion by John Hagan, a committee was appointed to meet with representatives of the Tyrone Young Men's Society to discuss consolidation.

As a result, on February 27, 1938, a special meeting of each organization was held in the Central Opera House and motions to consolidate were unanimously adopted by each group.

The representatives of each group who negotiated this agreement are as follows:

For the County Tyrone Young Men's Society  
Patrick Gillen, President;  
Edward McKenna, Secretary;



*County Tyrone Society Band*

Peter McCullagh,  
Henry Conway,  
John Kelly,  
Patrick Quinn.

For the County Tyrone Association:

Peter McSwiggan, President;  
Thomas McBride, Secretary;  
James McCullagh,  
Harry Hagan,  
John Niblo.

It was also unanimously agreed by each group that the name of the newly consolidated organization be "The County Tyrone Society." It was further agreed that both organizations parade together on the succeeding St. Patrick's Day.

Therefore, on March 17, 1938, the County Tyrone Societies, parading with full membership, together with their two bands and two banners, gave a demonstration of unity and strength that was a stimulus to pride and enthusiasm among the members and caused favorable comment generally.

Representative Irish leaders, journalists, editors and officers of various Irish organizations referred in glowing terms to the leadership and statesmanship displayed by the leaders of the Tyrone organizations in subordinating all personal opinions and considerations in the interest of harmony and the good of the Tyrone organization.

Formal authorization for consolidation was given by each group on April 21, 1938. The consolidation papers for incorporation as one society were signed for the County Tyrone Association by Peter McSwiggan, President, and Thomas McBride, Secretary, and for the Tyrone Young Men's Society by Patrick Gillen, President, and Edward McKenna, Secretary. Consolidation as "The County Tyrone Society," was approved by Supreme Court Judge Cotillo, May 5, 1938.

The following were elected to office in the new County Tyrone Society for the balance of the year 1938:

Harry Hagan, President  
Daniel O'Neill, Vice President  
Peter McSwiggan, Treasurer  
Thomas McBride, Financial Secretary  
Edward McKenna, Recording Secretary  
Owen Harren, Corresponding Secretary  
John Doris, Sergeant-at-Arms  
Henry Conway, Trustee  
Thomas Rogers, Trustee  
Frank Keenan, Trustee

Thus culminating one of the most portentous and happy episodes in the history of the social life of the people of Tyrone. As one of the officers responsible put it, "Amalgamation brought together a respected, vibrant, forward looking organization that gave Tyrone the nucleus of one of the most powerful county organizations in New York."