

Address given by Billy Adair to the Ulster Society of Organists and Choirmasters at Queen's Parade Methodist Church, Bangor Co Down, 15th November 2003. There were over 75 members and friends in attendance

'An Octogenarian Organist looks back'

This little talk will fall into four parts:

1. Autobiography
2. Captain C J Brennan OBE
3. The Church and the Clergy
4. The Ulster Society of Organists and Choirmasters

The 16th of February 1921 is unquestionably the most important day in my life, for that was the day I was born, in the Belfast home of my paternal Grandmother, one of the formidable Barr family of Dromore, Co Down.

On looking at me for the first time, her advice to my Mother was: 'Look after him well dear, for you won't have him long.' That was in 1921!

Four years later my brother Sinclair was born. We had loving, sensible parents and a happy childhood in North West Belfast: then the 'hungry 30s' came along.

Only those of us who lived through those times can have any conception of what depression and unemployment on a national scale meant to the average family - and it hit the middle class as well as the working class. When fathers just couldn't find a job, mothers **had** to work to feed the family. Then, it was not a fashion for women to have a career but a necessity, and my Mum was no exception. Money was scarce, and we grew up to appreciate small pleasures – jelly and tinned fruit was a luxury, and a chicken for Sunday lunch meant a celebration. One Bishop whose father was a country Rector, told me that whilst he and his sister were at boarding school, his parents could afford little more than porridge, potatoes and vegetables. Meat only appeared when the children were at home in the holidays.

In those days (and recollect I'm talking now of over 70 years ago) nothing was handed to you on a plate; there was no such thing as a free lunch. You paid for what you got, and that included higher education. My parents had sacrificed enough, and so at 16 I entered the world of business by necessity, instead of the world of *academia* which would have been my choice.

I spent all my working life in the Textile world: in the much respected firm of William Ewart & Son Ltd, which employed in excess of 2,500 people. There were few millionaires in the Textiles business, but then, the annual stipend of a Rector was £525 and a Curate £270. The salary of a successful businessman was around £500 - £600 per annum and if ever one reached the magic figure of £1000 per year, one had made it.

When I reached £1000 a year, I became engaged and Dorothy and I are still together after 48 years – and, at the same address! We reared our family there – Stephen who is 45, and despite his Autism took an Honours Degree in Political & Social Science, and Gill who spent four years at the Royal Academy in London, a further year at the University of Ulster, and is happily married to Ray. She is now Head of Music at Dundonald High School. They have two lovely children, Aaron and Helen.

Musically, two events are engraved on my mind. The first was when I was only months old. I had been bathed and was ready for bed, and I was on my Mother's knee in front of a blazing coal fire. She began singing softly and slowly a little gypsy song and I cried and cried. It was a sad melody: the music affected me, and although that was 82 years ago I still remember it vividly. Had I a voice, I'd sing you the melody.

My next musical experience was on a Saturday evening in 1936, when I would have been 15. A fortnight's Youth Campaign for the Down Connor and Dromore Diocese had been going on every evening in the YMCA Hall, Wellington Place, and this was the climax -- a great Thanksgiving Service in Belfast Cathedral. Brought up as a Presbyterian, I had never been to the Cathedral before and I was deeply impressed – the vastness, the crowds, the choir, the music, and particularly the organ playing of Captain C J Brennan. He was in his hey-day then!

The Processional hymn was 'Holy, Holy, Holy' and in my mind I questioned the appropriateness of this choice – 'early in the morning' at an evening service – but when it began I was completely bowled over, especially when CJ added the Swell mixtures at 'the glassy sea'. It was magic! Then his Psalm accompaniment – I'd never heard the organ played like that, and I came away determined that one day (please God) I'd be a Church organist, inspired by Captain Brennan.

