

## Honouring Ireland's First Lady of Concertina

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By Cecilia Nic Dhomhnail



*The late Mrs Crotty, Kilrush with Kathleen Harrington, Sligo and Dublin, also deceased*

In August this year, the West Clare town of Kilrush will host traditional musicians, singers and dancers from all over Ireland and abroad, who will gather to pay homage to Ireland's First Lady of Concertina Music, Mrs. Elizabeth Crotty, whose celebrated name continues to stand guard over the town's Market Square. Thirty seven years after her death in December 1960, Mrs. Crotty is still a revered figure among Irish traditional musicians on both sides of the North Atlantic. A pioneer of the [fleadh](#) cheoil movement, a host to the travelling piper, and an encyclopedia of tunes for the music collector, she is particularly remembered as a kind and unassuming lady who always made time to mentor and encourage younger musicians. At summer schools from North Carolina to Miltown Malbay her music is still being passed on today to a new wave of concertina enthusiasts by Clare concertina masters who have inherited the unique reputation she created for Clare's tiny hexagonal instrument.

### **A MEETING OF OLD FRIENDS AND BROADCASTERS.**

The weekend school will convene on Friday August 15 and continue until Sunday evening August 17. Dr. Ciaran MacMathuna, whose distinguished career in broadcasting began with a rare series of recordings made in Crotty's in the 1950's, will perform the official opening on Friday evening. This will be followed by the Mrs. Crotty Memorial

Lecture in Kilrush public library presented by Dr. Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin of the University of San Francisco. The evening will conclude with a series of traditional music sessions at various venues throughout the town.

For the concertina enthusiast, Saturday promises to be a feast of epic proportions. Classes for beginners, intermediate, advanced and master students will be held in the morning and early afternoon. Later on Saturday afternoon, a special gathering of old friends of Mrs. Crotty will meet students and teachers in Crotty's kitchen which functioned so often as the primary 'studio' of West Clare music. This informal gathering will include Clare concertina masters Tommy McCarthy, Tom Carey, Bernard Sullivan, Tommy MacMahon, Sonny Murray, Vincent Crowley, Gerdie Commene, Junior Crehan and Chris Droney - some of whom were present in Crotty's kitchen during Ciarán MacMathúna's Job of Journey Work broadcasts in the 1950s. To relive the magic of those halcyon days, Ciarán himself will preside over the session. He will be joined by fiddlers Peter O'Loughlin and Paddy Canny, and Muiris Ó Rocháin, Director of the Willie Clancy Summer School. The organizers also hope to tempt Seamus Mac Mathúna, Timire Ceoil of [Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann](#) home to West Clare for the event. Seamus, a master flute player and sean-nós singer grew up in nearby Cooraclare, and remembers the Crotty sessions from his school days at the Christian Brothers in Kilrush.

## **AN INSPIRATION TO FEMALE MUSICIANS**

Saturday evening's gala concert will feature a stellar cast of musicians, sean nós singers and set dancers from all over the West of Ireland. In particular, the concert will highlight the role of female performers in Irish traditional music. Playing in a social milieu which was often very patriarchal, Mrs. Crotty helped to create a special forum for female musicians - both in the national media and on the public platform. Following her example set in the 1950s, females have now gone on to establish parity with their male counterparts throughout the Irish music world. Among the female concertina players invited to perform at the gala concert are Mary McNamara, Ann Droney, Jacqueline McCarthy, Miriam Collins, Brid Meaney, Dymphna Sullivan, and others who have preserved Clare's concertina tradition intact since Mrs Crotty first brought it to national attention over four decades ago.

## **RELIVING THE 'LIFT' OF THE KILFENORA IN THE MARKET SQUARE**

Sunday will feature a special mass of remembrance for Mrs. Crotty and a eulogy at her graveside in Shanakyle cemetery. The weekend will be brought to a close by the Kilfenora [Céilí](#) Band who will play for an open air céilí in the Market Square early on Sunday evening. No strangers to the renowned set dancers of West Clare, the seven time All-Ireland Céilí Band Champions had many a lively session in Kilrush -some as far back as the 1950s, when Mrs. Crotty presided over the local fleadh. Folklore still recalls some of the early céilí band competitions in Kilrush which attracted upwards on ten céilí bands from County Clare alone. Is it any wonder that the Tulla and the Kilfenora Céilí Bands have become such celebrated veterans?

## **CROTTY'S OF KILRUSH - AN UNTOUCHABLE ICON**

Watching over Scattery and its monastic ruins, the stony grey streets of Kilrush can conjure up images of old-world Victorian mobility and port town commence. Indeed the town went through various periods of decline and renewal since its river traffic heyday in the last century. Recent years however have seen Kilrush bounce back into the frontline of regional development. Its state-of-the art marina and maritime adventure center are now attracting tourists from all over the world, while cultural tourism has brought a renewed verve of optimism to the region. Sitting in midst of this renewed gateway to the Shannon is Crotty's traditional pub and guest house. Untouched by plastic and neon, this icon of nineteenth century elegance has been restored to its former splendor by its present owners Rebecca Brew and Kevin Clancy. The premises with its homely kitchen, its timeworn memorabilia and wooden fixtures are a living testament to the good taste of 'ould times' when Micko and Elizabeth Crotty presided over the household and its marketplace bustle.

Everybody is welcome to attend the Mrs. Crotty School. Come and enjoy the unique hospitality and music of West Clare for the weekend of August 15-17. Anyone requiring further information on events, registration and accommodation should contact:

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