

Singers, Sessions, and Songs



At nine o'clock on Friday night, June 8, 2001, the streets of Dublin are crowded with groups of young men and women, laughing and talking as they make their leisurely ways to their favorite local pubs. I (Stan Scott) drive past the green expanse of Merrion Square, skirt the walls of Trinity College, pass underneath the tracks of the commuter train, and park beside Trinity Inn on Pearse Street. Entering the pub, I recognize the grizzled red beard of Luke Cheevers, standing at the bar and gathering a round of drinks for some of his convivial partners in song. Luke is a long-time member of the *Góilín* (pronounced "go-lean") Singers' Club, a group of traditional singers who have been meeting to sing on Friday nights for more than two decades. Club member Jerry O'Reilly explains that the title *góilín* "comes from two things . . . an expression for singing, in Connemara, . . . and also, it's an outlet from something out into a bigger thing. And this is what we're endeavouring to do—pushing it [traditional singing] out into the mainstream of Irish life" (O'Reilly in discussion with authors, 2001).

The choice of a Gaelic term for singing from the rugged Connemara countryside is highly significant, because Connemara is considered the heartland of *sean-nós* (literally "old style") singing, the bedrock of Irish traditional song. Connemara is one of several pockets, collectively known as the *gaeltacht*, where the Irish language has survived as an unbroken, dominant linguistic tradition. Connemara *sean-nós* singing features Gaelic lyrics, and favors highly ornamented, drawn-out modal melodies, sung a cappella by a solo vocalist. In the *Góilín* Singers' Club, *sean-nós* songs are heard along with English language songs, both being acknowledged as important parts of the Irish singing tradition.

The pub resounds with the energetic chatter of Dubliners beginning their weekend. Exchanging greetings with Luke, I proceed up the stairs to a quieter room, where the singing will begin at ten o'clock. I am greeted by Jerry O'Reilly's wife Anne, who chats with a friend while collecting a small admission fee from each person who enters the ses-

sion. Various cassette tapes and CDs are displayed on the table beside her, recordings of traditional songs produced over the years by the club.

From the entrance, one faces lengthwise down a long, rectangular room, lined with cushioned benches against the walls. Ten square tables stand just inside the benches, each surrounded by low stools. A bartender serves drinks from a bar against the short wall to the right of the entrance.

Jerry O'Reilly joins me and asks cheerfully what I'll have to drink. In the *Góilín*, one encounters the interplay of two sets of rituals: those of Irish pub life in general, and those of this singers' club in particular. Irish pub etiquette stresses the principles of hospitality, generosity, and reciprocity. Hospitality mandates that I be offered a drink upon arriving, generosity requires that as a visitor I not pay for that drink, and reciprocity assures that, in the course of the evening, I will return the favor in kind. The special rituals of the *Góilín* Singers' Club will come into play when the singing is about to begin.

I join Jerry at a table halfway down the room. A few minutes before the singing starts, Jerry moves about and has a quiet word with two singers. He then returns to our table and asks discreetly if I would be willing to sing the second song of the night. To get the evening rolling, the first three singers are prearranged. As in all traditional singing sessions, the choice of repertoire is left entirely to the individual singer, who in most cases will decide spontaneously what he or she will sing, perhaps taking a cue from the preceding song. Preselecting the first three performers gives each of them a chance to prepare, selecting a song and running through it mentally before the session actually begins. The first three songs give other singers a chance to think about what they would like to sing, and by the time three songs have gone by, the members have overcome the initial shyness that might result in a night dominated by talking rather than singing. Preselecting the first singers also gives the club some loose control over the sort of repertoire that will be sung. If the first singers have a stock of traditional songs and a grasp of Irish traditional aesthetics, the tone of the evening will be established early on, and subsequent singers will be more likely to choose "appropriate" repertoire.

As ten o'clock approaches, the room begins to fill. I count fourteen women and twenty-four men, ranging in age from near twenty to sixty-plus. On this occasion, all are Caucasian, and most are Irish; many are Dubliners, but some travel from other parts of Ireland to attend the session. They come from a variety of working backgrounds: government employees, teachers, steel workers, computer programmers, students,

bus drivers, and one or two professional folklorists. The only prerequisite for attendance is a love of Irish traditional singing. Care is taken to offer encouragement to all the singers, often in the form of spontaneous responses during a song ("good man!" "good girl!" "that's the stuff!"), as well as applause at its conclusion.

Instrumental accompaniment is absent from sessions of the *Góilín Singers' Club*. The art of accompanying Irish singing on the harp, only recently revived after a break of almost two centuries, has not reentered common practice, and the guitar, in the minds of many traditional music enthusiasts, is associated with staged, professional (and therefore "inauthentic") performances. In clubs like the *Góilín*, the emphasis is on songs handed down from generations of amateur singers, whose intimate manner of unaccompanied singing places primary emphasis on details of phrasing, ornamentation, and storytelling that can easily be lost when accompaniment is provided. Melodically, many Irish tunes reveal a pitch logic that is modal rather than harmonic, and the imposition of conventional chord changes often works at cross-purposes with such melodies. Rhythmically, Irish folk songs tend to be sung in free rhythm, or with a very free treatment of any underlying meter; instrumental accompaniment tends to regularize tempo, obscuring or erasing the rhythmic nuances passed down by older generations of singers. To be sure, some Irish traditional songs are composed in strict meter with an obvious harmonic structure, and even the modal tunes in free rhythm can be tastefully accompanied with effective drones and counter-melodies by musicians who have an ear for the style, but such musicians are uncommon. At the *Góilín*, skilled accompanists may attend and sing, but they leave their instruments at home.

A handful of core members take turns emceeing Friday night sessions; tonight's master of ceremonies is Luke Cheevers. At ten o'clock, he stands beside the display of recordings near the entrance, rings a large hand bell, and then welcomes all present to the twenty-second year of *Góilín* club meetings. He makes a few announcements, and the singing begins.

The first to sing is a young man named Pat, who sings a "night-visit" song in English. The theme of the night-visit genre is a clandestine meeting of two lovers; in many of these songs the young woman is summoned to her bedroom window by the tapping of her young suitor, who has braved all manner of perils (including darkness, cold, rain, and the wrath of her parents sleeping in the next room) to spend the night by her side. The tone may range from humor (the awakening of a parent and the subsequent punishment of the daughter and flight of her

lover) to tragedy (the young man's vow to commit suicide because parental objections and class differences doom their love to a single night of bliss followed by a lifetime of separation). Pat has chosen one of the more serious representatives of the genre.

As the designated second singer, I follow Pat's song of ill-fated love with a humorous love song, in which a traveling man asks a young woman the way to the Blarney Stone (an object alleged to have the magical power of bestowing flattering speech on those who kiss it). The lass replies that "the only Blarney Stone I know is underneath my nose"—an invitation to kiss her. I select this song partly because it seems to fit well after Pat's night-visit song, and partly because many of the singers present will recognize it as a favorite of the late Tom Lenihan, a much-loved singer from West Clare. When such a song becomes closely associated with a singer, it is regarded almost as his personal property; others will avoid presuming to sing it in his presence. Performing it after the "proprietor" of the song has passed on can be a kind of homage to the singer, and the song takes on added meaning; singers who knew Tom Lenihan hear not only the tune and the story, but also the echo of his voice and manner. You may hear Tom Lenihan singing "The Blarney Stone" on CD track 20.

The third singer is Nick Ó Murchú, who, like many of the singers present, spent the previous weekend at the Clare Festival of Traditional Singing. Nick begins a ballad entitled "Mary and the Russian Sailor," but after three traditional verses the song mutates into a farcical contemporary account of a tennis accident. At the Clare Festival the previous Sunday, a singer named Mick Fowler (who is known for singing "Mary and the Russian Sailor" at *Góilín* sessions) ruptured his Achilles' tendon playing doubles with singer Johnny Moynihan and Dora Hast, one of the authors of this book. It is a mark of the vitality of the singing tradition that a ballad about this event has already been composed and performed, less than a week after the incident, but this is only the *first* account of the game to appear in song; within a week, another will be sent to the email of Irish folklorist Tom Munnely.