In the late 1930s Arthur Martin was a well known singing teacher, specialising in boys' voices and he was organist of the Shankill Road Mission, an impressive semi-circular hall with a coloured glass dome, a stunning acoustic and which housed a 2 manual free standing Binns organ. I helped Arthur with his large junior choir and eventually he appointed me his Assistant Organist – salary, nil! -- but I had permission to practise on the organ and believe me, I did – 8.00am before going to the office and frequently also after 10.00pm.

The next year when I was 16, I had my first Church appointment to St Michael's just opposite the Shankill Road Mission and at the princely salary of £40 per annum. Then, St Michael's must have been the ugliest Church in Christendom, with a two manual hand blown organ (the original from Bangor Abbey) in the North Aisle and the choir in a semicircular box in front of it.

This was truly a Low Church Parish – the Choir was unrobed, and the clergy were forbidden to wear a cassock – surplice only, which looked more than ridiculous. The four part choir was keen, so was I, and I stayed there three years and enjoyed every minute.

This is where Captain C J Brennan comes in. Up until then I had no formal organ lessons, so I asked my friend Sydney Gaukroger, the Librarian at Belfast Cathedral, to arrange a meeting with Captain Brennan. This was to take place after Sunday Evensong in the Cathedral and I was terrified. When the great man appeared the first thing I noticed was that he had cut himself shaving and there was a spot of blood on his white collar. He was human after all!

So began my lessons with Captain Brennan – first organ, then harmony, counterpoint & composition, singing, piano and choir training. I now had a choir of my own, so to help me he suggested that I attend the Cathedral practices on Wednesday evenings, something I did for years. In winter it was jolly cold! Later I became his Assistant Conductor of the Ulster Male Voice Choir.

C J Brennan OBE MA BMus FRCO LRAM was a man of many parts:

Cathedral Organist

City Organist

Organist of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Ireland

Conductor of the Ulster Operatic Society

Conductor of the Ulster Male Voice Choir

Lecturer in Music at Queen's University of Belfast (for many years he **was** the Department of Music at QUB, until they created a Chair for Ivor Keys)

Adjudicator at Music Festivals

External Examiner – on one occasion with Sir Edward Bairstow

President of the Society of Professional Musicians

President of the Ulster Society of Organists and Choirmasters

The Captain always looked the part – small, rotund, neat and dapper. In summer, always with his yellow chamois gloves, in winter with a heavy great coat and immaculate grey spats. He didn't encourage jokers, but had his own particular sense of caustic humour which the following stories illustrate.

The first occurred at a Wednesday evening practice in the Cathedral. C J's method of practice was to have everything unaccompanied, but if the work had a set accompaniment he would go through it again with the organ. They had just sung the big Stanford Anthem, 'The Lord of Might' and were about to repeat it with organ when the Dean walked in – Dean Kerr, later Bishop of Down. The choir were doing nothing, so he began talking to the ladies, who presumably were making some Communion Linens. He discussed this little motif, and that little motif and by this time the Captain had dog-eared every page of the anthem and was ready to begin. But the Dean went on. Quite exasperated, C J bounced off the organ stool: 'Mr Dean, am I supposed to be conducting a choir practice, or are you conducting an embroidery class?'. Without even looking round, the Dean disappeared.

Then a new Dean arrived – Dean Elliott from Down Cathedral. He quietly introduced a couple of hymns at the early Communions on Easter Day and on Christmas Day, and the Captain didn't like it. He referred to these innovations as 'the Dean and his countrified ideas'. It was approaching Christmastide, the BBC were broadcasting the Carol Service for the first time, and the preparations were under way. The Vicar Choral, John Nolan, came to the Captain with a message from the Dean, signifying that he was unhappy with a boy reading the first lesson – the Genesis one.

‘And why not, John?’ asked the Captain. ‘He thinks it inappropriate for a boy to read this particular lesson, sir.’ (He meant about Adam and Eve prancing around the Garden of Eden in their birthday suits). ‘John’, said the Captain, ‘tell the Dean from me, that I am quite prepared to sit Sunday by Sunday listening to his platitudes from the pulpit, but when he asks me to put them into practice, I draw the line.’ The boy read the lesson!

