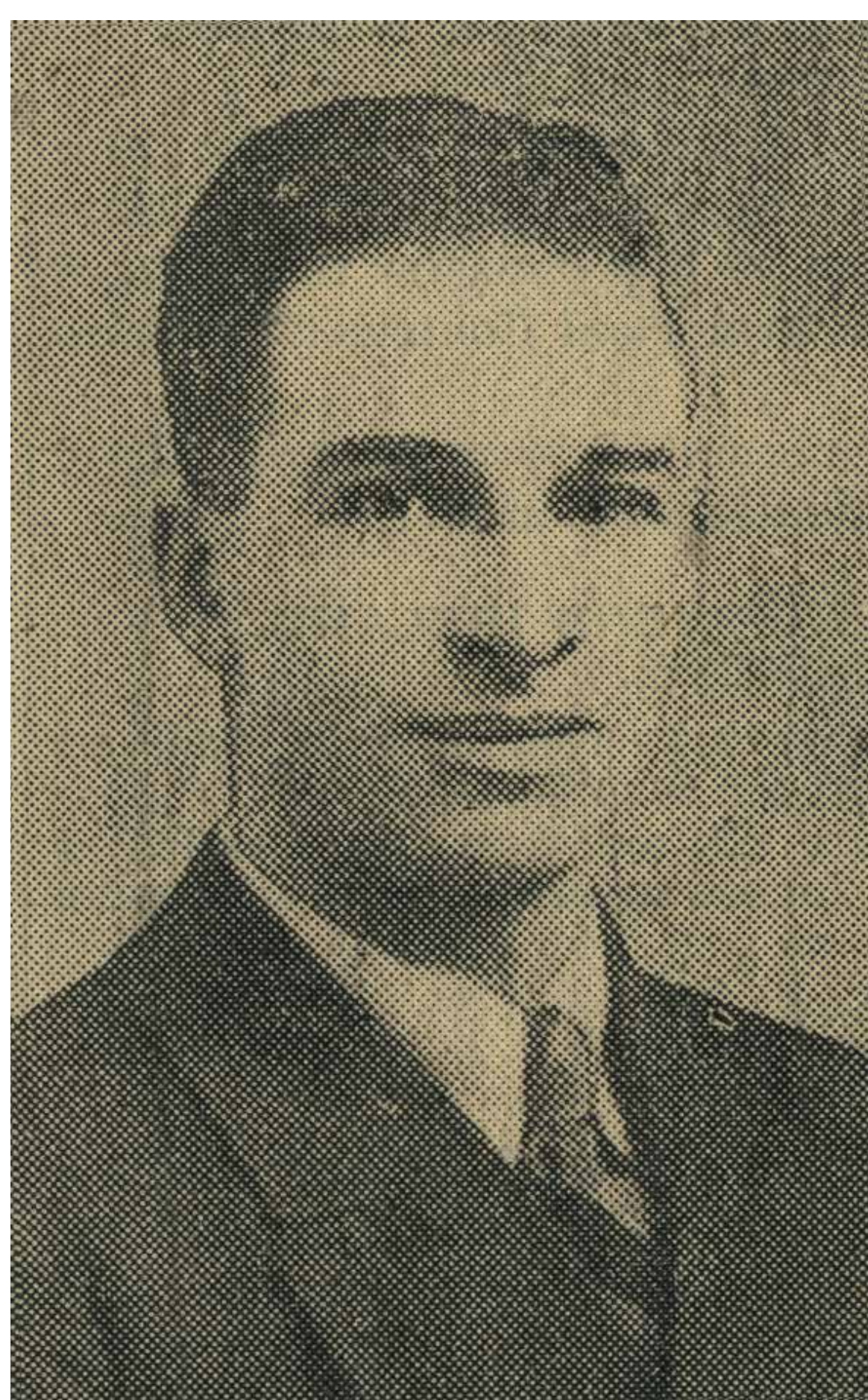


EARLY BEGINNINGS



E.P. Northwood, Editor of the Newry Reporter. The Newry Reporter played a vital role in establishing Newry Musical Feis.
© Newry Reporter

Established in 1928, Newry Musical Feis was first proposed by Mr E.P. Northwood, Editor of the Newry Reporter and backed by Mr Edward Hodgett, the newspaper's owner. An organising committee and officers were elected at an inaugural meeting held on 19th September 1928 and the Feis opened at Newry Town Hall on 8th April 1929.

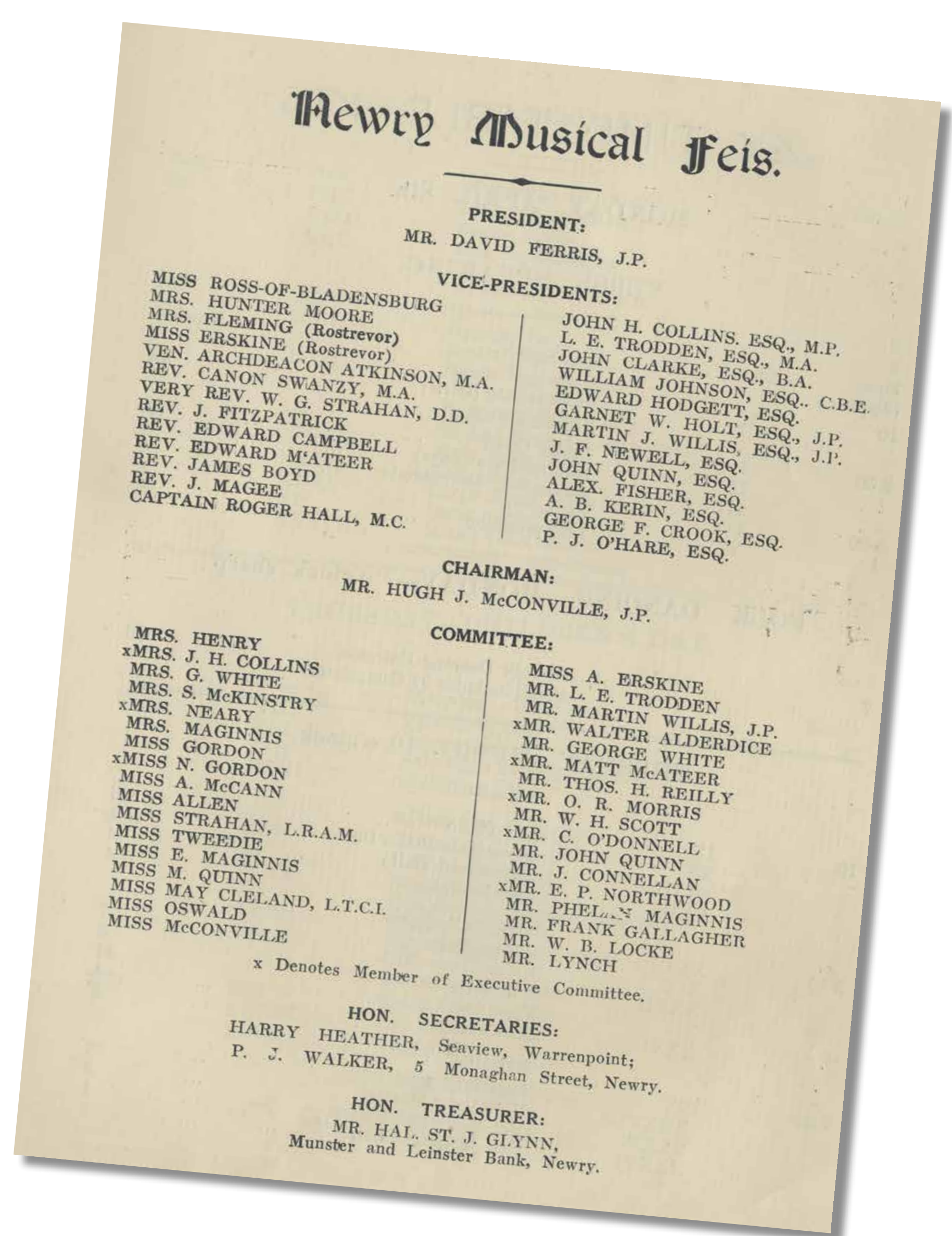
The first Feis offered three days of Music competitions and a fourth day, divided into two sessions of Verse and one of Folk Dancing. On the final night, the Prize Winners' Grand Concert was held in the Town Hall.