The creation of such ballads illustrates the community-oriented nature of song making in the Irish tradition. Although Irish singing enthusiasts are spread throughout Ireland and beyond, the number of singers is small, constituting a mobile affinity group drawn together in various locations by a common love of singing. In previous generations, ballads about local events would be composed for an audience of perhaps a hundred neighbors who had personally known the characters in the story. The airplane, automobile, and computer have now made it

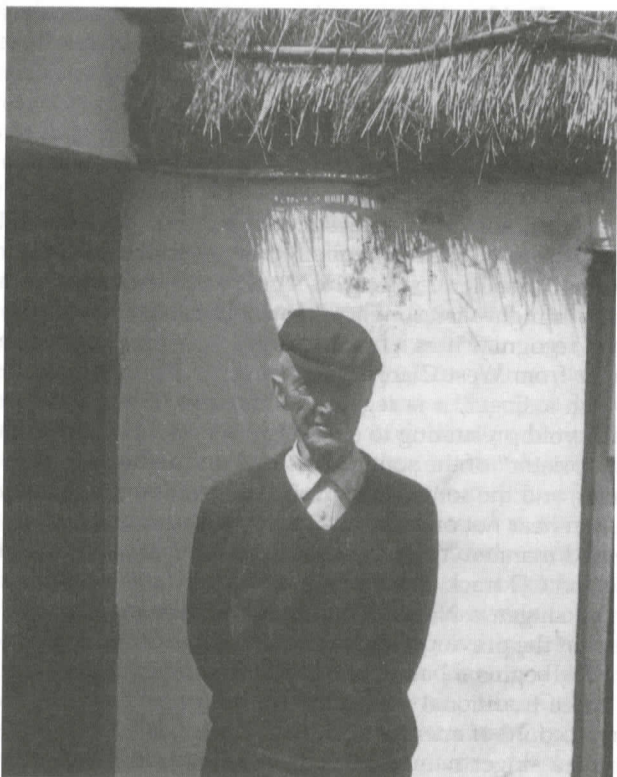


FIGURE 5.1 Tom Lenihan in front of his house in Miltown Malbay. (Photo by Stan Scott)

possible for such "local" ballads to reach a similarly small audience of friends and acquaintances, but spread across an international landscape.

The spirit of this community becomes audible when singers join in on the chorus of a song. You can get a sense of this by listening to CD track 21, in which Jerry O'Reilly sings "The Carmagnole," a song dating from the 1798 Irish uprising against British rule. *Carmagnole* is the name of a tune and dance that were popular in France at the time of the French revolution. Irish nationalists of the time looked to France, which had declared war on England and Holland, as an ally in securing Irish liberty.



FIGURE 5.2 Jerry O'Reilly. (Photo by Stan Scott)

Some of the following lyrics require explanation: *Gallia* is France, the *tocsin* is a warning bell or alarm signal, the *Carmagnole* represents the spirit of the French revolution, and the "Great Batavian Line," was the government formed by French revolutionaries in Holland (Moylan 2000, 16). *Fleur de lis* was the coat of arms of the prerevolution French monarchy. The song describes a sea battle between the French and the English.

'Twas in the year of Ninety-three,
The French did plant an olive tree
A symbol of great Liberty,
And the patriots danced all around it;
The tools of murder, near and far,
The sons of Freedom thought to fear—
But Gallia taught new modes of war—
And the tocsin it was sounded.

Chorus:

For was not I oft' telling thee,
The French could fight right heartily
And the Carmagnole would make you free,
Ah but you would never mind me.

In Ninety-four a new campaign
The tools of darkness did maintain—
Gallia's sons did form and train,
Which left their foes astounded.
They gave to Flanders Liberty;
And dealt their shot so far and free,
Tha Dutch and Austrians home did flee,
Which left the Dukes confounded.

(Chorus)

On June the first two ships at sea,
Did drub each other heartily,
Both sides claimed the victory
And gloried in the slaughter.
Jean Bon St. André was the boy,
The hero of the French convoy—
John Bull rang out his bells in joy,
Which gave the French much laughter.

(Chorus)

Behold the great Batavian line,
Emancipate with France combine—
May laurels green all on them shine,
And may their sons long wear them—
May every tyrant quake in dread,
And tremble for his dreary head—
May fleur de lis in dust be laid
And men no longer wear it.

(Chorus)

For old church and state, in a close embrace,
Are the burdens of the human race,
When people tell you to your face,
That long you will repent it;

For kings on thrones, and preaching drones,
Are the cause of all our heavy groans,
Down from your pulpits, down from your thrones,
You will tumble unlamented.

(Chorus)

(Moylan 2000, 16)

Jerry O'Reilly concludes this performance by singing the original French lyric and tune of "The Carmagnole." (Another performance of "The Carmagnole" is available on Jerry O'Reilly's CD *Down From Your Pulpits, Down From Your Thrones*, Craft Recordings CRCDO4.)

Although Jerry O'Reilly took this song from the recently published book *The Age of Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition* (Moylan 2000, 16), Jerry's rendition reveals the process of oral transmission at work in more than a dozen changes to the words from the published version. For example:

Published version:

And patriots danced around it
And the Carmagnole would
make you flee
And soon their foes confounded
Down from your pulpits and
your thrones

O'Reilly version:

And the patriots danced all around it
And the Carmagnole would
make you free
Which left their foes astounded
Down from your pulpits, down
from your thrones

Some of these changes ("And the patriots danced all around it," and "Down from your pulpits, down from your thrones") add rhythmic energy, enhancing both momentum and meaning. Some ("flee" to "free") significantly alter the significance of a line, while others ("confounded" to "astounded") create only a minor change in meaning, but illustrate the traditional singer's liberty to play with a text, as long as the central message is undistorted.

ACTIVITY 5.1 Sing "The Carmagnole" with class members taking turns singing individual verses and all joining on the chorus.

"The Carmagnole" is not sung tonight, but is included in this chapter to represent sing-alongs heard at the Góilín. A young woman fol-

lows Nick Ó Murchú's song of the singer's tennis accident with a serious contemporary ballad by Scottish songwriter Dick Gaughan. The inclusion of modern compositions is not unusual. Irish traditional singing is not static; new songs are often heard, and a few eventually become staples of the repertoire.

The next two songs relate to seasonal rituals: "Dancing at Whitsun," and "The Boys of Barr na Sráide." Irish Gaelic singing makes its first appearance in the following selection, a macaronic composition. Macaronic songs are linguistic hybrids, in which verses alternate between English and Irish. Many Irish songs in this ancient verse form were composed in the nineteenth century, when much of Gaelic-speaking Ireland became bilingual. (Ó Muirthe 1999, 356).

The macaronic song is succeeded not by singing, but by a recitation; Luke Cheevers presents a humorous poem by Percy French entitled "Queen Victoria's After-Dinner Speech." Luke's performance is lent further hilarity by a heckler, who punctuates his recitation with critical comments and corrections. The session is not limited to singing, but welcomes poetry and storytelling, and even good-natured heckling is included among the verbal arts represented.

Luke's recitation is followed by the macaronic *Siúil a rúin* ("Walk, my love"), which had great currency in the United States during the anti-Vietnam war movement under the English title "Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier." The first half of the evening then concludes with a delicate, florid *sean-nós* sung entirely in Gaelic.

After this song, Luke Cheevers rings the bell a second time, and announces that the newly published *The Age of Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition 1776 to 1815*, is available for sale. The editor of the book, Terry Moylan, sits beside Jerry O'Reilly. The bell marks the midpoint of the session and a break in the singing; silence gives way to the animated roar of conversation, and singers gather at the bar to order rounds of drinks.

During the intermission, I observe a number of posters on the walls advertising song-related events: concerts, festivals, and publications. Jerry O'Reilly makes his rounds, enlisting three singers to begin the second half of the session. When people have had a chance to talk for a few minutes and replenish their drinks, Luke Cheevers reads a number of announcements. The lights dim, the bell rings, and the singing resumes.