The final story concerns the Ulster Male Voice Choir, which met for practice on Monday evenings in Great Victoria Street Presbyterian Church Hall – a sort of ‘singing for pleasure’ exercise. This particular evening had been taken up entirely with two works by Elgar. Elgar wasn’t exactly popular with the choir and his music even less so; consequently, at the end of the practice one man had the courage to voice his opinion. ‘Sir’, said he, ‘we have spent the entire evening on stuff that you like, now before we go, could we sing something **we** like?’ The Captain straightened himself, ‘And what do **you** like Jimmy?’ ‘What about *Oft in the Stilly night*, sir?’. ‘Right, stand up and we’ll have *Oft in the Stilly night*’. This was more like the music the choir liked, and the first verse went really well. Then came the second verse; ‘*When I remember all the friends so linked together, I’ve seen around me fall like leaves in wintry weather, I feel like one who treads alone*’. But, they broke the phrase and sang: ‘*I feel like one (breath) who treads alone*.’ C J stopped them abruptly. ‘You feel like one? I feel like one myself’, and off he went home.

Charles John Brennan was a school teacher, who came over from England to take up an appointment in Strabane Parish Church: then to Elmwood Presbyterian Church which he left after a short time to become organist of St Anne’s Parish Church, which later became St Anne’s Cathedral. He was twenty eight when appointed and eighty eight when he retired – just think of it, 60 years’ devoted service. I am so glad to have heard him, and worked with him in his hey-day. Some of you who only knew him as an old man never really knew him or his worth.

When the BBC was setting up in Belfast, a high-powered deputation from London called on him and offered him the post of Head of Music, BBC Northern Ireland. Naturally he was interested, providing he would be free on Sundays for the Cathedral. This they could not guarantee, so he declined the post. They returned next day hoping to persuade him, but no, for him it was Cathedral and BBC, not the other way around. They were here to make an appointment, so he advised them to go to Holywood and interview Godfrey Brown, Conductor of the Philharmonic Society. That was how Godfrey Brown got the job at the BBC.

When I was getting £120 per annum at St John’s Malone, he was being paid £250 at the Cathedral. When I moved to Lisburn Cathedral at £250 per annum, he had gone up to £400 per annum. He did it for love, not money.

Now back to myself.

After three happy years at St Michael’s (at £40 pa), I had three years at St Patrick’s, Jordanstown (at £60pa), and fourteen years at St John’s, Malone (at £120pa). Malone entailed three services each Sunday – 11am Matins, 12 o’clock Sung Eucharist, 6pm Evensong, which was followed by a said Litany. The choir consisted of men and boys only – hard work as I was constantly competing with Boarding Schools.

Then came a big change, Lisburn Cathedral and back to women and men. It meant an anthem and a setting at all services. The organ console was in the east end, near the choir – actually in the Dean's family pew on the south side. My predecessor Harry Taggart said that when he looked back down the Cathedral from the organ stool he couldn't make up his mind whether he was playing the organ or driving a bus! All I will say is that I felt the change acutely, as did the family, and after three years I was persuaded to move to our home parish of St Mark, Dundela.

This time, boys women and men, and a hard act to follow- Alan Angus FRCO. Alan was Music Master at Campbell College and aimed at having a College Choir of men and boys in the Parish Church. But a few of the ladies stayed on, and these he entirely ignored. My brief was to re-instate a service in which the congregation would be encouraged to participate. Much work had been put into the choir, (Alan had a boys' practice every single day), yet the Rector summed up this period as 'five most unhappy years'. It is seldom a happy situation when music ceases to be the handmaiden of the Church, takes over and ignores the worshipper. St Mark's is only one such instance.