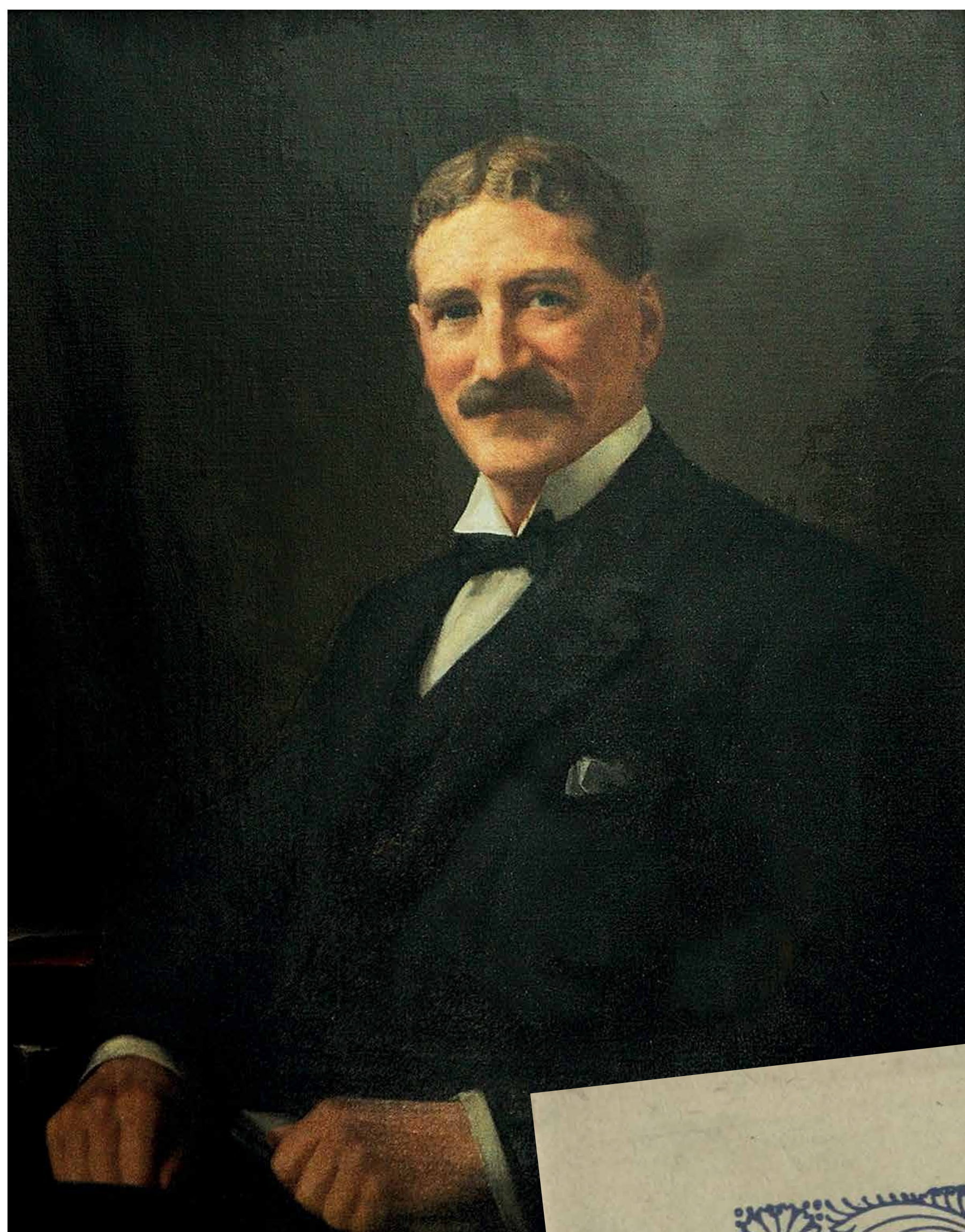
Photograph of Newry Musical Feis Committee c.1930, taken from the Golden Jubilee programme, 1978.
Back Row (L-R): Richard Smyth (Irish Dancing Adjudicator), Mrs M.B. Collins, Miss Gordon, J. Walker, Madeleine McCann, Hal Glynn. Front Row (L-R): Mr and Mrs H.J. McConville, Miss Allen, Accompanist, Harry Heather, Mr Evans (Adjudicator).
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

There were an estimated 925 competitors, mostly from Newry and Mourne and other parts of counties Armagh and Down. A number of competitors also came from Belfast and Dundalk.

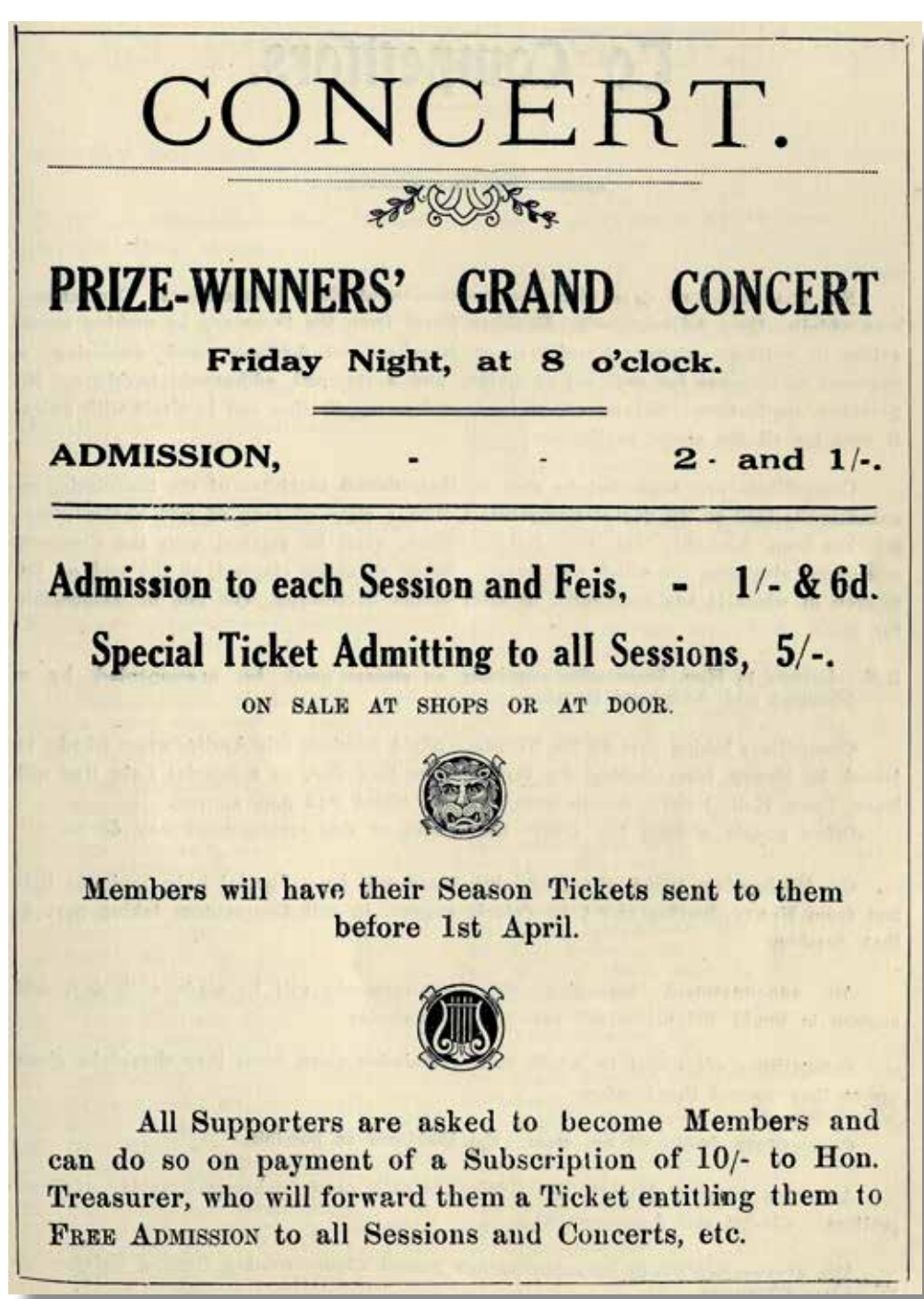
The Feis quickly developed strong foundations and an enviable reputation due to the exceptional efforts of Mr Harry Heather and Mr P.J. Walker, who worked as joint General Secretaries from 1928 – 1937, obtaining the services of the most respected adjudicators and working tirelessly to manage the rapid growth of the competition.



