

Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore was born on 25 December 1829, and as he himself once put it, "I was sort of a Christmas gift to my parents." The young Gilmore was destined to be much more than a gift to his parents however; he would from his early days spent at Ballygar, Co. Galway show a special musical talent. After being placed in Athlone as an apprentice, he developed a bigger interest in the study of musical instruments. He learned to play several and quickly joined the Athlone Band. His career as a band member, and then as a bandmaster, was launched. At eighteen he left Ireland for Boston where he immediately undertook the direction of several bands. In a short time he was earning one thousand dollars a year as the head of the Salem Band, but returned to Boston in 1858 to form the famous Gilmore Band.

At the outbreak of the American Civil War, he volunteered his services as an army bandmaster. He played not only for his own Union Army men, but also in the evening near the front line so both sides could benefit from his music. He played the *Star Spangled Banner* and *Dixie* as well, in the spirit of reconciliation which he knew would eventually come. After the war ended he returned to Boston where he undertook the staging of giant concerts at which as many as 30,000 singers and a 600-piece band entertained audiences of more than 120,000.

His fame ultimately brought him in 1873 to New York, the center of the American entertainment industry. There he directed the sixty-five piece band of the 22nd Regiment, New York National Guard. It was this band, under Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore, that provided the music on the occasion of the dedication of the Statue of Liberty on 28 October 1886. Later, he began a long run at "the handsomest seaside resort in the world," Manhattan Beach near Coney Island in Brooklyn in 1880 and continued his engagement there every summer until his death in 1892. The Manhattan Beach concerts were great crowd pleasers for he presented a varied selection of music. When his close friend Patrick Ford, publisher of the *Irish World*, would arrive, Gilmore would play the

Wearing of the Green or some other Irish tune. Gilmore's novelist daughter, Mary Louise, occasionally wrote articles for Ford's popular Irish weekly newspaper.

Gilmore was much in demand all over the United States and Europe and he often traveled far from his Manhattan brownstone at 61 West 12th Street. Although his band was not strictly speaking an Irish band, he played for Irish nationalist demonstrations from time to time. At Madison Square Garden in 1887 he played for a massive salute to the Irish land reformer Michael Davitt on his departure for Europe. An "Irish Night" was held at Madison Square Garden in June, 1891. Gilmore gave the melodies and airs an added Irish dimension by including the noted bass Edward O'Mahoney as one of his four performing soloists. Like many bandmasters Irish and non-Irish alike, he had a fondness for the songs of Thomas Moore. A convinced Irish nationalist, Gilmore featured a composition of his own entitled "Ireland to England," a march in which he set to music his own feelings about the "hereditary foe, the Sassenach."

In addition to playing the classical airs of

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Illustration: Gilmore as the leader of the 22nd Regiment Band of the New York National Guard, a sixty-five piece brass ensemble. *The Irish World*, 1 October 1892. Courtesy of J. T. Ridge.



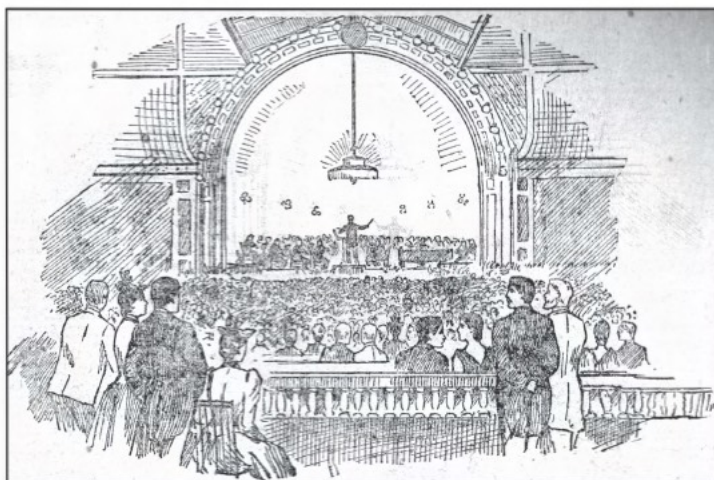
German and Italian masters he composed many of his own musical numbers. Gilmore's *Hail Columbia* was the piece he played every New Year's Eve at New York's City Hall before a crowd of thousands gathered to celebrate the passing of the old year. *When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again* (written in 1863) remains one of Gilmore's best-remembered compositions. He was widely known to his admiring public as "the Prince of Bandmasters." When he passed away suddenly from a heart attack at the St. Louis Exposition on 24 September 1892, he was at the height of his career and had just been selected to play at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893. His death created a vacuum which was filled by another great bandmaster whose memory is far fresher than "Gilmore the Great." His replacement at the 1893 musical season at Manhattan

Beach was none other than John Phillip Sousa and it is Sousa whose name today has become synonymous with march music and the brass band. The way, however, had already been prepared as the *New York Evening World* prophetically editorialized following Gilmore's death:

Where is Another Gilmore?

In the death of Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore the general public has had inflicted upon it a loss of which it is hard to take the full measure. This, because of the unique and singularly distinguished position held by the man who had passed away. It is not enough to say that he was the most popular bandmaster that the country has known. Gilmore created and held for himself a position in the public heart to which, at this time, it seems impossible that any other leader, even should he be as great in a musical sense as the one now lost, can ever succeed.

The public loved Gilmore. And now Gilmore is gone. Where is one to take up the baton where he has left it?



Illustrations: Gilmore conducting Voyage of Columbus from manuscript at the Jubilee Concert, Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn. The Irish World, 3 September 1892. Both courtesy of J. T. Ridge.

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