The singers become more adventurous in the second half. Two *sean-nós* songs follow the ringing of the bell. Terry Moylan then sings "I'm Done with Bonaparte," an intriguing selection. As the editor of *The Age*

of *Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition*, Terry has collected and published a large number of pro-Bonaparte songs, all reflecting the hope of late eighteenth century Irishmen that Napoleon would come to liberate Ireland from British rule. "I'm Done with Bonaparte" breaks from this tradition by expressing disappointment in the French republican-turned-dictator, who never did come to liberate the Irish. In poetic and melodic style (though not in meaning), the song seems to fit well with others of the era, and I am quite surprised when Terry informs me that it was written by rock composer Mark Knopfler in 1998, the bicentennial anniversary of Ireland's aborted 1798 rebellion.

Terry's singing is succeeded by a *sean-nós*, and then by the English language song "Wondrous Mayo," representing a very common Irish song genre: odes in praise of the Irish landscape. Emigrants bound for the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wrote many such songs. They give us a good look at the thoughts and emotions of Irishmen who were forced by financial circumstances to leave beloved friends, relatives, and places for an uncertain future in the New World. Clichés like the "shamrock shore" abound, and it is easy to criticize many of the emigrant songs for maudlin sentimentality. However, to truly appreciate this repertoire one must understand it *locally*, as the product, not of professional lyricists, but of actual farmers and fishermen who made the difficult sea voyage from Ireland to America, leaving behind parents, neighbors, sweethearts, and a landscape that they most likely would never see again.

Even among aficionados of Irish traditional singing, the discipline of sticking to "authentic" repertoire wears thin over the course of three hours. In the penultimate song of the night, this stylistic "dam" begins to burst, with the rendering of an American chain gang song. Irish singers are quite aware of the historical and stylistic connections between Irish and American folk music, and American songs often find their way into Irish traditional sessions. Singers enthusiastically join the choruses of "Breakin' Rocks All Day on a Chain Gang," and this communal spirit continues into group singing of the Gaelic choruses of the last "official" song in the session: "I Spent a Year Down in Kilrush."

The stylistic barrier collapses entirely as soon as the official singing is over. While singers talk, finish their drinks, stand, and prepare to leave, a gentleman who had earlier sung a lively, somewhat risqué Gaelic song entertains a small group of listeners by singing "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," with a strong American accent and the stage mannerisms of a Las Vegas nightclub entertainer.

THE GÓILÍN SINGERS' CLUB AND THE FOLK REVIVAL

On the day after the session described above, we met Jerry O'Reilly at Hughes' pub in Dublin. Sitting in a quiet corner, Jerry outlined the history of the club:

The two founding members of the Góilín Singers' Club were Tim Dennehy and Donal de Barra . . . The first place that the Góilín took place, was in the Pembroke Lounge in Pembroke Street, in 1979. I came along about a year after the founding of it . . .

What happened then was that around 1984, Tim Dennehy, who was sort of the driving force, moved away to live in Clare, and at that point we were sort of—I won't say we were rudderless—but for about a year or so, we just seemed to be drifting along, and the whole stage, we were at a very low ebb. The club—eight of us sat inside—and I remember somebody saying to me, "There's only the eight of us; it's hardly worthwhile going upstairs to sing." And I said, "Quite the opposite; it's more important than ever that we go up and sing."

I went to Clare in July, and I spoke to Tim Dennehy, and Tim and I had a drink and we discussed the whole thing, and he said, "How's the club goin'?" So [I said] "It's at a very low ebb, Tim; it's on its last legs." And I said, "I'm reluctant to get involved," because I wasn't involved; I was just an attendee at that stage. And Tim said, "Do you think it's worthwhile?" And [I said], "I think it's very important." He says, "If you think it's important you should get involved."

So on the basis of that, when I came back from Clare, I contacted Luke, and some of the other main movers, and set up a meeting. And at that meeting we actually set up the structure we have now. Which is that we have an ad hoc committee, not elected. The people on the committee are chosen, people we know. Somebody said to me, "How do you get onto the committee?" And I said "You don't." You're asked; if you're the right person, you will be asked . . .

Anyway, we had a meeting, and at that thing we hammered out a structure that we would have a guest every third week, and every third guest would be a guest Irish language singer. And then we would also try and produce various CDs, tapes, and things to do with singing and songs. And we have adhered to that policy ever since. And thank God, it seems the club is prospering ever since (O'Reilly in discussion with authors, 2001).

Jerry O'Reilly's account reveals important features of the philosophy underlying the Góilín. The club was created by singers for the purpose of singing. It is not a case of a pub hiring musicians to provide entertainment for the pub's patrons, but of singers seeking out a pub willing to let them use a room to entertain themselves. The Góilín started small, and only survived because some key individuals believed in the importance of continuing to sing traditional songs, even when only a handful of singers seemed interested. The Góilín's organizational calendar, nightly rituals, and ad hoc committee were created in response to the club's near extinction.

Committee membership, like the structure of each session, reveals an interesting blend of formal and informal, and illustrates the interaction of two important principles that seem to operate in every folk music revival: the inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Inclusiveness—the welcoming of any and all singers, the opportunity for anyone to sing, and the lack of amplification equipment, a formal stage, or a pre-fixed concert program—incorporate traditional values and impart to each session the atmosphere of an informal get-together. Formality and exclusiveness—the ringing of the bell, the function of the emcee, the preselection of the first three singers in each half of the evening, and the restriction of committee membership to the "right people," as defined by the committee—provide a certain measure of artistic, social, and temporal control.

Why do the members of the Góilín Singers' Club feel the need for a formal, weekly meeting to sing traditional songs? The answer has to do with the nature of folk music revivals, and with the particular situation of Irish traditional singing in contemporary Dublin. Ireland is one of scores of countries in which the rediscovery and promotion of indigenous music has played a key role in the creation of a postcolonial culture. The performing arts of subject peoples often suffer from a lack of prestige and patronage; a sort of cultural "inferiority complex" beset many of the subjects of European colonization, from the far East to the New World, and certainly affected the life of Irish music under British rule. In Ireland as elsewhere, the birth of nationalism coincided with the kindling of a passionate interest in cultural features, such as language and music, which distinguished the host people from their foreign rulers. Alongside of this nationalistic motive, we may place another: the desire to document waning folk traditions before they entirely disappear, and, when possible, to stimulate their resurgence.

In Ireland's case, this resurgence faced significant challenges on multiple fronts. Gaelic song and the Irish language had died out across most

of the country by the time the Gaelic League initiated its Celtic revival in the 1890s. Even after independence was achieved in 1922, traditional music in Ireland fought an uphill battle, against both the continuing legacy of the colonial psychology (regarding indigenous art as being inherently "inferior" or "backward") and competition from a new source: the international spread of American popular music. In each postindependence generation of Irish musicians, individuals have had to choose between the urban, upbeat, high-volume allure of swing, rock and roll, country and western, heavy metal, or rap and the more rural, frequently slower-paced, quieter, intimate appeal of Irish traditional music. Some musicians chose one direction, and some the other. Increasingly, however, they have taken to blending the two, mixing styles and instruments from folk and contemporary sources to create new hybrid forms.

In singers' clubs like the *Góilín*, traditional music lovers create a protected space in which folk music is passed on in what they regard as authentic, unadulterated forms. The goal is not only to protect the music, but to perpetuate the cultural values surrounding it: social inclusiveness, respect and a welcome for each singer, a grasp of traditional aesthetics, an emphasis on the local (in songs about particular events, people, and places), and an emphasis on song as a medium for conveying history and an Irish understanding of it. To these values must be added another: the infusion of new life by the addition of newly composed songs in traditional styles.

The model for these clubs seems to come from England, and particularly from London's "The Singers' Club," founded in the 1950s by playwright, songwriter, and traditional singer Ewan MacColl in collaboration with folklorists and musicians such as Alan Lomax, Séamus Ennis, and Peggy Seeger. The motives for creating such clubs were several: to promote folk music as an emblem of cultural, national, or class identity, and to provide a forum for traditions that were in danger of being squeezed out of existence by the homogenizing force of the mass media.