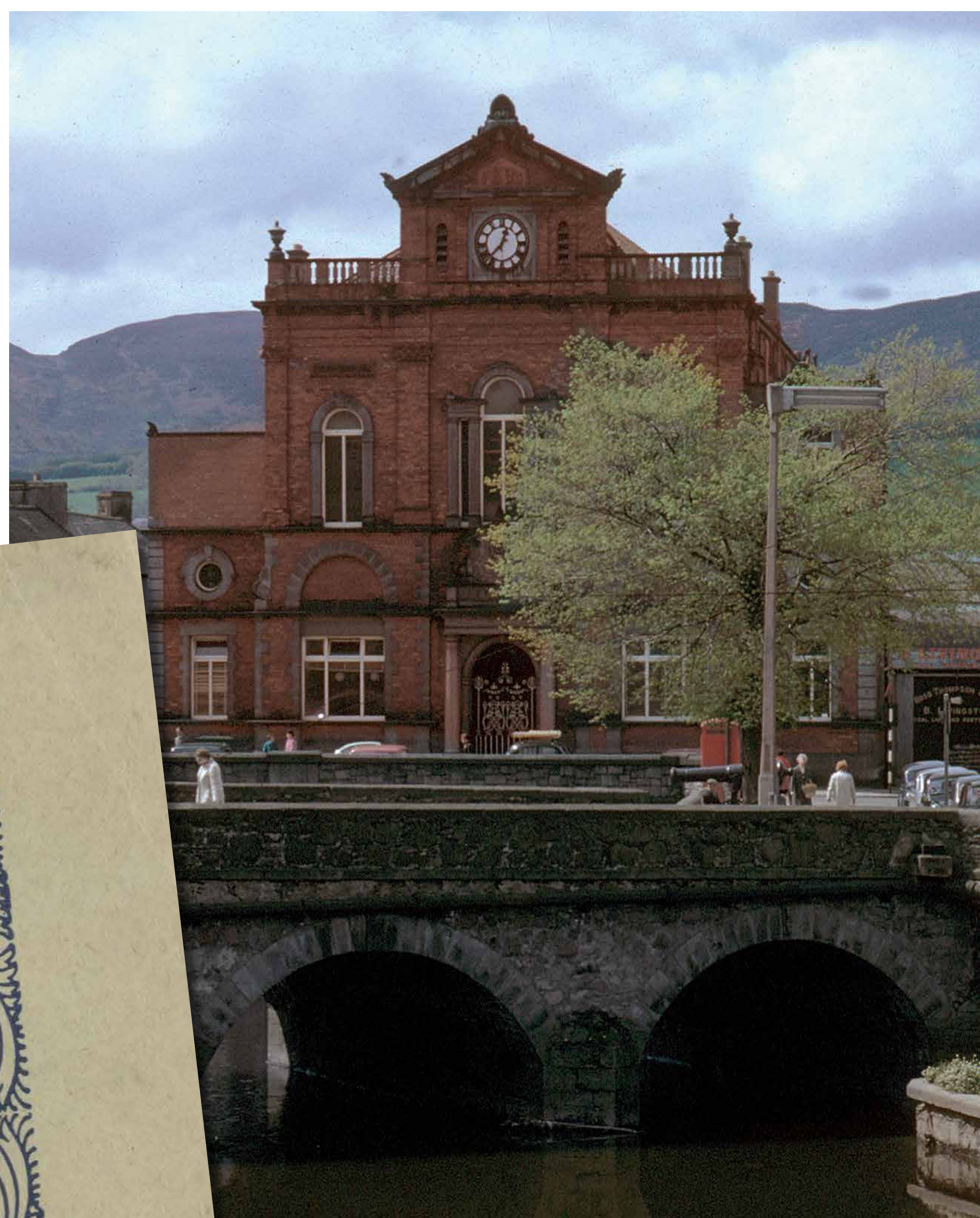
Newry Musical Feis committee members and officeholders as printed in the first Feis programme in 1929.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



Portrait of Hugh John McConville, Chairman of Newry Musical Feis 1928 – 1937, painted in 1937 by Frank McKelvey.
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council



Advert for the Prize Winners' Grand Concert as printed in the 1929 Feis programme.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