After three very busy years at St Mark's (two practices and three services per week), because of business pressures I had to resign, but was persuaded to still play the 10am service – a congregational effort led by an unrobed choir of ladies only. This was by far the best attended service of the day. I played this service for the next fifteen years until the numbers dropped from 250 to 50 at the formal 11am service and it was decided to hold one morning service only and at the compromise time of 10.30am. I was redundant, but anything but idle.

For the next number of years I acted in a temporary capacity at St Polycarp's, St Stephen's, St Luke's, St Mary's, Immanuel and again at Lisburn Cathedral. In all, over the years I have played in 81 Churches – some of these spells were a 'one-off', a wedding or a funeral, others lasted a few weeks or months, others were over a year. I spent two spells of over a year at St Mary's and enjoyed them.

I retired from business in 1986 and went to play for the month of April in St James' which had just lost Timothy Wilson to St Mark's, Dundela. The service was a Sung Eucharist (Harwood in Ab) and afterwards I went to thank the choir, but there they were in force, to petition me to be their organist. Although I hadn't applied, I agreed and am still there after 17 years.

St James' is a Parish with listed buildings, a roll of impressive Rectors and Organists, a fine musical tradition, a Church with a superb acoustic, one of the finest three manual Parish Church organs in the Province, a small and devoted choir of four sopranos, one alto, one tenor and two basses, with no financial problems whatever and on the decline. In five years time the Parish will officially close, and for the want of people, not money.

Now the Church and the Clergy.

In those early years it was the Presbyterians and Methodists which produced the finest preachers. Dr Hanna, Dr Wylie Blue, Dr Henry Montgomery, W G Wimpriss, Dr Douglas Frazer-Hurst, Professor R J Wilson, Professor John Barclay, and Jack Withers to mention a few. They could attract large congregations and some were impressive figures in the pulpit, especially Dr Wylie Blue with his rugged features, shock of long white hair, and rumbling Welsh bass voice. I recall him leaning over the pulpit in the Shankill Road Mission with his hands spread out and announcing his text: 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'.

The Church of Ireland perhaps laid emphasis on scholarship – Archbishop Gregg, Archbishop Sims, Dr W R Breen, Dr J C Coombe, Dr Gilbert Wilson, Dr Michael Dewar, all experts and writers in their own particular field, but none would have been ranked as outstanding preachers.

In those early days a Canon wore a black rosette on the band of his hat. Few bothered to change from scarf to stole for the Sacraments. In several Parishes, St Michael's, St Clement's, and Willowfield, the clergy were not allowed to wear a cassock – surplice only. Nor did the people stand at the entry of the clergy – not even for the Bishop!

We **have** come on!

Also in those days Bishops **were** Bishops, and addressed by one and all as 'My Lord', or 'Your Grace'. It amuses me to hear even junior clergy address the Bishop by Christian name. **Then** Bishops dressed as Bishops – frock coat, apron, gaiters and flat black hat with ribbons attached – but no pectoral cross! They were autocrats and exercised their authority, and often had their clergy almost cowed. At one time a Curate couldn't get married without his Bishop's permission. And that authority extended to Belief and Practice. The Rev Mr Seaver, a Modernist in Theology and Rector of St John's Malone: Fred Colquoun of St John's Sandymount : and in our own time the Very Reverend Andrew Furlong, Dean of Clonmacnoise were all before the Ecclesiastical Court on trial. Also All Saints, Grangegorman and St Bart's, Clyde Road, Dublin were dragged through the Courts for breaking or bending the Canons.

Archbishop Gregg (the spitting image of DeValera) ruled the Church with an iron rod, yet in his biography he tells a lovely story against himself. He was on a Parish visitation which meant an overnight stay at the Rectory, to which the Rectory folk were not looking forward. Anyhow, all went well, and after breakfasting the Archbishop was waiting for the chauffeur to bring the car to the front door when the Rector's wife came along accompanied by her four year old daughter. 'Your Grace', said she, 'before you leave would you mind signing our visitors' book?' He agreed, pulled out his pen and was about to write when a little voice piped up: 'And don't you scribble in that book'!

