

Appendix 12 - Mr Carmichael's Miscellaneous Material

Summary of Comunn na Feinne from Mr Carmichael's closing notes.

“The history of the Society goes back to the early days of Geelong, having been formed in 1856, seven years after the town was incorporated by an Act of Parliament, and only 22 years after John Batman had made his famous treaty with the blacks. The time was one of great activity in the district. The discovery of gold at Ballarat had resulted in a rush of immigrants to Australia, and Geelong's population had jumped from 1,370 to nearly 23,000.

The Society was started by a few enthusiastic Scottish Highlanders to give a touch of home to the new colony for the benefit of their countrymen from overseas who were arriving in such numbers as to justify Australia Felix in joining with the Londoners in the famous prayer, “Oh Lord deliver us from the bloody yoke of Scotland.”

The name Comunn na Feinne, meaning “Gathering of the Strongmen,” was taken from the works of the Gaelic poet Ossian. The name had to do with the Highland Games and sports which were organized by the Society. Soon sturdy Highlanders were to be seen tossing the caber, putting the stone, and throwing the hammer to the skirl o' the pipes.

For its Coat of Arms, the Society chose a design depicting a Highlander and an Aboriginal each standing. Also present were various Gaelic mottoes such as, “Seas Cuis.” (Fair Play???) , suggesting white invaders and Aborigines.”

But perhaps the most valuable contribution of the Comunn na Feinne to the town's progress was the inauguration of an educational examination system. At the time public examinations were non-existent, and all schools in the district were of a denominational character. These examinations drew candidates from various schools in the County of Grant and attracted large numbers of bright Girls and Boys who were anxious to have their qualities tested in the fundamentals of the educational standards of the day.

But the Comunn na Feinne was doomed to have many vicissitudes of fortune. Removals from the District resulted in depleted membership, and the time came when years passed by without any Highland gathering at all.

Records of the early days of the Society recall many names well-known in Geelong History: among them the Hon., Robert de Bruce Johnstone, a former Mayor of Geelong, after whom Johnstone Park was named, who was aided and helped by the late Robert Shirra.

In those days, the Society had as its arena a reserve known as the Comunn na Feinne ground at

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South Geelong. This ground was subsequently taken over by the Government when arrangements were made for the Society to acquire the land and premises of St Andrew's Church in Yarra Street, the oldest church building in the city. After extensive alterations had been made to the building, the Society entered into occupation.

After the death of the aforementioned enthusiasts, the operation of the Society was conducted under the Chieftainship of the late Captain Percy Chirnside, during whose term of office Hugh M. Sutherland, Niel Campbell and George R. King took a leading part. At this period the outdoor gatherings of the Society were held at the Geelong Agricultural Society's grounds at East Geelong, 1895.

From about 1912 onwards the Society changed the form of its activities in that much of its activity centred around the old St Andrew's Church premises, where musical entertainment and lectures were a feature.

Peak Achievement

Under the patronage of Neil Campbell, a former Mayor of Geelong, with Phillip Russell, Esq., as Chief, Dr John Small as President and James Galbraith as Secretary, and with the active support of Senator William Plain, the Society reached its highest peak of achievement. Annual Haggis Suppers, Burns' Nights and similar events formed the basis of entertainments which drew together large gatherings of the sons and daughters of Scotia.

Such well-known singers as Marjorie Lawrence, John Brownlee and Norman Menzies made their early appearances in the Comunn na Feinne Hall under guidance of Dame Nellie Melba, as well as many others of lesser fame, but nevertheless of considerable talent.

But the depression which followed the 1914-1918 war, coupled with the fact that the influx of new Scottish blood declined with the cessation of immigrants from the Auld Country, cast a pall over the movement from which it had not recovered when the 1939-1945 war struck a death blow. The death and retirement of leading members of the Society left it without an administrative organization. Fresh trustees were appointed consisting of William Plain MLA., George R. King, Ken A. Wilson, and efforts were made in many directions to revive the Society, but the day of national sentiment appeared to have passed. Meanwhile, the trustees burdened with heavy commitments, came to the conclusion that nothing remained, but to realize on the Society to the best of their ability. (*Carmichael Notes* – in Private Hands.

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