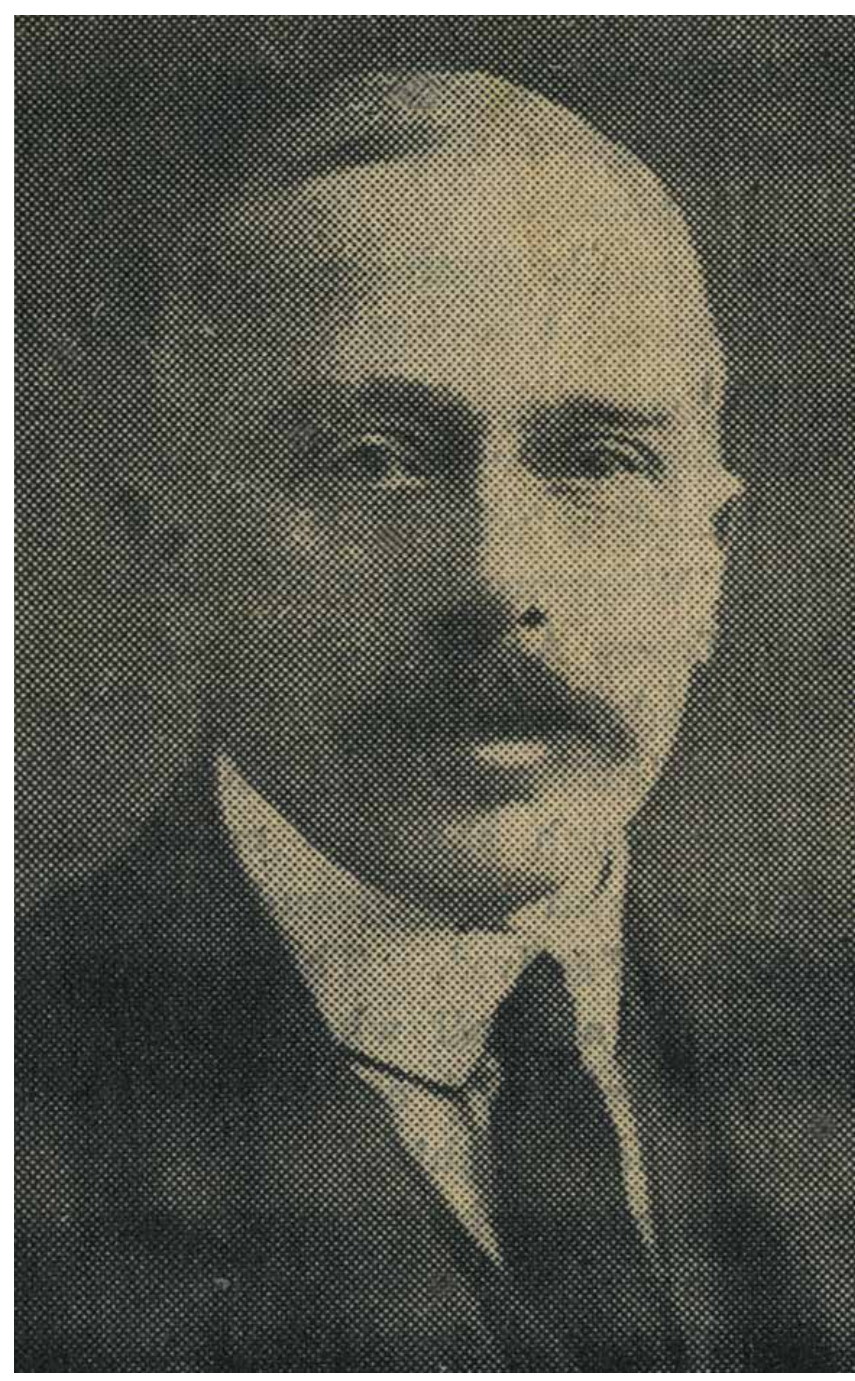


Newry Town Hall in May 1966. With only a few exceptions, Newry Musical Feis has been held here every year since the first Feis in 1929.
© William McAlpine

Programme cover from the first Newry Musical Feis in April 1929. The quote from Sir H. Walford Davies has adorned Feis programmes ever since.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



GROWTH IN ADVERSITY



David Ferris, President of Newry Musical Feis, 1928 – 1956.
© Newry Reporter

The number of competitors continued to grow throughout the 1930s, with interest increasing from other areas of Ireland. By 1936 the competition had increased to ten days. Music adjudicators spoke highly of the excellent standards being achieved across all disciplines. High standards were also achieved in Folk Dance and Dramatic Productions.

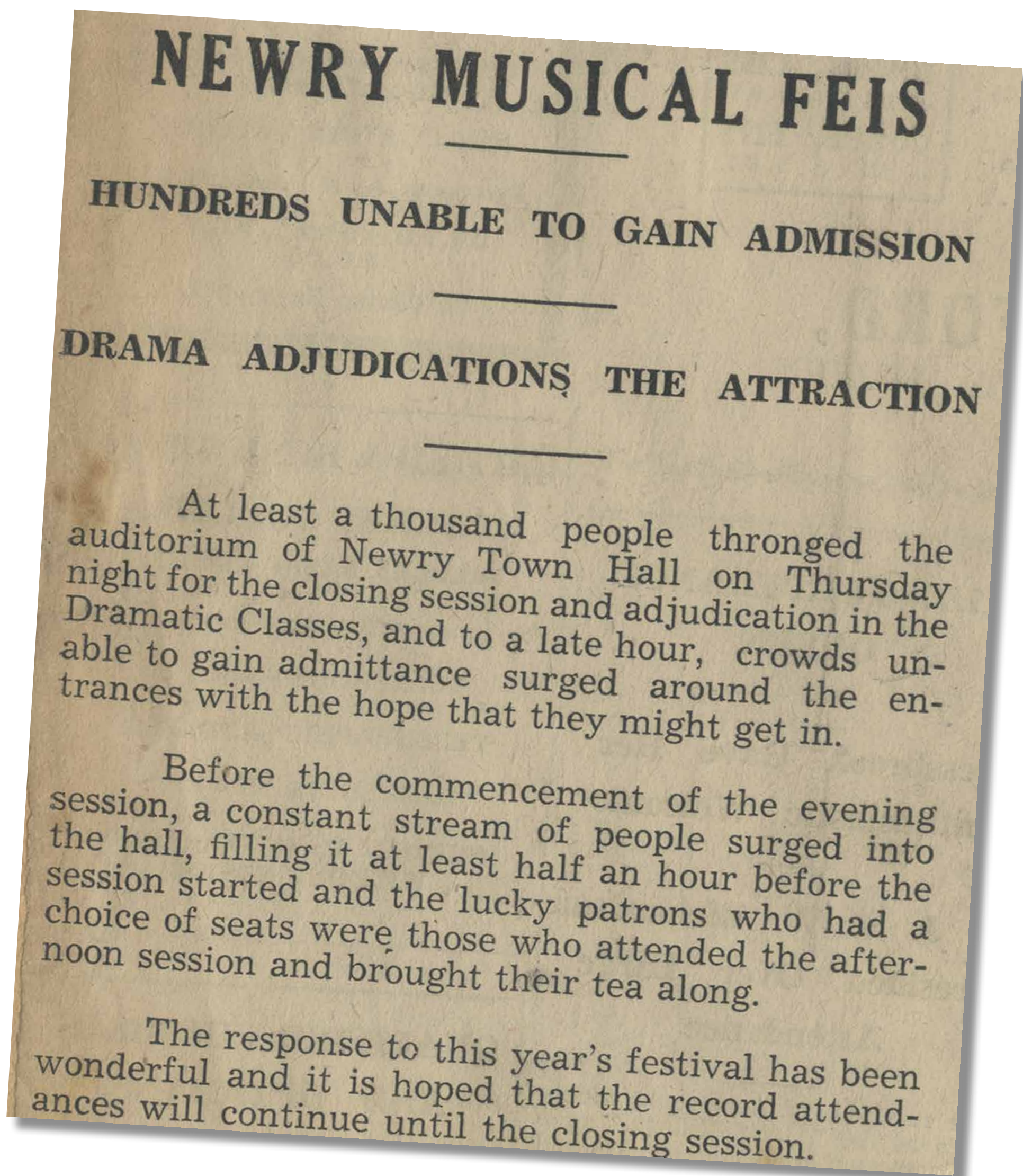
In 1939, Ballet, based on Irish music was presented for the first time in any festival outside Dublin. The same year, the Music adjudicator, Mr Maurice Jacobson, said that *“the Feis Executive was one of the best that could possibly be met anywhere. . .”*

The Feis continued to be held during World War II. In his opening speech in 1941, Mr David Ferris, President and Chairperson, said *“In these terrible days of world upheaval there are many difficulties to be encountered . . . but in the face of all this the Committee decided to carry on . . .”*

Due to the restrictions on civilian travel, in 1944 the Music and Verse adjudicators were unable to travel to Newry and new adjudicators had to be secured a few days before the opening of the Feis. Entries continued to rise during the war years; 1,400 in 1943 and 1,530 in 1944, which also saw the largest sale of tickets.



