

'The Great McAlpine'

The Greatest Athlete Newtownards Ever Produced

By D. B. FERGUSON

"Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Martin Breedies, world's strongest man." Inside the massive threefold tent on Tuesday night last I was a very interested spectator as the great Irish showman Mr. John Duffy, introduced his various celebrities to an eager audience. Issuing a challenge on behalf of his strong man, the never-grow-old Johnny, speaking through his 'mike' said, that sitting among them tonight as a spectator, was one of the greatest artistes who had ever trod the boards, or sawdust ring — Mr. Bob McAlpine, of Newtownards, now residing at Bangor, who, as 'The Great McAlpine', had worn the crown of three countries for feats of strength, Mr. Duffy concluded by adding, that the challenge did not apply to Bob, whom he hoped would keep his seat.

A GREAT SHOWMAN

Martin Breedies gave a splendid performance of physical strength, but I've yet to see any modern Samson give as daring and spectacular a performance as our own local man when he was in his prime. What a thrill we got in days gone by when, seizing a 56 lb. weight in each hand, he jumped on to a table and from it on to a springboard weighed down at one end with a massive barbell. Swish went the 200 lbs weight high into the air, thud went the fifty-sixers to the ground, and 'The Great McAlpine' braced his muscles to catch the descending barbell on his forearms. I wonder what memories of past triumphs passed through his mind as artistes whom he had performed with on the same bill, saluted him from the ring, before doing their stuff.

PAST TRIUMPHS

Maybe — in memory, Bob went back to South Africa on the night he won that country's championship. Or in his mind's eye, did he again visit Budapest on the evening he dropped a fifty-sixer in the promoter's box (when catching the flying barbell) and the Russian promoter had to take a prolonged rest cure. One thing sure, should he live to a ripe old age — Mr. McAlpine should, and I hope he does, he will never run out of memories when thinking of past victories.

Born and bred in Newtownards he trained himself up to a perfect specimen of manhood and carried his strongman banner all round the world. Personally I thought it a very nice gesture on the part of Mr. Duffy to pay tribute to Mr. McAlpine, one of our circuse's leading artistes and champion strongmen of his day.

A couple of years before his death.

A VERY CONDENSED PEN PICTURE

I am taking advantage of this week's dullness in football affairs to give a very condensed pen picture of the greatest exponent of physical culture which Newtownards has ever reared. Old timers will immediately jump to the name of Mr. R. A. McAlpine, who as 'The Great McAlpine', headed the bills in amusement halls in practically every city in Great Britain, South Africa, France, Belgium, Lapland, Russia. It is not necessary to state to the older inhabitants of the town that I am dealing with authentic facts regarding one of the greatest weightlifters of his time. But the young sporting generation are apt to look with a dubious eye on



R. A. McAlpine

amazing records of past athletes, and so I would like this younger school to realize, that all the following performances which I relate here, are copied from the daily and weekly papers circulating at that period.

CHAMPION OF SOUTH AFRICA

R. A. McAlpine, born in Newtownards soon discovered that he was naturally endowed with a great strength, and turned to physical culture just as a hobby, and later as a profession, following a method of training which he had devised himself, and brought his body to such a state of physical perfection through severe self discipline where

his whole nervous system and every muscle of his body became servants to a strong will power, at the age of 24 was recognised as South Africa's strongest and most perfectly developed man.

IRELAND'S CROWN

This title was not gained in a foreign country by any ready-made path. It was only won after many contests against challengers of all nationalities, and on leaving Africa in October 1907, this position was filled by his brother Henry, who opened the chain of physical culture schools widely known throughout the Union of South Africa.

Fresh from his laurels and back in his homeland, 'The Great McAlpine' was soon flooded with challenges from Ireland's Strongest Men. The next newspaper records give full accounts of these contests in the Wellington Hall, Belfast, where after marching from victory to victory, McAlpine was declared the Champion Strong Man of Ireland. It is well to remember at this point that his body weight in all these contests was 12 stones 10 pounds, and that some of these opponents whom he stepped over to be crowned, weighed 18 stones of hardened manhood.

