

IN THE FERTILE, gently rolling countryside of Adjala Township, at the southern end of Simcoe County, about 50 miles north-west of Toronto, lies the tiny farming community of Colgan. This part of southern Ontario was first settled early in the 19th century by Irish immigrant farmers, most of whom came from County Wexford.

One of these pioneers was James Ronan, about whom, sadly, little is known. His son Patrick continued farming in Colgan, and married Anne Hayden, a school teacher. They had 10 children, the last being John Edward Ronan, who was destined to become one of the finest teachers and composers of liturgical music for the Roman Catholic Church in Canada, and the founder and first Director of his music school for boys; St. Michael's Cathedral Schola Cantorum, later to be known as St. Michael's Choir School.

Eddie Ronan was born in 1894, the same year the St. James Parish Church was built in

St. James, Colgan.



Colgan. In fact, he was the first child to be baptized, by Father Kilcullen, in the new church.

It was inevitable and quite natural that Eddie Ronan should grow up to be involved with music. He lived with it constantly at home. His father had a good voice, and his mother sang and played the piano and organ. His sister Annie, who learned to play the piano, organ and violin, was said to be intrigued at the way her little brother could quickly imitate her, and by the ease with which he could pick up and sing the pieces she was playing. Another sister, Mary, was the organist at St. James for over half a century. An older brother, Matt, also had a fine voice, and was much in demand for the amateur performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas put on in the area. As the baby in such a talented family it is not surprising that Eddie Ronan was taught and encouraged by his parents as well as by his brothers and sisters.

Eddie finished High School in 1910, and considered several vocations, but could not decide just what he wanted to do. A few years before, he had been browsing among the books at the back of St. James Church and came across a copy of the *Motu Proprio*, in which Pope Pius X urged the restoration of the ancient Choir Schools of the Church. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," he thought, "if there was a choir school in Canada that I could go to?." About 30 years later, John Edward Ronan, with the help and encouragement of the then Archbishop of Toronto, James Cardinal McGuigan, had started one. This in spite of the Great Depression, the relatively small size of the Catholic population in Toronto and the fact that there was no tradition of choral music in the Catholic Church in English-speaking Canada. Little problems like these were not going to stand in the way of Father Ronan's determination to bring his dream to fruition.

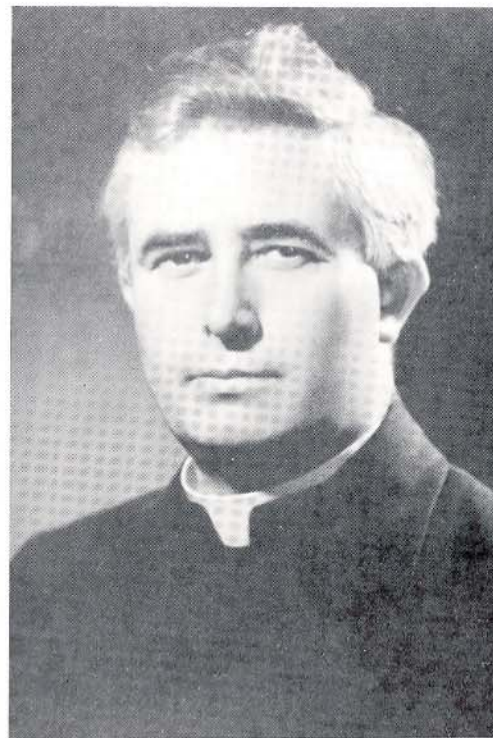
Eddie Ronan was a teacher for a few years,

The Dream

having studied at Hamilton Normal School. He taught in No. 4 School in Loretto, near Colgan. Later he attended St. Michael's College of the University of Toronto, with the intention of studying law. At the same time he maintained his passionate interest in music, and while at University, studied under the internationally famous composer of liturgical music, Dr. Healey Willan.

After University, Eddie Ronan entered St. Augustine's Seminary in Scarborough, near Toronto, to study for the priesthood. He

J.E. Ronan



resolved to conceal his love and knowledge of music, but in the words of the late Monsignor Joseph McDonagh, also a musician, and a life-long friend, "There was no bushel big enough to hide that light". So John Edward Ronan took great joy in singing in the Schola Cantorum at the Seminary under Father Castex. As a deacon he was appointed assistant teacher of Gregorian chant, which in those days occupied a much more prominent place in the music of the Church than it does today.

After his ordination in 1922 at the age of 28, Archbishop Neil McNeil sent Father Ronan to the new Pius X School of Sacred Music in New York. Here he studied Gregorian Chant under Dom Mocquereau, a Benedictine from the Abbey of Solesmes, in France. At the end of the course, Father Ronan was offered a professorship at the School. Only the persuasive tongue of Archbishop McNeil could bring him back to Canada.

Archbishop McNeil appointed Father Ronan Archdiocesan Director of Church Music, which

meant that he was busy organizing singing classes in the Catholic schools of Toronto. There was not much money available for such activities, and Father was given only a small car allowance for his work. Nevertheless he gave unstintingly of his time, energy and talents (not the least of the latter, according to contemporary reports, was raising money from wealthy friends), and for years concerts and pageants featuring his boy singers were presented regularly at Columbus Hall and Eaton Auditorium in Toronto.

Later, the School Board discontinued Father Ronan's work in the schools, much to his disappointment. He was advised however, by a close friend, to concentrate on his Cathedral School, which he did. What was to be known as the Cathedral Sanctuary Choir was begun in 1926.