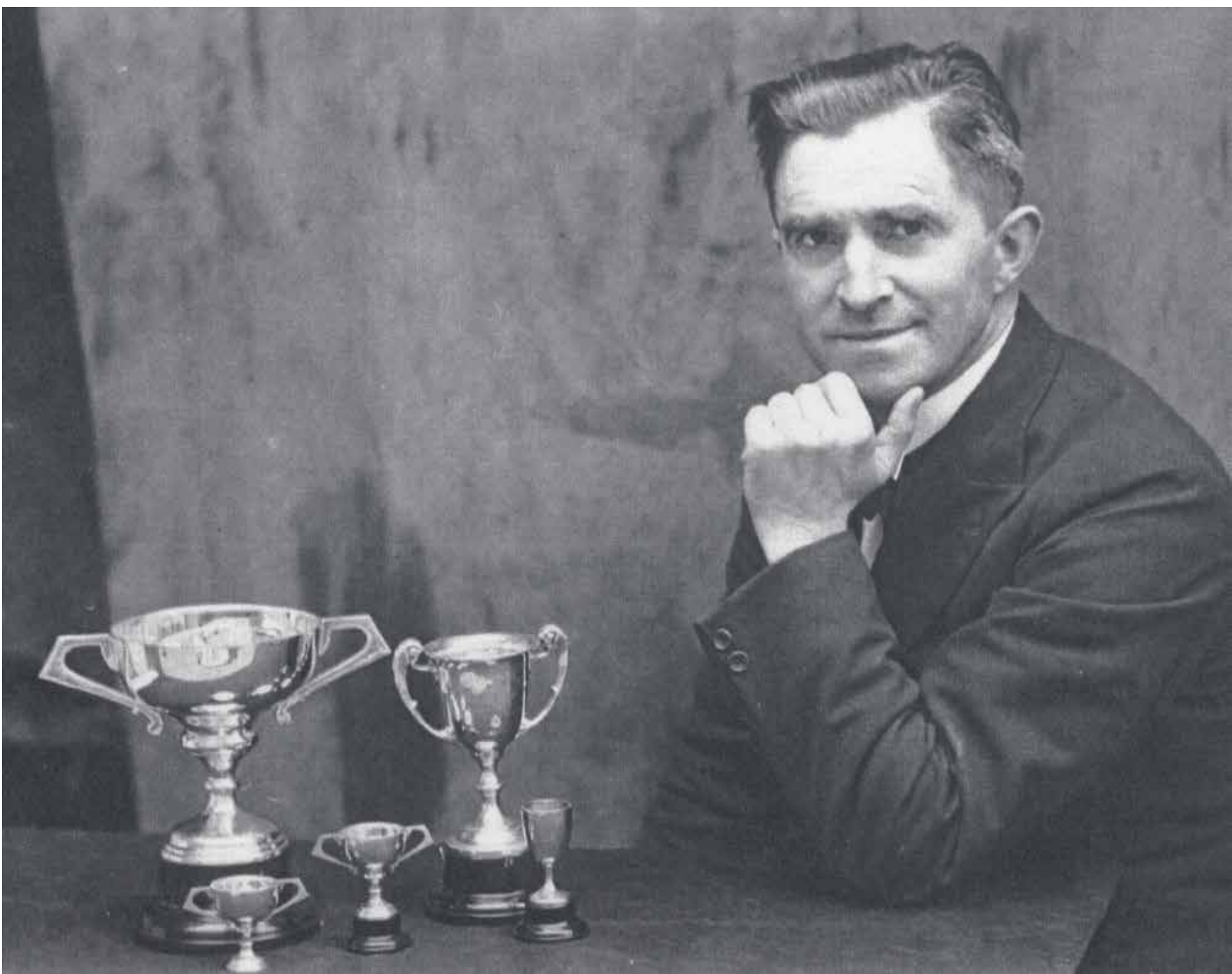
Photograph of James Canavan's production of the trial scene from The Merchant of Venice at the Drama Section of Newry Musical Feis in 1937. The adjudicator, Gabriel Fallon awarded 101 marks out of 100.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



Newry Musical Feis was a highly popular source of entertainment during the 1940s. This headline from the Newry Reporter dates from 1946. By 1948, the drama section had grown so large that a separate committee was formed, establishing Newry Drama Festival, which was inaugurated in 1949.
© Newry Reporter



Employees of Newry Central Laundry with the W.R.H. Hennessey Perpetual Memorial Silver Challenge Cup, first prize in the Ladies' Choir section, 1940s.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



Joseph Conway Guinan pictured with his trophies for the Light Operatic Tenor class, which he won at Newry Musical Feis in the early 1930s.
Courtesy of the late Julia Guinan

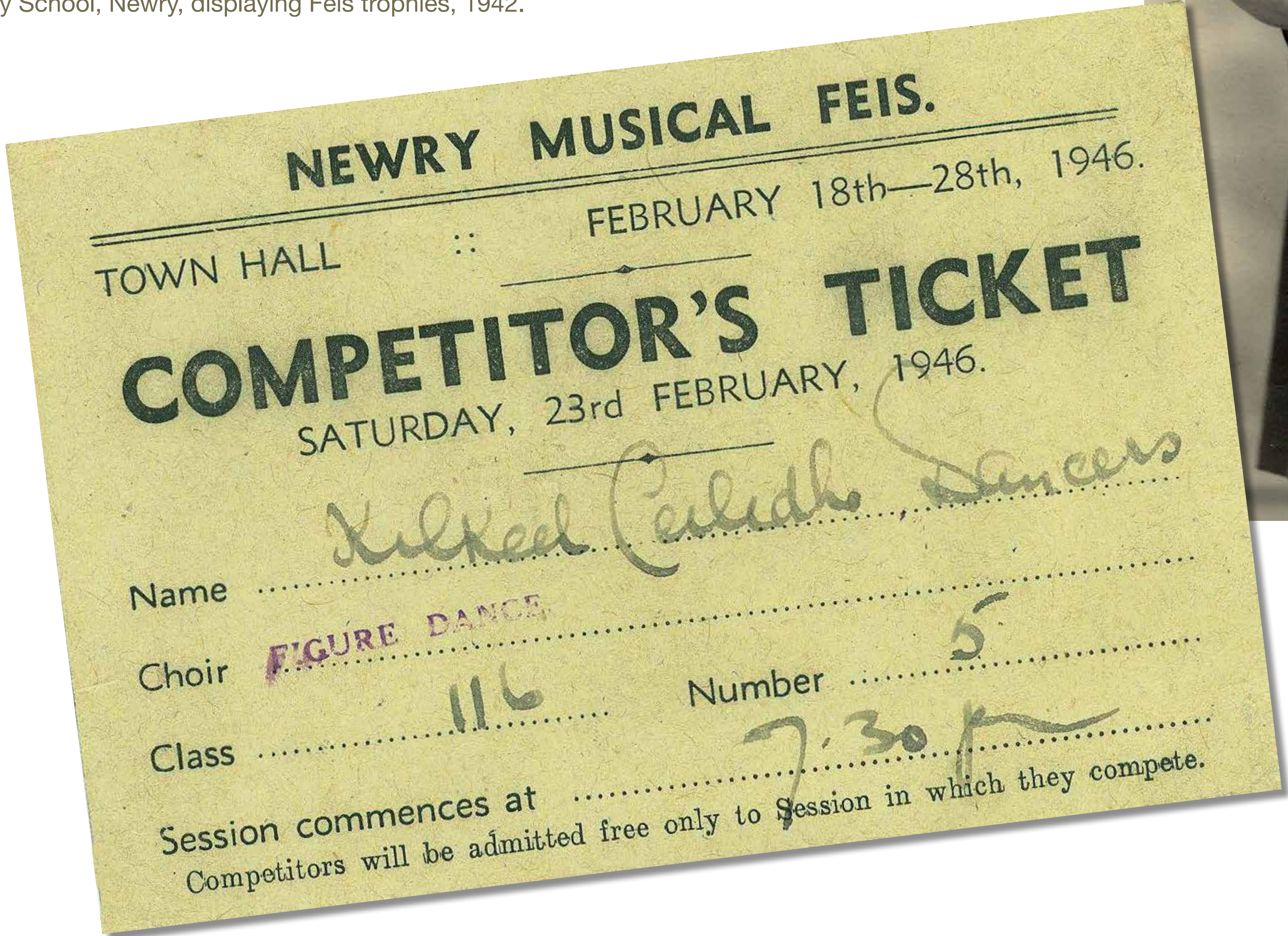


Pupils of St. Clare's Primary School, Newry, displaying Feis trophies, 1942.
Courtesy of Kathleen Harrington



Kathleen McNally who won the Junior Violin competition at Newry Musical Feis in April 1940.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

Competitor's ticket for Kilkeel Ceilidh Dancers, February 1946.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



THE SPIRIT OF NEWRY

RECOVERY AND CO-OPERATION

During the post-war years two significant milestones were reached. In 1949, the Feis celebrated its 21st birthday followed by its Silver Jubilee in 1953.