DEFEATS ITALIAN CHAMPION

Yet another par. at that time gives a glowing account of the contest between Vincent Gargano and R. A. McAlpine at the Tokio Hall, Linenhall Street, Belfast. Gargano claimed the Italian Championship, but that did not deter the Newtownards man, who already wore two crowns, from conceding Gargano 56 lbs in one lift, and sending him home to his sunny climate a wiser but beaten champion.

Shortly after this contest McAlpine was offered and accepted a touring engagement of all the leading music halls, where open challenges were thrown out to all and sundry, and were always accepted without restriction, but the McAlpine slate was kept clean — never once was he equalled, never mind defeated.

A FLAWLESS MAKE UP

Everyone will understand that a tour of this sort just mentioned, means that challenges are always accepted by the strong men of every city and town who have a local reputation to sustain. These men generally insist on doing

things in their own particular way, and generally have to get doing it so, as they are the local favourites — with the crowd behind them — and crowds like to see title holders defeated. Therefore the champion must always be in top form, as any lack of condition would prove disastrous. Anyone setting himself a task like the above must not only have a convincing brand of courage in his make up, but a make up free from all discernible flaws, such as staleness, and the off-form bogy which, in McAlpine's own words is generally a lack of concentration and interest in your job.

AN OPEN CHALLENGE

Many of the old-timers will remember McAlpine's tour of Ireland in 1913 with Duffy's Circus when he challenged, met and defeated 12 strong men per day for six months. This averaged six men at each twice nightly show, and was preceded at every performance by 45 minutes exhibition work, which always included the spectacular feat of lifting a horse and rider clean off the platform. It is impossible for me with the space at my command to give detailed accounts of McAlpine's life and contests, but I now take some of the local events in his career not heretofore mentioned. Sam Brown recognised as the best man Belfast had known as a wrestler and weightlifter wrote in December 1907 asking if 'The Great McAlpine would meet him in an open contest.'

REMAINED IN THE ONE HAND LIFT UNEQUALLED

The reply from the kingpin of strong men was — "Please come when ready." The contest took place in the Orange Hall, Newtownards, and the result of that challenge match will be remembered by all who thronged into the above building. Sam Brown, worthy of a strong man's name, lifted manfully and well up to 224 lbs. Sixteen stones he pushed above his head with two hands but this was his limit, and he failed to do another pound.

McAlpine at this stage, uncorking the stuff of which champions are made, ordered 14 lbs. more to be added to each end of the barbell, making a total weight of 252 lbs. This he raised from the floor above his head, and held it there with one hand only. This feat stands today unbeaten!

REMAINED CHAMPION

In August 1913, six of the best and strongest men in Dublin under Mr. Wright, the above City's famed gymnastic instructor challenged and met McAlpine at Greystones, Dalkey, Malahide and Bray, but all bowed their heads in defeat, and our man's crown never once even wobbled. At Manorhamilton, McAlpine met and defeated the famous Paddy Gaffney who was credited with getting below his cart when loaded with turf and carrying the lot from the bog. Next came Mick Walsh of Macroom, who could throw a 56 lb weight further than any other athlete living at that time. Mick's pet hobby was to follow strong men's shows and then step up at their performances, accept their challenges, and relieve them of silver cups by defeating them. At this particular time the Roland Brothers, two German weightlifters and all round strong men, were doing their stuff with the late Buffalo Bill Circus. After Mick Walsh had won five cups off the Roland Bros., by beating them at their game, realizing the prestige of the circus was at stake, Mr. Buffalo Bill wired for R. A. McAlpine who duly turned up at Limerick. What was the result? Why, Walsh got no more trophies; two strong men went back to Germany and one remained king of the iron men.

THE BIG SHOW

Then came the Great War, and McAlpine threw in his weight with the biggest show of all. He had four and a half



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years' service with Commander Locker Lampson's Armoured Car Squadron where he held the position of physical training expert and sports organiser. During active service all ex-Servicemen realise that living conditions are far from ideal. Nevertheless Sergeant Major McAlpine managed to keep fit at all times under every sort of conditions. This was absolutely necessary as he was expected to keep all units under him in good condition, and to organise sports meetings and concerts whenever circumstances permitted. At all these war time sporting events McAlpine headed the bill. Exhibitions of strength and muscle control were given by him, and challenges were as usual thrown out, and accepted by strong men of many countries.