In addition to competing with more popular forms of modern entertainment, traditional Irish singing faces additional competition from its close kin and frequent allies: traditional instrumental music and dancing. Since the 1960s, pub sessions featuring impromptu gatherings of instrumentalists have steadily increased in popularity, as more and more players and listeners have found inspiration in the recordings and performances of professional groups like the Chieftains, Planxty, The Bothy Band, and Altan. Unaccompanied solo singing, especially in the Irish language (which is unintelligible to many modern Irish listeners, in spite of their required study of it in the national schools), is not al-

ways welcome in contemporary pub sessions. Singers start a club to create a refuge, not only from pop music generated by an electric band, juke box, radio or television, but also from instrumental sessions in which singing is effectively excluded.

Singers' clubs are not the only place where traditional singing is heard. The ancient Irish tradition of gathering to enjoy all kinds of home-made entertainment, including singing, storytelling, instrumental music and dancing, lives on in informal gatherings in particular homes and pubs, but they can be difficult to find. The parameters of *Góilín* club meetings—Fridays from ten o'clock until one o'clock in the morning, with no instruments allowed and the mix carefully spiked with singers who will stick to "authentic" repertoire—is, no doubt, artificial, but it provides Dublin's traditional singing enthusiasts with a reliable source of opportunities to hear and be heard, and a way of meeting other singers, in whose company more spontaneous, informal sessions can and do occur.

In Chapter 6 we will take a closer look at the Gaelic and English singing traditions in the experience of two singer-collectors: Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin and Len Graham.

The *Sean-nós* in the New Ireland: Irish Singing Traditions



In a broad sense the term *sean-nós*, meaning "old style," refers to Irish traditional singing in Gaelic and English as well as a style of step dancing. In common use, *sean-nós* is used to distinguish traditional Gaelic singing from its English language counterpart. In this book we usually use it to refer to Gaelic singing, but sometimes to describe the old style of singing in both languages.

Although Gaelic speech and song had died across much of Ireland by the turn of the twentieth century, the tradition is unbroken for native speakers and singers in several areas, especially in the Connemara *gaeltacht*. This being the case, the term "old style" may be somewhat misleading; Liam Mac Con Iomaire writes, "as the line of singing has never been broken the style is as modern as it is old" (Mac Con Iomaire 1999, 336).

THE LYRICS OF *SEAN-NÓS*

When professional bards sang the praises of an Irish-speaking aristocracy, the ancestors of modern *sean-nós* songs were fashioned by full-time poets and musicians, and would be more properly described as "art" songs than folk songs. Most of the *sean-nós* repertoire sung today is anonymous, probably composed between 1600 and 1850, and was maintained by amateur singers in rural areas after the extinction of the bardic profession, but modern composers continue to add new songs to the tradition (Vallely 1999, 339).

Several dominant poetic genres of *sean-nós* were adopted into the Irish language from Anglo-Norman culture between 1200 and 1600 CE. Irish secular song, like that of England and continental Europe, followed the example of the French *chanson de amour courtois* ("song of courtly

love"), with its subgenres of the "pastoral love song," the "song of the deserted young girl," and the "song of the unfaithful wife." These themes moved directly from French into Irish, sometimes in line-by-line adaptations (*ibid.*, 341).

While the Norman influence was strong, not all *sean-nós* lyrics originate from French models. Some Irish language genres, including laments and seasonal songs, appear to predate the Anglo-Norman tradition. The genres of *sean-nós* are several: love songs, lullabies, *aislingí* (vision poems), laments, drinking songs, humorous songs, bawdy lyrics, hymns, work songs, and topical songs. Lyrics frequently have an extremely local reference; the songs were composed for an audience of neighbors and family who had a personal connection with the persons, places, and events described. The songs do not render the facts in a journalistic fashion, for two reasons. First, the audience already knew the basic story. Second, singing was part of a larger tradition of verbal arts including storytelling and poetry, and singers were in the habit of introducing each song with a spoken preface explaining "the reason for the song" (O'Boyle 1976, 13–14).

Two important features of Gaelic poetry have had a profound effect on the form of *sean-nós* singing: the length of the poetic line, and the prevalence of assonance and internal rhyming. The lines of Irish poetry tend to be longer than those of English, with the result that sung melodies have more beats and accents per line than those of English song. Not only are the lines longer; Gaelic song sprang from a rural environment where entertainment was either homemade or nonexistent (and yet it seems to have been plentiful!). There was time to fill, so the songs themselves became lengthy, with many verses.

Internal rhyming, an essential element of Irish poetry, has found its way into many English songs in Ireland, often with comic effect, as in the clever drinking song "Paddy's Panacea" sung by the late Tom Lenihan:

Let your quacks in newspapers be cutting their capers 'bout curing the
vapors, the scratch or the gout,
With their powders and potions, their salves and their lotions, ochón, in
their notions they're mighty put-out.
Would you know the true physic to bother pathetic and drive to the devil
cramp, colic, and spleen?
You will find it I think if you take a big drink with your mouth to the
brink of a glass of whiskey (Lenihan, personal communication, 1985).

Note the internal rhymes within each line, “papers,” “capers,” and “vapors,” in line one, and the use of assonance or vowel rhyming in line two: “powders,” “potions,” “lotions,” “*qchón*,” “notions,” and “put-out.” Also note the length of the lines, with eight accented syllables apiece. “Paddy’s Panacea” is not a translation of an Irish lyric into English, but its English is extremely Irish in its use of poetic devices common in Gaelic poetry.

THE SOUND OF SEAN-NÓS

Sean-nós is a solo, unaccompanied genre. Musicians since the 1960s have experimented with adding accompaniment and vocal harmony to Gaelic songs, but by definition, such innovations are outside the “old style.” Irish Gaelic differs from region to region, as does the singing, and in each region individual singers have personal styles unique to themselves. Unaccompanied solo singing lends itself to a free treatment of rhythm, since there is no need to coordinate with other singers or musicians, and this has given rise to slow, long melodic lines with a great deal of melodic ornamentation—but the *sean-nós* repertoire also includes fast songs in strict meter, with a syllabic (one note per syllable) rather than melismatic (multiple notes per syllable) treatment of text. Vocal timbre, as in the case of the late, trend setting Connemara singer Joe Heaney, can be quite nasal, but it ranges through a full spectrum including even pure, open tones that would be appropriate in Italian opera.

Listen to the style and timbre of Joe Heaney’s singing on CD track 22, “The Lament of the Three Mary’s.” Celtic and Christian themes merge in the lyrics which apply the pre-Christian Irish practice of “keening” (lamenting) with the story of the Passion.

ACTIVITY 6.1 Consult our website for the lyrics and English translation of this song: www.oup.com/us/globalmusic.

“Úirchill a’Chreagáin” / “Creggan Graveyard” (CD track 23) demonstrates the sound of *sean-nós* through an *aisling* (“ash-ling”) or vision poem sung by Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin (“paw-dra-geen nee oo-la-hawn”). In medieval *aislingí*, the narrator-poet described a dream-

meeting with a fairy woman of supernatural beauty. In eighteenth century *aislingí*, the story was modified to become a political allegory. The narrator met a woman of extraordinary beauty in the countryside. In a series of questions and answers, she was revealed to be the personification of Ireland, awaiting deliverance from foreign rule (Shields 1993, 74, Henigan 1999, 7).

“Creggan Graveyard” belongs to the allegorical *aisling* tradition. It was composed by South Armagh poet Art McCooey (d. 1773). In this recording, from Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin’s CD *An Dara Craiceann/ Beneath The Surface*, Pádraigín has sung a shortened version of four verses (a full version is available in her recent publication, *A Hidden Ulster*). The Irish text of verse one and translations of all four verses are given below:

Line A: *Ag Úirchill a’Chreagáin sea chodail mé aréir faoi bhrón*
By Creggan Graveyard I slept last night in sorrow
Line B: *’S le héirí na maidne tháinig ainnir fá mo dhéin le póig*
At daybreak I was kissed by a young woman
Line C: *Bhí gríosghrú ghartha aici agus loinnir ina céibh mar ór*
With flaming cheeks and a golden lustre in her hair
Line D: *’S gurbh é íocshláinte an domhain bheith ag amharc ar an ríoghain óir*
One look of her would cure all the world’s ills.