The committee, some of whom had held office from the earliest days of the Feis, saw significant changes in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The Rev J.P. Burke took over from Mr David Ferris as President in the mid-1950s. In 1961 Mrs Alma Brown became General Secretary and Music Secretary, taking over from Mr Harry Heather who had been elected to the original committee in 1928 and Mr Sean O’Driscoll became Section Secretary for Irish Dance, taking over from Mr P.J. Walker, who had also held this position since 1928.

In February 1972 Newry Town Hall was substantially damaged by an arson attack, necessitating the use of two alternative venues; Downshire Road Presbyterian Church Hall and St Colman’s Parochial Hall. Further disruption occurred when a bomb exploded in Kildare Street on 28th April 1972, less than 100 yards from St Colman’s Hall, where an Under - 10 verse class was taking place. After the children had been calmed, *“ . . . in the true tradition of the stage, parents and organisers decided that the show must go on”*.



Members of the Feis committee in 1953.
Back Row (L-R): Mr P. Magennis, Miss M. Keenan, Miss F. Allen, Mrs F. McKinsty, Mr K.P. Neary, Mr F. Sweeney, Mrs H. Taggart. Front Row (L-R): Miss U. McClafferty, Mr J.H. Heather, Miss N. Gordon, Mrs M.B. Collins, Rev J.P. Burke, Mr C.A. Musgrave.
© Newry Reporter



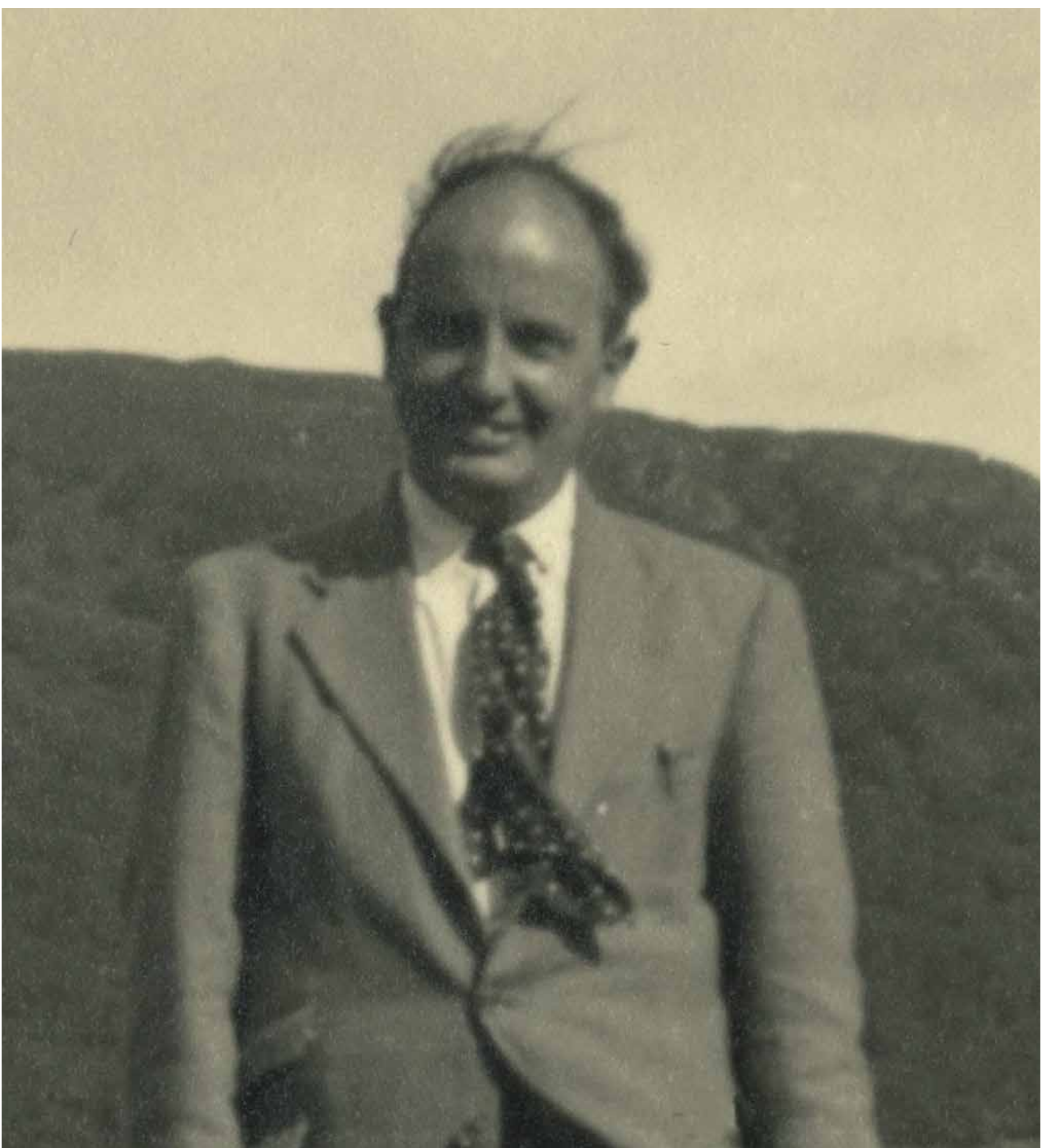
Newry Musical Feis Certificate of Merit for Verse Speaking awarded to Margaret Byrne, 1966.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



Mr Irvine Millar, Verse Speaking Adjudicator with two competitors; Mamie McGuigan and Florence Magowan, both of Newry, 1955.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



Dancers from the Arthur Burns School of Dance at Newry Feis, 1964 – 65.
Courtesy of Oliver McAtteer



Harry J. Heather, Hon. Secretary to Newry Musical Feis, 1928 – 1960. He was widely known in local musical circles as a teacher and church organist. In the 1920s he had his own dance band and was a pianist at the Garden Cinema in Warrenpoint.
Courtesy of Margaret Wilson



Ballyholland Primary School who were cup winners for Songs in Irish at the 1956 Feis.
Courtesy of Lucy McDonnell



A competitor from the 1955 Feis.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