The following are some of the places where such contests occurred: France, Lapland, Belgium, Russia and included such towns as Archangel, Moscow, Odessa, Kieve, Baku and Uladikaykas. Add to this list the various camps in Mespot, Bagdad, Basra, etc., and you have a bird's eye view of the lands where 'The Great McAlpine' (born and bred in Newtownards) planted his standard of strongest man, and none had the strength to tear it from his hand.

PROUD OF HIS NATIVE TOWN

Bob was mighty proud of his native town, and the people were mighty proud of Bob, and the records he set up as Ireland's and South Africa's strongest man. From the first day he entered into the professional life of a champion weightlifter, he proved himself a super showman, and his amazing feats of strength made him for years a page one personality. In his quest for fame, he thrilled thousands with his dead weight lifts, bent arm presses and other acts such as raising horses off their feet, and printing his full name on a blackboard with a fifty six pound weight slung on his little finger.

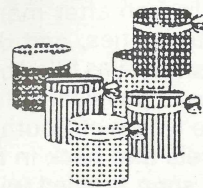
A FEARLESS CRITIC

Bob was a most interesting man, and entertaining talker and time passed quickly when he told of his exploits in

R. A. McAlpine



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Russia, in which he spent several years during the Great War.

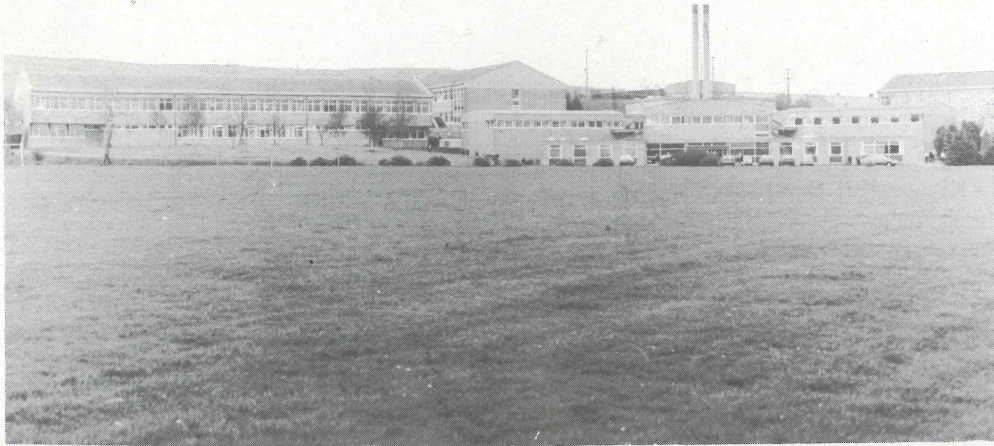
Frank and outspoken he carried the courage of his convictions, and when he was pleased his eyes shone and a puckish smile plucked at the corners of his mouth. He loved to prove himself smarter than newspaper men who took on themselves to criticise and prophesy, and he was capable of the most joyous gloating I ever saw. It used to make one glad that one had been wrong, and he had been right, because it seemed to give him so much pleasure.

PASSING OF MR. R. A. McALPINE

Arriving home from a week's holiday in the Lower Ards I received the sad news of the death of my old friend and sporting associate Mr. R. A. McAlpine. His death, I may say never came to me as a surprise. A few weeks previously I had visited him at his home in Bangor, but only the shadow of 'The Great McAlpine' spoke to me from his armchair.

NEWTOWNARD'S GREATEST ATHLETE

Nothing is so dead as the days that have passed. Yesterday to him was only a dream, and only the trailing clouds of memory remained. Yet with all his pain, and the end which he knew was near he tried to prove himself the old entertaining host of days that are now no more, and spoke at times of the periods of his conquests. In mind at any rate he proved himself 'The Great McAlpine' to the end, and if I can look the Grim Reaper as straight in the eyes without quivering as he did, I will be more than satisfied. So life goes — like that. But as a fitting testimonial it could well be carved on Mr. McAlpine's tombstone: "Here lies the greatest athlete ever born and reared in the town of Newtownards, Co. Down. Born 1882 Died 1939."



Dundonald High School.

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Junior Library Studies, from left: Jonathan Derby, Richard Waring, Ryan McClernon, Mark Moles and Andrew Jago.

Mr. G. Ritchie with Karen Rigby and Lyndsey Coulter.