In the Diocese of Down Connor and Dromore we had the no-nonsense Bishop Charles King-Irwin. Edgar Turner told me he was with the Bishop and overheard the shortest telephone conversation ever. The 'phone rang and the Bishop lifted the receiver. The conversation was 'Yes', 'No', and the receiver was banged down.

Over the years I have worked with many different kinds of clergy - some were wise, some were otherwise. One showed me what the inside of a pub was like. Another introduced me to the cigar. Another got us our very first second hand TV set. Another encouraged my study of Plainsong. Another fostered my love of reading. Another converted me to all in wrestling! Some had the reputation of being difficult or impossible to work with – R N Ruttle, Gilbert Wilson, F H P L'Estrange. I took them on: I'm still here, they're gone. Over those sixty six years I only ever had one serious row. That Rector only stayed a year in the Parish and then moved up to bigger things.

Of the thirty six or so clergy I've worked with over the years, one stands out in a class by himself – Canon F H P L'Estrange of St John's Malone. He was a solid High Churchman and sixty years ago that was a courageous stand to take in the Church of Ireland. He was an Irish Nationalist at heart, and Catholic to the core. Malone had High Church standards. At certain services a Cross and candles would appear on the Altar. He had servers at the Eucharist. He said Matins and Evensong daily in the Parish Church, though strangely not a daily Eucharist. He heard Confessions. In the most inconspicuous way he practised Spiritual Healing with Anointing. I admired and respected Frederick Herbert Paget L'Estrange more than any other priest I have worked with. R.I.P.

Now our Society – The Ulster Society of Organists and Choirmasters.

USOC was formed in 1918 and its first President was Dr Lawrence Walker of St James' Parish. Within months Dr Walker died and Captain C J Brennan, just back from the war, was elected President, a position he held until his retirement when he was succeeded by Bertie Megraw. At first the Society met in a room in the Assembly Buildings, but soon moved to the Merrythought Café in Donegall Place (later in Wellington Place) and eventually to the Presbyterian Hostel in Howard Street.

Meetings were much less frequent than now – probably, not more than five or six per year, one of which was an 'out-of-town' meeting – that is, we went to Bangor, Portadown or Coleraine, and once ventured as far as Dundalk! One trip was to Armagh Church of Ireland Cathedral where Dr Enid Chaundy gave a splendid recital of music unrecognised by anyone. Afterwards the good Doctor revealed that he had improvised the entire programme.

Much later we formed a liaison with the Leinster Society in the South – one year we met in Dublin, the next in Belfast. These joint meetings terminated quite a few years ago when the Leinster Society became extinct.

In those early days meetings were very formal – top table with the President in the centre and secretary and treasurer on either side. The minutes of the previous meeting were read and passed, new members were proposed and accepted, and other business matters were attended to. The content was largely educational – someone read a paper on an appropriate subject and there followed a discussion, often lively and sometimes prolonged. I recall one discussion which required a second meeting to conclude it.

These papers were given by members of the Society, but an occasional expert was brought in: Dr Douglas Frazer-Hurst on the Poetry of the Metrical Psalms: Canon Graham Craig on Singing: Tony Lucy on Acoustics: Rev Moore Wasson on Religious Broadcasting: William Young on piano pedalling: the Rev Professor John Barclay on the New Presbyterian Hymn Book: also the Rev Professor Northridge and Dr Havelock Nelson, among many others.

Once they took a risk and asked four young members to read papers – Leslie McCarrison, Dundas Hill, Jim Bates and me. ‘I only am left’! My subject was ‘My Ideal Small Organ’ and I can remember only one phrase from it: ‘As Shakespeare very nearly said: *Neither a borrower nor extender be*’.-

In June each year we had the Annual Recital in Belfast Cathedral. This involved young players as well as the more experienced, and it was always begun and ended with one of the ‘big guns’ – Captain Brennan, Dr Emery, Dr Chaundy, Jack McKeown, Fred Carter, or Fred Gyll. This event always attracted a considerable audience and a collection went to the Organists’ Benevolent Fund.