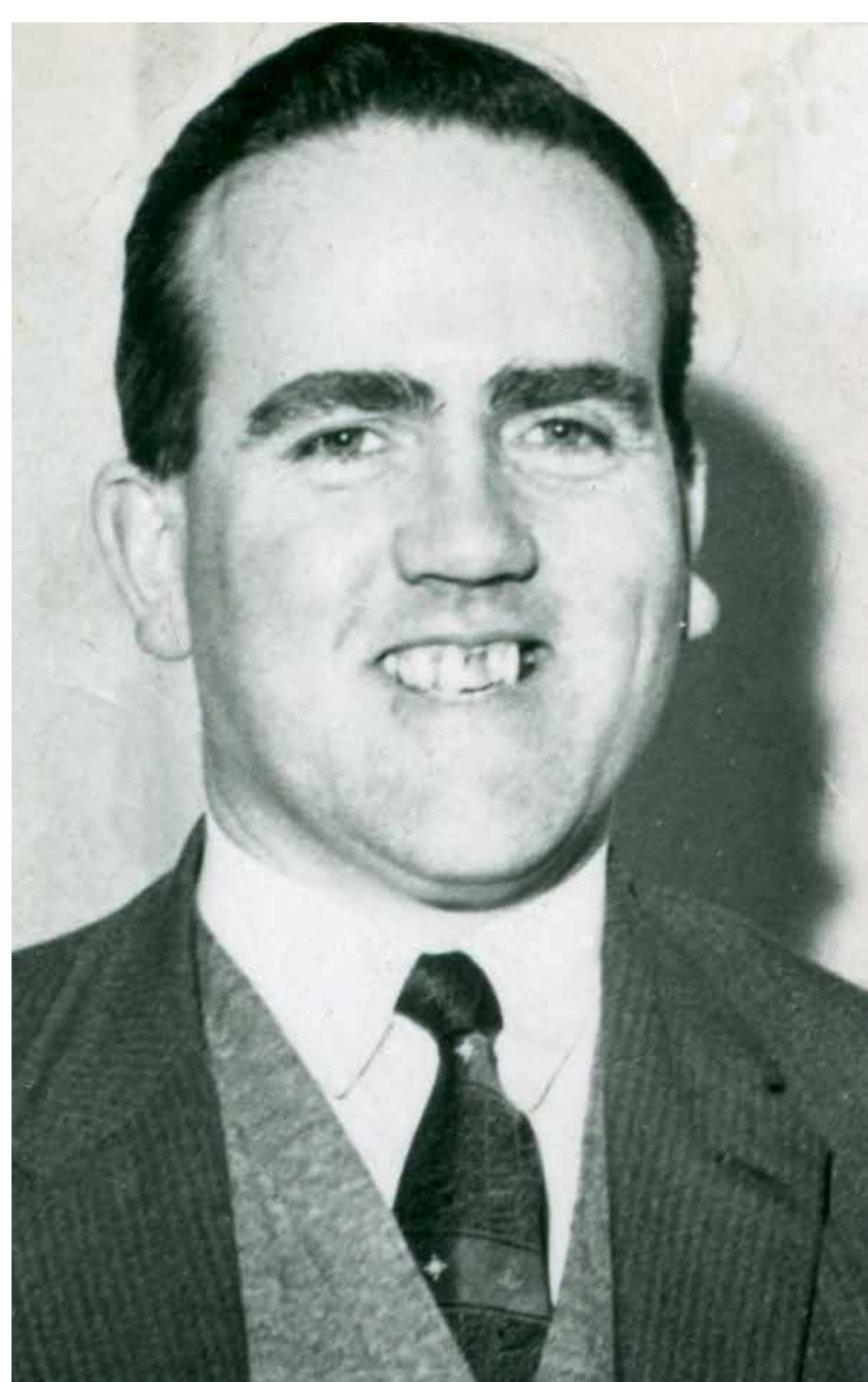


Irish dancers at Newry Musical Feis in the late 1940s. Left to right: Eileen Rooney, Iris Hillen, Eilish Toner.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



The scene in Kildare Street, Newry, after a car bomb exploded on 28th April 1972. A verse speaking competition was in progress at the time of the explosion in St Colman’s Hall (centre of picture in background).
© Newry Reporter

FROM GOLD TO PLATINUM



Kevin Neary, President of Newry Musical Feis, 1971 – 2001. He had the distinction of attending the inaugural meeting of the Feis in 1928 as a child with his mother.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection

The Feis celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1978. The Diamond Jubilee in 1988 was marked by the award of a special crystal bowl to the overall prize winner in Speech and Drama, Music and Irish Dancing.

The development and success of the Feis would not have been possible without the dedication and loyalty of many of its members. In January 1997, a Presentation Dinner was held to celebrate two long-serving members; Mr Kevin Neary, with 50 years of unbroken service as Treasurer and President and Mrs Alma Brown, with 35 years in the roles of Music Secretary and General Secretary. A dinner was held in 2002 in honour of Miss Ethel Fitzpatrick, who became President that year.

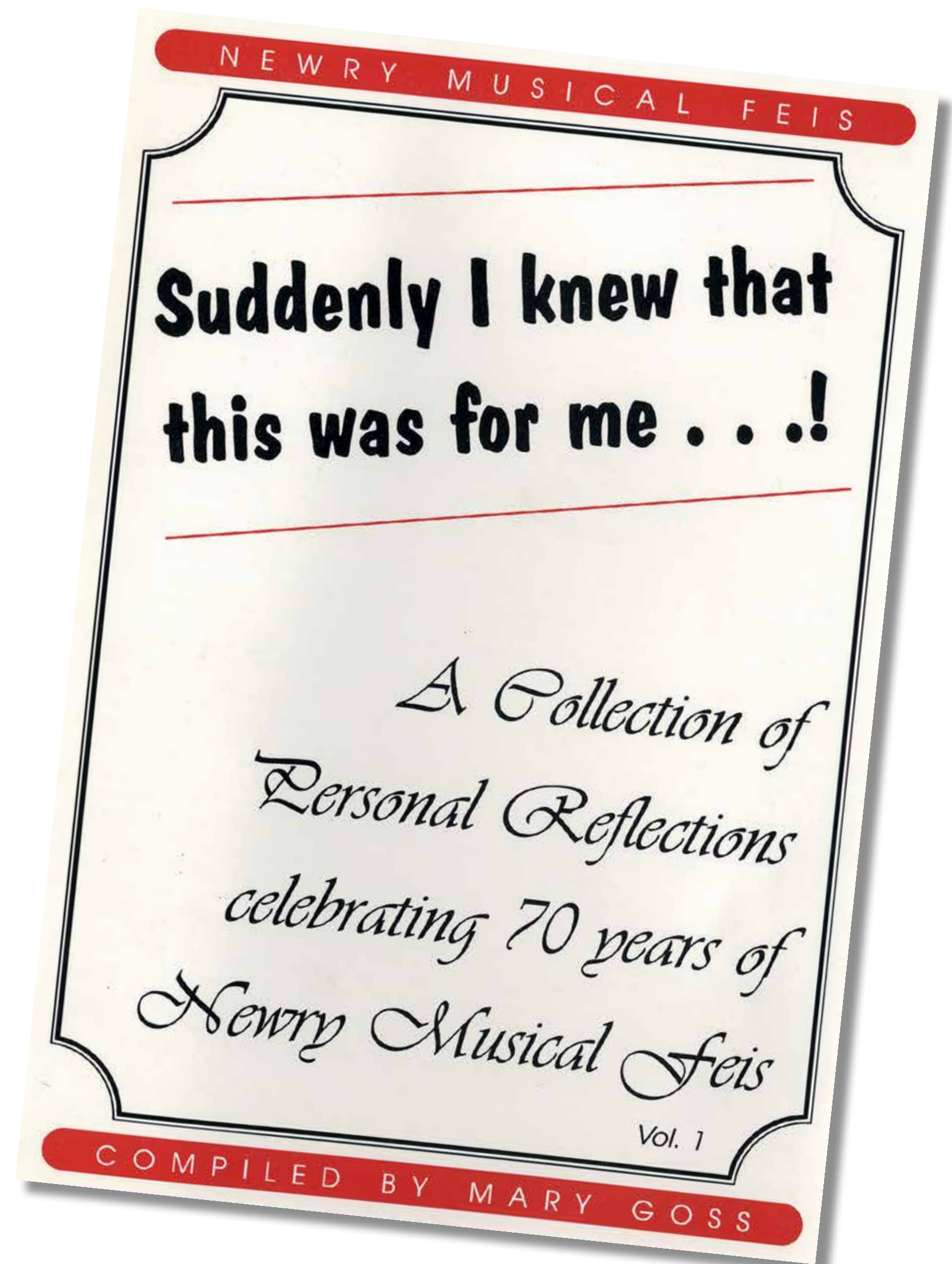
The 70th anniversary celebrations in 1998 focused on the contribution associated with the Feis, with the production of a booklet of personal reflections, titled *Suddenly I Knew That This Was for Me*, containing memories of past competitors, teachers and their relatives.