This group of boys and men, from all over Toronto, would sing the High Masses in St. Michael's Cathedral. A photograph of this choir, taken in 1930, is reproduced in these pages.

Helping Father Ronan with these small boys were two very young ladies who were subsequently to play vitally important roles in the creation and development of his Schola Cantorum. In the early 1930's Joan Hopperton, whose brothers Hugh and Peter sang in the Sanctuary Choir; and Kathleen Mann, whose step-brother Leo Killoran was also a member, were to stay on and join the staff of the Schola when it opened a few years later. They were part of a very special group of absolutely devoted and dedicated people who could and did turn their hands to practically any job asked of them,

The St. Michael's Schola Cantorum Sanctuary Choir of 1930. There are 53 boys and 13 men in this photograph. Among the boys pictured are Peter and Hugh Hopperton, (brothers of Joan), Leo Killoran, John and Charles Goodenough (Charles sang at St. Michael's Cathedral for almost 50 years), and Walter Ross, who in later life became a formidable basso. Father Ronan is on the right. How many do you recognize?



and who worked for long hours for very little pay and almost no holidays or time off. Without Harold Armstrong, Joan Hopperton and Kathleen Mann (who is still teaching at the Choir School), it would not have been possible for Father Ronan to have succeeded in his venture to the extent that he did. Later there were other devoted disciples, including Father (now Monsignor) Peter Somerville and Father Barrett Armstrong, no relation to Harold Armstrong, although they both came from Peterborough, Ontario. Both Peter Somerville and Barrett Armstrong graduated from the

Choir School before studying for the priesthood.

So far as the young ladies who laboured so hard and so long are concerned, one observer has said the Joan Hopperton played a role that was unique and indispensable. But all the early workers in this musical vineyard literally linked their lives to that of the Founder. They unhesitatingly gave up all thoughts of marriage and family life, to which state most young people of their age would generally aspire. But Kathleen Mann has said, "You can't say that I have never had the experience of raising a family". Indeed she has raised many families of little boys, and the hundreds of children who have passed through her hands testify to her undoubted skills in "Mothering". Joan Hopperton, too, had special skills when dealing particularly with adolescent boys, talking to them in her quiet way, and never raising her voice in anger. All the early colleagues of Father Ronan performed minor miracles every day as a matter of course.

Harold Armstrong was gifted musically as a child. He began helping Father Ronan in 1927, after taking his degree in Organ at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto. The following year he was hired by Father Ronan, and was appointed organist at St. Michael's Cathedral, a post he held for 35 years. He was a remarkable teacher of the organ and piano, theory, harmony and counterpoint. It is said of Harold Armstrong that "His work put a trained musician on many an empty organ bench, not only in Toronto, but across Canada". He was also the first conductor of the Tenor and Bass Choir (known, naturally, as the "T.B.'s".) This choir was formed in part to help the teen-age boys of the Choir School over the frequent psychological trauma of voice-change.

So Father Ronan was, in the late 1920's and early 1930's, laying the groundwork for his Cathedral Schola Cantorum, which was to open on Bond Street, in Toronto, next door to St. Michael's Cathedral, in 1937. He had practically no financial backing, but did have an unalterable resolve to create a school where boys from the Archdiocese of Toronto could attend and receive an academic, as well as a musical, education which would result in a "pool" of musicians who would serve the parishes of the

Archdiocese as choirmasters, singers and organists, as well as the Cathedral as singers and cantors for the several Masses each week-end.

Meanwhile, also in the early 1930's, Father Ronan was pursuing his own studies, and in 1932 he made a big decision. Turning his duties at St. Augustine's Seminary over to Father Belanger, he left for Rome to attend the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music. He was then 38 years of age.

In Rome, Father Ronan studied Gregorian aesthetics under Dom Ferretti; polyphony with Monsignor Casimiri; conducting with Monsignor Refice, and fugue with Cesare Dobici, as well as other well-known teachers of Catholic liturgical music.

Languages came easily to Father Ronan, and he learned to speak fluent Italian, French and German, as well as some Spanish. In Rome he received his Master's degree in Gregorian Chant and his Licentiate in Sacred Composition from the Pontifical Institute. During his summer holidays he studied in Vienna, Munich, London and Paris, taking courses from such masters as Abbé Brun, Paul Fauchet, Louis Vierne, and, naturally, Nadia Boulanger.

During his long absence in Europe he kept in touch with his friends and colleagues in Toronto by an endless stream of postcards. Many of these are preserved, and one, posted in Munich in 1934, and addressed to Joan Hopperton, is reproduced in this section.

In 1936 Father Ronan returned to Toronto to resume his teaching at St. Augustine's Seminary. Archbishop McNeil had been succeeded by Archbishop (later Cardinal) McGuigan.

The new Archbishop quickly announced that Father Ronan was taking charge of the music at St. Michael's Cathedral, and a year later the priest-musician from Colgan achieved his life-long ambition; permission to start his Schola Cantorum. The event took place quietly, and was almost unnoticed in musical circles. In October, 1937 (the opening was delayed by a few weeks by a polio scare), 18 boys, Father Ronan and Joan Hopperton assembled in one room at 67 Bond Street, in Toronto, just across the street from the main building of the present School.

The Cathedral Schola Cantorum was to occupy that site for the next thirteen years.