I joined the Society in October 1943, exactly 60 years ago, and the Initiation Fee then was 7/6 (37.5p today) and thereafter 5/- per annum (25p today). After some time I was elected to the Committee, then Assistant Treasurer, later Assistant Secretary, Treasurer, Secretary, Vice President and President. For some years I was also Hon Auditor. I have never been out of office and have held every available position in the Society.

At the beginning, the Hon Secretary was George Smith of St John’s Malone, then Jack McKeown, an excellent accompanist and organist at St James’. He was succeeded by Jack Young, the Town Solicitor of Belfast. The treasurer was Mr Littlejohn of St Paul’s, who was followed by Rob Anderson then at Duncairn Presbyterian, later McCracken Memorial and Bangor Abbey.

There were virtually no Committee meetings: if something urgent cropped up we had a few minutes discussion after a regular meeting. The President was quite happy to let Jack Young run the Society, and each year’s meetings were arranged by Jack and me, sitting in leather armchairs in front of a nice coal fire in the Town Solicitor’s Private Office in the City Hall at lunch time. Our suggestions were never challenged at the Annual General Meeting. All very democratic!

Circumstances seldom change and I recall an AGM when the treasurer moaned about the number of unpaid members who just wouldn’t part with their five bobs, despite repeated reminders. One of our more eccentric members, Hiram Longmore rose and asked: ‘Mr President, could we have their names please?’. After a muffled conversation at the top table the treasurer slowly read out the names and addresses to a stunned silence. ‘Now Hiram,’ said the President, ‘any comment?’. ‘Yes, Mr President, very nice addresses, Sir’. Loud laughter and the tension eased.

When the Presbyterian Hostel was eventually closed, our style of meeting drastically changed. We no longer had a regular base. There were now cars available, and we could move out and get around, so lately, the bulk of our meetings were in various Churches all over the Province – seldom twice in one place.

I'm sure there is value in seeing and hearing and playing many different organs, but somehow I miss the cerebral stimulus of some of our earlier meetings. Could the fall off in attendances in recent years echo my feelings? Think about it.

Eighty five years ago USOC was conceived and set up by a previous generation, with high ideas and high ideals for the Music of the Church. We battled on and survived and strengthened despite two World Wars and through thirty years of 'The Troubles'. Today the future of USOC is in the hands of a younger generation. I know **you** won't let it down.

As I look back on a long and happy and fulfilled life, I 'bless God for my creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life.' And that includes good health. Five years ago when things went wrong, I thank Mr Hugh O'Kane and his team for giving me virtually a new heart and an added span of life. I've always believed in miracles – now I'm one of them!

'No man is an island', and I am so thankful to have around me countless faithful friends, some no longer with us in this world, all too many to thank individually. But in this Society a few stand out, as without their practical help and wise counsel I couldn't and wouldn't have been such an involved member: Christopher, Timothy, Harry, John and especially Rodney.

And how thankful I am to have a loving and understanding wife, and a supportive family, and now grandchildren to keep us young, and to involve us in this process of growing up all over again.

*'For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child
Friends on earth and friends above,
Pleasures pure and undefiled:
Christ our God, to Thee we raise
This our sacrifice of Praise.'*

I have never considered myself 'old', believing very much in the maxim 'you are only as old as your mind', but I suppose as I get nearer the eighty-three mark, I have entered 'the twilight zone', and am approaching the 'departure lounge', so perhaps the 16th century poetical Dean of St Paul's, John Donne, in his incomparable prayer sums up the final thoughts of this octogenarian organist:

'Bring me O Lord God, at my last awakening, into the house and gate of heaven: to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of Thy Glory and dominion, world without end.'

And to that I say: Amen.

William Adair
USOC
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