*My kind young man do not sleep in sorrow
But rise swiftly and come along the road with me
To the land of honey where the foreigner has no hold
Where you will find happiness enticing me with sweet music.*

*It is my great pain that we lost the Gaels of Tyrone
And the heirs of the Fews now nearby in silent tombs
Niall Frasach’s good people who never rejected music
But at Christmas would clothe the poets who served them well.*

*My own my dear if you are fated to be my love
Promise me before we go along the road
That if I should die in Shannon, the Isle of Man or in great Egypt
Bury me then in the fresh clay of Creggan Graveyard*

Translated by P. Ní Uallacháin

The “heirs of the Fews” mentioned in verse three are the O’Neills, the Armagh branch of the chieftains of Ulster. The poet sings longingly,

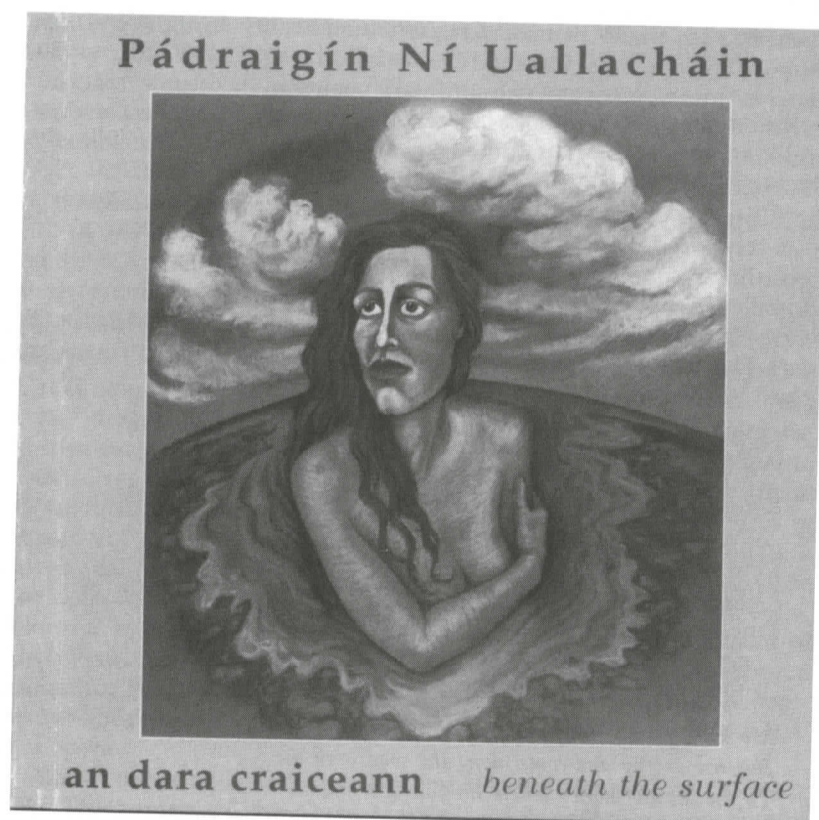


FIGURE 6.1 Cover art of *An Dara Craiceann/Beneath the Surface*. (Painting by Frances Lambe, Dún Dealgan. Permission given by Len Graham and Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin.)

not only of bygone days under Irish leaders, but of the generous patronage poets enjoyed before British rule extinguished the livelihoods of the bards and their patrons.

Listening to Pádraigín's performance, you will notice that the texture is sparse: one unaccompanied voice. The timbre is warm and intimate, and the pitch and volume are slightly higher than that of a speaking voice—elevated enough to create the sense that something more passionate than normal conversation is going on, but not at the frequency and dynamic level of an operatic aria or a shouted blues.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this performance, when compared with more familiar kinds of singing, is the use of rhythm to emphasize the meaning and emotion of the text. Just as the timbre, pitch, and volume of her singing are closely related to those of a speaking voice, in rhythm also the cadence and timing of speech override other musical or poetic factors. As Irish musicologist Seán O'Boyle has written:

Whilst a *sean-nós* singer reflects the stresses of a poetic metre in his performance, he does not feel bound to observe the isochronous nature of the metrical feet. Being involved in the atmosphere and meaning of the song, he moves from stress to stress at his own pace which is really dictated by the feeling he puts into the words and by the amount of ornamentation and the number of stops he chooses to use in his gracing or "humouring" of a tune (O'Boyle 1976, 17).

Every performance of a *sean-nós* song is a kind of collaboration between the present singer and past generations of singers, poets, and composers. Melodies and lyrics change, not only from singer to singer, but even in different performances by the same person. Did Creggan Graveyard's composer sing the same tune in the eighteenth century that Pádraigín sings today? We cannot know. *Sean-nós* singers learn melodies by ear, not from written notation, guaranteeing that songs change over time.

While we don't know how Art McCooey meant "Creggan Graveyard" to be sung, we can examine how the melody interacts with the words in a contemporary performance. In Pádraigín's singing of "Creggan Graveyard," the music follows the four-line structure of the poetry, labeled as lines A, B, C, and D in the text just presented. The contour of the melody seems to reinforce the meaning of the text. In line B, the highest note renders the word *maidne*, "daybreak" in the translation. Line C is musically identical to line A, except for its final note; the lower ending note in line C calls special attention to the words *mar ór* ("like gold"), which describe the hair of the young woman in the poet's vision. In line D, the highest notes correspond to the words *iocshláinte an domhain*, the "cure" for the world's ills.

In terms of rhythm, Pádraigín sings freely, adding pauses and elongating or shortening notes to reflect the meaning and emotion of the words. Line B ends with a pause, providing a breathing space for both the singer and the listeners, who require time to absorb its impact. Line C has already been noted because of the way its melody diverges from that of line A to set off the words *mar ór* ("like gold"); rhythmically also, these syllables require an extra beat, and are followed by a rest, lend-

ing them added emphasis. Finally, the deceleration at the end of line D acts to mark the end of the verse.

A SINGER'S MISSION

Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin became familiar with the melody of "Creggan Graveyard" through a recording of the piper Séamus Ennis, who played it instrumentally as a slow air. Ennis had learned the air from a cylinder recording of a singer named Mary Harvessy, recorded near the year 1900. Pádraigín sought out the original recording, to find the source



FIGURE 6.2 Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin. (Used with permission from Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin)

of Ennis's inspiration. She regards this kind of work—researching, reconstructing, singing, recording, and publishing old songs from the Gaelic singing tradition of South Armagh—as her life's mission.

Pádraigín inherited this mission from her father, Pádraig Ó hUallacháin. Although he was born in English-speaking County Louth, from age fourteen onwards Ó hUallacháin spent his summers studying Irish Gaelic in the Donegal *gaeltacht*, in a college founded by linguist-researcher Lorcán Ó Muirí. Inspired by Ó Muirí's enthusiasm for the Irish language and *sean-nós* singing, Ó hUallacháin himself became a song collector, passing his love of the tradition on to Pádraigín. She recalls:

My first language was Irish. Music, there was always music in the house. My father was very interested in songs, and we always sang in the car, we always sang at home. There was an emphasis as well on composing songs . . . My father was a very fine singer of *sean-nós* songs . . .

I remember the very first *sean-nós* song that I heard, when I was about seven—that made an impact on me . . . And in later years, he would talk about singers, and he would say they didn't have the *sean-nós*, so that he obviously had come in contact with what the *sean-nós* was . . .