Mrs Alma Brown (standing) and Miss Ethel Fitzpatrick (seated) at a dinner in September 2002 in honour of Miss Fitzpatrick, who became President of the Feis that year.
Courtesy of Mary Goss



Member of the Committee at the Feis opening in 1977.
Back Row (L-R): James Quinn, Arthur Burns, Doreen Whitten, Lily Fox, Paddy Rafferty, Eileen Keenan, Tommy Burns, Rhoda Neary. Front Row (L-R): Dean Davis, Florrie Ewan, Joy McCall, Mary McElroy, Kevin Neary (President), Ethel Fitzpatrick, May Allen (Adjudicator), Alma Brown.
© Newry Reporter



Suddenly I Knew That This Was for Me, edited by Feis General Secretary, Mary Goss. The title is a quote from a pupil of Ethel Fitzpatrick, writing about performing in the Feis.
Newry and Mourne Museum Collection



Newry Musical Feis celebrated its Diamond Jubilee in 1988 with three special crystal bowls. The winners, pictured here, were Judith Devine (Speech and Drama), Judith McGinn (Music) and Gary Moan (Irish Dance).
© Newry Reporter



1984–85 Sacred Heart Grammar School Orchestra with August Toremans and Alma Brown.
Courtesy of Mary Goss

Members of the choir of St. Mary's Parish Church who won the Perpetual Challenge Cup for Church Choirs in 1970.
© Newry Reporter



A NEW CENTURY

The Feis greeted the dawn of the 21st century with continued growth and development. To accommodate the increase in competitors, the Speech and Drama Section was divided into ‘Open’ and ‘Schools’ categories in 2001. In 2002, a Ballet and Theatre Dance Section was added to the already extensive programme.

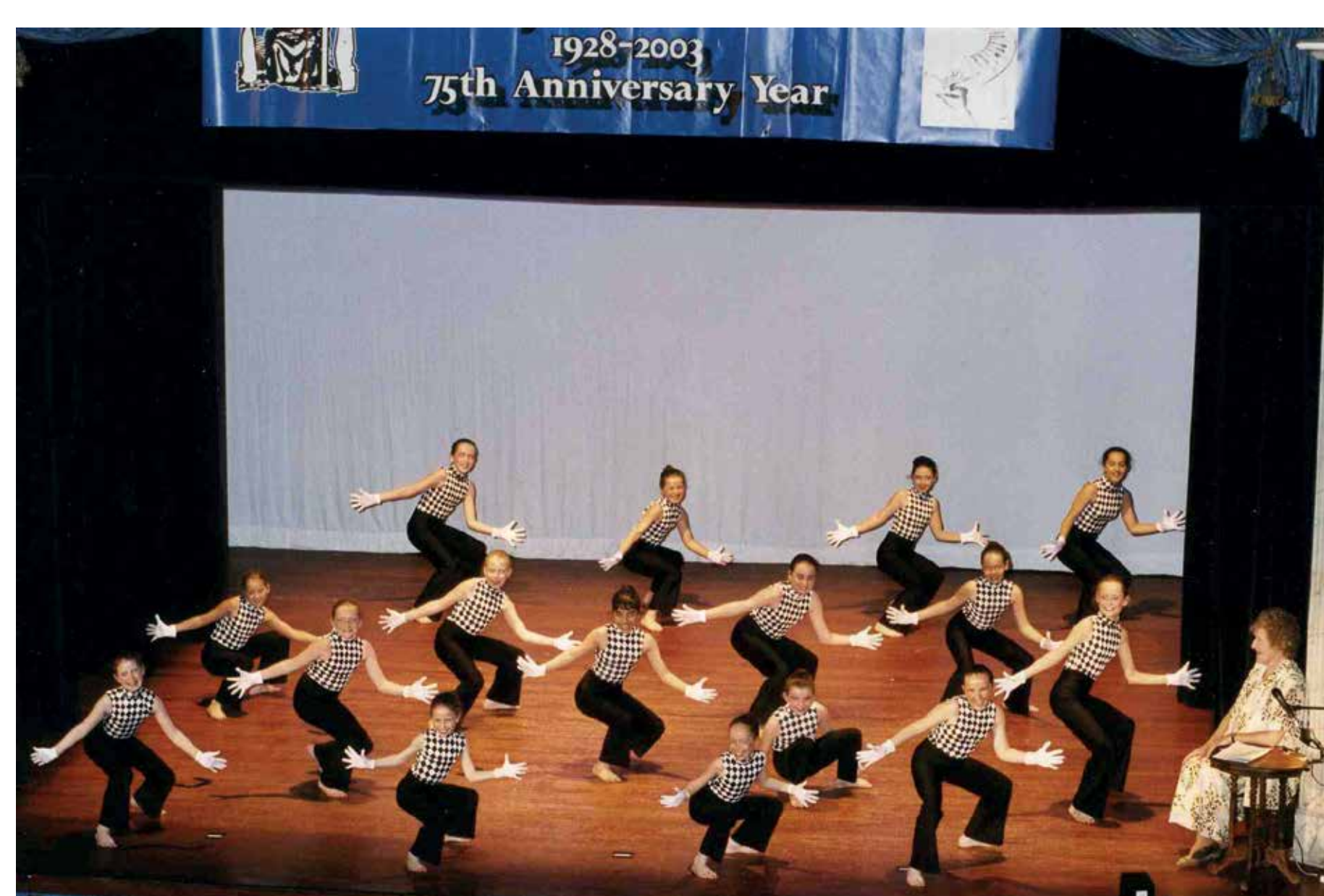
The 75th Feis in 2003 saw the revival of a great tradition, the Prize Winners’ Concert. Compered by Miss Ethel Fitzpatrick, a dazzling array of talent representing all five Sections performed for a capacity Town Hall audience. Miss Fitzpatrick brought the audience a wealth of memories and insights from a lifetime of Feis involvement as participant, teacher, Committee member, Chairperson and President.

Affiliated to the British and International Federation of Festivals, Newry Musical Feis is one of the top three festivals of its type in the world, facilitating 14,000 performances across a 44 day programme.

A Gala Concert featuring past and present performers marks the 90th Anniversary in 2018.



Alma Brown, President Newry Musical Feis and Roisin Mulgrew, Chairperson Newry, Mourne and Down District Council at the launch of the Feis' 90th Anniversary programme.
Courtesy of Mary Goss



The Anne-Marie Morgan School of Dance performing at the 75th Anniversary Prize Winners' Concert at Newry Town Hall in June 2003.
Courtesy of Newry Musical Feis



The Presidential Chain of Office was presented to Alma Brown in June 2017 at the launch of the 90th Anniversary year. It contains the names of all six Presidents; David Ferris (1928–1956), Rev J.P. Burke (1957–1966), Henry Lyons (1967–1970), Kevin Neary (1971–2001), Ethel Fitzpatrick (2002–2015), Alma Brown (2015–present).
Courtesy of Mary Goss



The Choir of St. Patrick's Primary School, Drumgreenagh, performing at the 75th Anniversary Prize Winners' Concert at Newry Town Hall in June 2003.
Courtesy of Newry Musical Feis



Ballet and Theatre Dance Section at Newry Musical Feis, 2002.
Courtesy of Mary Goss



Irish Dancers performing at the 75th Anniversary Prize Winners' Concert at Newry Town Hall in June 2003.
Courtesy of Newry Musical Feis



Patrick Coyle and Doreen Whitten pictured backstage in the early 2000s. The role of accompanists has been vital to the success of the Music Section throughout the years.
Courtesy of Mary Goss



The moment when a performer receives their trophy is a special one for many. However, it is the taking part that embodies the spirit of the Feis.
Courtesy of Mary Goss

“At a Festival Competitors do not set out to beat each other, they set out to pace each other on the road to perfection.”

Sir H. Walford Davies