He did apply as a school inspector to be sent to the *gaeltacht*, so that he could bring us up in the *gaeltacht*, and he was denied that . . . so he was keen that we *would* live in the *gaeltacht*. He recognized the importance of the community as being the primary source, as well as the family, for the acquisition of language. But we never lived in the Irish-speaking areas (Ní Uallacháin in discussion with authors, 2001).

Pádraigín's parents met at the Irish college in Donegal, and raised their eight children as Irish speakers. Both parents were musical; her mother had learned the fiddle as a teenager. In school, Pádraigín learned music from outside the *sean-nós* tradition: choir singing, musicals, and piano. Then, as a young woman, she followed her father's example, seeking out traditional singers in the *gaeltacht*:

When I was about nineteen or twenty I spent a lot of time in Connemara. I heard Máire Aine Ní Dhonnchadha, I knew Seosamh Ó hÉanaí (Joe Heaney) well. Then I met a lot of northern singers, in my early twenties—like Len Graham, Joe Holmes, Eddie Butcher. *All* of those singers influence a singer. And then you create your own style—I believe, my style would be very Ulster . . .

I was listening . . . I would listen, and then I would go and buy—all my first salaries would have been spent on recordings, and then I'd end up pawning them all and starting all over again . . .

There was a period when I would be listening so much to others and saying, "what exactly were they doing with ornamentation?" And then there comes a point when this comes spontaneously, and knits together with the expression of emotion and feeling. And then you let the song take off on its own . . .

I spent a long period listening rather than singing out . . . I was listening a lot, an awful lot, over the period, and singing a lot on my own. But only very occasionally would I feel that I was of that standard that should sing out . . .

I think singing generally is a solitary activity. It's at its *healthiest* when it's community-based. . . . The singing in Connemara, a lot of it is community-based, but I'd say that's probably the exception to most places in Ireland. In Connemara, you can learn a song, you could go out on Saturday night, and you could have an audience that night, if you're standing at the bar, somebody could call you to sing, regardless of what's happening in the pub . . . I would *never* have that experience. I could learn a *hundred* songs, that some of them may *never* see the light of day, unless I record them . . . It would be strange for me to now live in a community where either my language or my singing was an intrinsic part of the community around me. It would be certainly a bonus, maybe in my next life, but—it is a solitary activity . . .

I would say most of the singing that I heard was in pubs, or informally, or unplanned. Late at night, early hours of the morning . . . probably heard the best singing that I ever heard would be three, four 'o clock in the morning. That would be the main context. I never liked going to concerts to listen to *sean-nós* singing. I think it was always the wrong context (ibid.).

After Pádraigín began singing out in late night pub sessions, she began performing on the stage, but she still finds this to be an uncomfortable context for *sean-nós* singing. Interestingly, she performs in collaboration with jazz musicians in Scandinavia, where she feels that audiences are more receptive to *sean-nós* than audiences in Ireland:

Where I find myself performing in Norway and in Denmark, Scandinavia, the audience who come are only interested in the expression of feeling, so what comes across is what impacts, regardless of lan-

guage. And that appeals to me, because maybe that's where my strength is, in the expression of feeling and emotion . . .

There isn't a big audience for *sean-nós* singing in Ireland. It comes back to the question of language, and ease. There's a discomfort because people feel they *ought* to understand; if they'd only relax and sit back and *feel*, they would understand, but they feel, because they haven't got the language, or they left the language aside, or the language was just a school subject, that they're cut off in some way, and the barriers are down (ibid.).

In collaboration with other musicians, Pádraigín has made several recordings of songs to introduce new singers and listeners to the tradition. Her latest and most ambitious recording and publishing project is entitled *Songs from a Hidden Ulster* (2003), a collection of fifty-four songs from South Armagh. Research for this project involved years seeking out the surviving song texts, searching through the available recordings and notation to "remarry" the lyrics with their melodies, and piecing together biographies of the singers and collectors who served as her sources. She describes her mission to pass these songs on to future generations:

I felt a responsibility, as well as an interest, to leave behind, when it comes to my time to move on, a body of work in the area in which I live, so that somebody, even if it's only *one* person that comes after me who wants to sing, will have a source of the material that was vibrant at one stage in the area in which I lived.

Because in cosmic time it's such a short space of time that the language has died; it's only a matter of a generation or two, but the songs *were* there, so my publishing project is to leave, primarily a sense of responsibility to all those who've worked before me, and to the carriers of the song tradition. In fact, I feel in a way that I don't really have any choice but to do this work . . . I love the work and I'm very interested and enthusiastic about it, but I feel a tremendous responsibility, because they lost the language, to leave that body of work behind, so that somebody else can take it a step further (ibid.).

Thanks to the work of singers and researchers like Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin and support from governmental, educational and media institutions devoted to the promotion of the Irish language, Irish Gaelic song has survived into the twenty-first century, and is enjoying somewhat of a resurgence among lovers of traditional music. The next section focuses on similar processes of song-collecting and cultural renewal in the English-language singing of Len Graham.

A LINGUISTIC MEETING-GROUND: IRISH TRADITIONAL SONGS IN ENGLISH

Broadly speaking, Irish traditional songs in English include: (1) Gaelic songs translated into English, (2) English and Scottish ballads brought to Ireland by soldiers, English and Scottish colonists, and migrant Irish laborers traveling between England, Scotland, and Ireland, and (3) English language songs composed by Irish authors.

The exchange of songs between England and Ireland accelerated in the seventeenth century, when the Crown increased its military presence in Ireland and established large "plantations" of English and Scottish settlers, especially in northern Ireland. Plantation and intermarriage led to the importing of many English-language ballads, which gradually absorbed Irish influence through the substitution of Irish airs for English melodies and the adoption of musical and poetic usages from Irish song.

Many indigenous English language songs were composed by "hedge schoolmasters." After the 1310 Statute of Kilkenny, the education of native Irish was discouraged or banned by a succession of British laws. In the eighteenth century, this ban stimulated the widespread creation of secret "hedge schools," in which Irish pupils received instruction in a broad range of subjects. The hedge schoolmasters frequently were poets and singers, and they created a large body of songs, characterized by the use (in English) of Gaelic assonance and meter, classical and Biblical allusions, and flowery poetry.

As the Irish language lost ground across the country, the employment of Gaelic poetic devices in English lost sway, but new songs in English still presented Irish stories and sentiments viewed from an Irish perspective. Narrative songs in English reached their heyday in the nineteenth century, when itinerant ballad singers sold lyric sheets at markets, fairs, athletic events, and political meetings. These ballads addressed a broad range of issues including love, emigration, forced conscription into the British army, murders, shipwrecks, and the execution and banishment of Irish heroes.

The nineteenth century also gave rise to a new genre of genteel "folk songs," which originated not with "the folk" but with collectors and composers who either sanitized existing repertoire or created new songs in imitation of folk models. Thomas Moore dominated the style (see Chapter 2). Irish musicologist Seán O'Boyle described the genre in this way:

Moore's songs were nostalgic, pseudo-historical, whimsical, sentimental productions suited to the drawing rooms of the nineteenth

century, and were in striking contrast to the live Gaelic love-songs, lullabies, *aislingí* (vision poems) laments, drinking songs, hymns and work-songs of the Irish-speaking people (O'Boyle 1976, 13-14).

In song, as in instrumental music, much Irish repertoire traveled to America with emigrants over the last two centuries. Irish song collectors often consult American publications and singers to recover songs that left Ireland in past generations and have not survived in their place of origin. Listen now to one such example, CD track 24: "Love Won't You Marry Me," a song that Irish singer Len Graham "retrieved" in 1990 from John Ward, an Irish-American singer, then in his late eighties, who learned it from his father who had brought it from Donegal.

Love Won't You Marry Me

*I'm tired now of single life,
My mind's made up to take a wife,
To help me through this world of strife,
And to keep me out a' danger.*

Chorus:

*Love won't you marry me, oh marry me, marry me,
Love won't you marry me and keep me out a' danger?
Love won't you marry me, oh marry me, marry me,
Love won't you marry me and keep me out a' danger?*

*I have a cottage by the sea,
Adorned with flowers for her and me,
And any girl would happy be,
And I would treat her fairly.*

(Chorus)

*And now that we the knot have tied,
And she for years has been my bride,
Wi' lots a' children by our side,
We're shielded from all danger.*

(Chorus)

[Lilted section (dance tune)]:

*Ridle um diddlye dee ydle diddlye deedle
Um diddley die, rattle diddle dee diedoh
Rum diddledee dum diddlye dee ydle diddlye deedle
Um diddley die, rattle diddle dee daydoh . . .*

The three verses and chorus of "Love Won't You Marry Me" give lighthearted expression to important values in the remote agricultural society and economy of the extreme north of Ireland: love, marriage, family, and fertility. "Danger," for a young single farmer in Donegal, meant isolation: the lack of a wife to provide companionship and help in the home, and the lack of offspring to provide hands to work the land. "Lots of children by our side" provided an important "shield" from the danger of being alone.

The texted song is followed by a "lilted" dance tune. Lilted refers to the singing of Irish dance tunes to vocables, syllables which have no literal meaning, and is analogous to many vocal traditions around the world, such as scat singing in jazz or *tarana* singing in north India. Many Irish musicians attribute the origin of lilted to the scarcity of affordable instruments in rural Ireland, or to the difficulty of getting instruments repaired. Lilted would be called into service to provide music for dancing when no instruments or players were available. Lilted continues to play an important role in learning music; musicians sometimes lilt a tune before attempting to play it, or to remind one another of tunes. Lilted has also become a performance art in its own right, and lilted competitions are held each year by CCE (Madden 1999, 214-6).

ACTIVITY 6.2 Learn by ear to sing the verses, chorus, and lilted dance tune of "Love Won't You Marry Me."

A Floating Repertoire of Tunes and Verses. In English as in Gaelic, much of the Irish song repertoire is lyrical rather than narrative. The audience is assumed to be in possession of any story line essential to the understanding of a song, either by virtue of its being common knowledge, or because the singer has presented it in a spoken prologue. For this reason, verses and melodies tend to float from song to song, reassembled from singer to singer and performance to performance. The logic of such performances is circular rather than linear; verses move around the subject, presenting it from different poetic angles, rather than presenting it in a step by step, chronological fashion (O'Rourke 1985, 13).

Nineteenth century ballad sheets, and Irish song collections dating into the late twentieth century, frequently presented only the words of a song, assuming that singers would fit the lyrics to a traditional tune

of their own choosing. To provide an example, Len Graham has sung the initial verses of "The Banks of the Bann" to two different melodies. The first he heard from an old recording of singer Richard Hayward, and later from Len's good friend Eddie Butcher. Len heard the second melody from singers Malachy Clarkson and Mick Hoy, and has recorded the entire song to this air on his CD *Do Me Justice*. Listen to the two selections on CD tracks 25 and 26 while reading the lyrics:

The Banks of the Bann

*When first to this country I came as a stranger,
I placed my affection on a maid that was young.
She being young and tender, her waist small and slender,
Kind affection has made her to be my overthrow.*

*On the banks of Bann Water where first I beheld her,
She appeared like a goddess or like some Grecian queen.
Her eyes shone like diamonds, her hair bright and golden,
Kind affection has made her to be my overthrow.*

Now let me try the other version of it . . .

*When first to this country, I came as a stranger,
I placed my affection on a maid that was young.
She being young and tender, her waist small and slender,
Kind affection has made her to be my overthrow.*

*On the banks of Bann Water, where first I beheld her,
She appeared like a goddess or like some Grecian queen.
Her eyes shone like diamonds, and her hair bright and golden,
Her cheeks like to roses, or like blood drops on snow.*

*'Twas her cruel parents, I must blame for this variance,
Because I was poor and of a low degree.
But I'll do my endeavors, for to gain my love's favor,
Although she is come of a rich family.*

Linguistically, these verses illustrate the use of a floating stock of lines, verses, and images that move from song to song. "She being young and tender, her waist small and slender," "She appeared like a goddess or like some Grecian queen," "Her cheeks like to roses, or like blood drops on snow," and "her cruel parents" appear in many songs, and the theme of a young suitor who is rejected for being too poor is common in American, English, and Irish folk songs.

Do me Justice Len Graham



ceirbhí clár

FIGURE 6.3 Cover art of *Do me Justice*. (From "A Broadsheet" by Jack Butler Yeats, by kind permission of the University of Reading. Permission given by Len Graham.)

Compare the melodies while listening again to the two versions. Version one is sung smoothly in triple meter, in the key of D major. The ornamentation consists almost entirely of single grace notes sliding up or down into a main melody note. The melody is in four distinct parts (ABCD) corresponding to the four lines of text.

Version two presents more challenges to the listener. It is sung in a drawn-out fashion, with many extended notes and pauses. At times it seems to be in the key of A major, but G natural (the flattened seventh) and even C natural (the flattened third) make striking appearances, giving the air a very "modal" feeling. It is highly ornamented. Indeed, the

A

When first to this coun - try I came as a

B

stran - ger I placed my af - fec - tion on a maid that was

C

young she bein' young and ten - der her

D

waist small and slen - der Kind af - fec - tion has

made her to be my o - ver - throw.

Rubato

A

When first to this a' coun - try I came as a

B

stra - ger I placed my at - fec - tion on a maid that was

A

young. She be-in' young and ten - der her waist small and

B

slen - der kind af - fec - tion has made her to be

my o - ver - throw.

FIGURE 6.4 Two versions of "The Banks of the Bann."

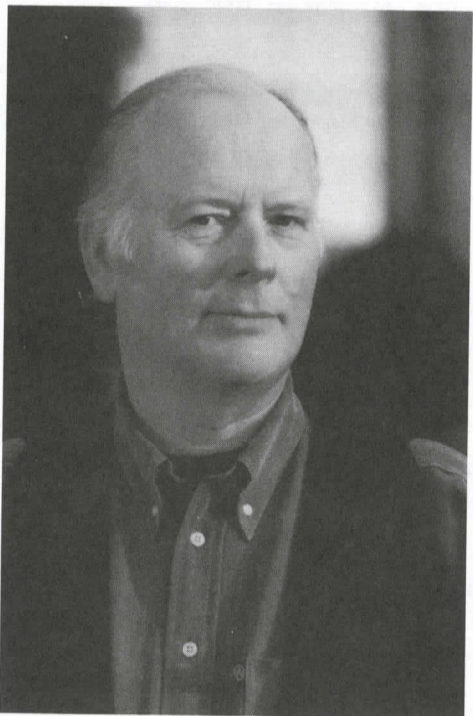


FIGURE 6.5 Len Graham. (Used with permission from Len Graham)

two melodies seem to represent two distinct kinds of Irish traditional tunes: one fitting easily into the major/minor tradition of modern European melody, and the other representing a distinct (and perhaps older), modal, melismatic tradition. Finally, version two uses its complete melody twice in rendering a single verse (ABAB).

Len Graham: "A Compulsive Singer." Like his wife, Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, Len Graham (b. 1944) is a major performer, collector, and publisher of Irish traditional songs, and he is one of very few full-time professional traditional singers in Ireland. Born into a musical family in Glenarm, in Northern Ireland, he seems almost to have been born singing:

[My] very earliest recollections are of singing, and *me* singing. My mother used to say that I was singing before I could talk, and cer-

tainly my very earliest memories are of singing. I seem to have got the bug very, very early, because they couldn't keep me quiet. I was constantly singing and always seemed to be at that, and my father was a singer, my mother was a singer, my grandparents—seemed to be a lot of music about, and as I say, I don't remember doing anything else but singing. As Pádraigín will tell you, I'm a compulsive singer; I have to sing every day, whether it's to myself or whatever—it just is something that I *have* to do (Graham in discussion with authors, 2001).

Len's mother, Eveline Robinson, provided the model for his "compulsive," everyday singing; they often sang together around the house, not only traditional songs from their area in the Glens of Antrim, but also "whatever'd be comin' out of the radio." His father, Samuel Graham, did more public singing, either in pubs, or occasionally in variety shows, beginning with benefit concerts for the Red Cross during World War II. Len began singing in public in his early teens; his father would sit in the audience, coaching and encouraging him.

I remember singing at a concert that he was in the audience, and where I came down very upset, because the people before me and the people after me were doin' sort of comedy acts and got much more response than what I [got], you know—He said to me, "That's the nature of what you're at, you know; if you get through to *one* person out there in that audience you're providing a service. Don't expect," he says, "to get the same response as the funny person, or the comedy act." (ibid.)

Each summer, the Grahams would visit relatives in Scotland, where at age eleven Len acquired a taste for the late hours of a singer's life—and enjoyed the rewards of singing for pay:

We used to go across to relatives over in Scotland, and this was a good place to perform, because there was the incentive of money. If you did your party piece at some of these gatherings—family gatherings over in Scotland, on our holidays—then you got a chance of performing, and if you did perform, there was a few shillings in it for you as well. And you were also like, stayin' up very late, this was another thing; that you, three o'clock in the morning you were still out of your beds and gettin' paid for singin' a couple of songs, you know? (ibid.)

During his early teens, Len found an outlet for singing in the Scouts. The compulsive nature of his vocalizing sometimes provoked unexpected responses:

In the Scouts there was a sort of a campfire singaround, and you did your party piece, so again, like I used to be always singin'. And [I] remember going out to one camp, over Scotland again . . . We sailed from Belfast to Glasgow, overnight sailing, and they couldn't shut me up, and they tied a scarf around my mouth to shut me up, you know (ibid.).

In 1963, Len began attending CCÉ English language singing competitions, ultimately winning first prize in 1971. He also went with his father to Antrim-Derry fiddlers' nights, where in 1963 he met an older singer named Joe Holmes, who was to become Len's first regular singing partner.

He came over; actually I was singing at one of those Antrim and Derry fiddlers' nights. I was asked to sing, and Joe came over to me and asked me for one of the songs that I'd got from my grandmother—it was a song that his, I don't think his mother sang but his grandmother sang . . .

So he asked me for it, and I came around to his house shortly after that. He started singin' for me. Nobody had told me that he sang, and he hadn't sung for years, you know? He was known as a fiddler. In the Antrim and Derry fiddlers, I was always askin' who would sing, and who didn't sing—but nobody ever associated Joe with singin' . . . Very shortly after that, actually, we started singin' out a bit, singin' together and going around (ibid.).

Len Graham and Joe Holmes remained close friends until the latter's death in 1978.

For many years, Len traveled at least once a week to swap songs with another older singer with a great collection of songs: Eddie Butcher of Magilligan, in north Derry. Len was inspired to seek out Eddie Butcher while hearing a broadcast of Eddie's singing on the radio, in a show produced by the eminent song collector Hugh Shields.

I'll tell you how it happened. There was a radio program that Hugh Shields did . . . and I happened to be listening to the radio and I heard this singer, in Magilligan. [I] jumped in the car—and drove off to Magilligan. Of course I was living in Ballymoney, which is twenty miles from Magilligan; it wasn't a million miles away. And landed in Magilligan, asked where Eddie Butcher lived and somebody di-

rected me, and [I] rapped the door and Gracie Butcher opened the door and I said "was Eddie Butcher on the radio?"

So I just landed within an hour at their house, from him bein' on the radio. And started up a friendship . . . and then the following time I took Joe Holmes with me. I said, "Can I bring a friend?" to Eddie and Gracie. So, "Of course," and I brought Joe down, and then we kept this up from the late '60s to the late '70s when Joe died, in '78. And I kept going, until Eddie died in 1980. And if for some reason or another I didn't manage to get down there, the phone woulda' rung, and [Eddie] said "Have I done something to you? Why have you not come down to sing for me?" And as soon as I brought Pádraigín down, the first thing he says is, "Can she sing?" And he had her singin' (ibid.).

Pádraigín recalls that she would learn a new song in English every week to sing for Eddie, "cause there's no point in singing in Irish for him." Eddie Butcher's home was the site of many *céilís*, which in Northern Ireland refers not only to dances but to informal entertainment including songs and stories. Pádraigín describes the Butcher household as "the last *céilíng* house, I'd say, certainly in Ulster."

We noted that sessions at the Góilín Singers' Club demonstrate the principles of hospitality, generosity, reciprocity, inclusiveness and exclusiveness, which seem to permeate the social life of Irish traditional music. We again observe these features as Len and Pádraigín describe a typical *céilí* with Eddie and Gracie Butcher:

LEN: Well initially, it would have been to the pub first; we'd have gone to the local pub, and at that time, in the '60s, there were quite a lot of singers around Magilligan, in that generation, Eddie's generation, although Eddie would have been recognized as bein' the main one. His brother John was still singin' at that time, but he wouldn't have the repertoire that Eddie would have had. He had an enormous repertoire—hundreds of songs, you know? John would have had maybe a dozen songs, but sang them very, very well. And there would have been a lot of singers of that generation still alive that would have met in the local pub, Greta Deegan's, and woulda' been great singarounds. But then that sorta' died out; a lot of these singers started dying off, and the pub became noisy, and the younger generation seemed to be moving in, and we stopped going to the pub and we just would have gone to Eddie's house.

PÁDRAIGÍN: Arriving about nine—

LEN: Around nine o'clock, and usually brought a carry-out with us, and would have had a few—

PÁDRAIGÍN: Eddie would start to sing, straightaway—

LEN: Straightaway, yeah. It would have been straight, there'd have been no niceties, or—

PÁDRAIGÍN: Sat in the same chair—

LEN: He never budged, it was always Gracie woulda' ha', probably about eleven or midnight she woulda' came up with the sandwiches and tea—

PÁDRAIGÍN: Heaps of sandwiches.

LEN: So, that would have gone on till the early hours of the morning.

PÁDRAIGÍN: We'd leave about—they were *old*, at the time—we would leave about—two?

LEN: And sometimes later (Graham and Ní Uallacháin in discussion with authors, 2001).

Hospitality and generosity appear in the welcome and sandwiches offered by Eddie and Gracie, reciprocity in the "carry-out" (usually Guinness stout) brought by Len and Pádraigín, and exclusiveness in the eventual decision to avoid singing in the increasingly noisy pub. Inclusiveness is manifest in the invitation for Joe Holmes and Pádraigín to join the sessions, and in "the easy interreligious mix in these Northern Irish gatherings (Joe and Len were Protestant and the others Catholic). Such camaraderie among singers and musicians [of the two faiths] has long existed and continues to do so." (Munnely 2003) These *céilís* continued until 1980, when Eddie Butcher died as he had lived, learning a song jotted on a piece of paper that Len had just produced from his pocket.

The deaths of Joe Holmes and Eddie Butcher created a vacuum in Len Graham's musical life, as Pádraigín recounts:

Len was working in an industrial plant . . . And they started to cut back on the work force, and doubling the work of the official workers, who were learning songs underneath the desk. And I saw Len, being a compulsive singer, who had lost Joe, lost Eddie—he'd actually no outlet anymore. And he used to walk around the fields singing. Next door to our house. He was walking around the field all the time. And he started doing night duty, which was disastrous for everything. And I remember thinking, "how can we improve on this?" (Ní Uallacháin in discussion with authors, 2001)

Improving on the situation involved several steps: Pádraigín became a teacher, and Len quit his plant job to become a full-time performer, giv-

ing concerts and recording several albums, both solo and with his newly formed band "Skylark." The audience for unaccompanied singing was small, so professional touring meant collaborating with instrumentalists to provide accompaniment for Len's traditional repertoire. Like many contemporary musicians, Len enjoyed the challenge of creating ensemble arrangements of his songs, but purists within the folk "establishment" could be critical of such changes within the tradition. Pádraigín describes the dilemma:

. . . When he [Len] went professional, he would have to sing with a band and accompaniment to make a living. That affects the tradition of unaccompanied singing in a way. There's two things: first of all, you *enjoy* singing with accompaniment, but there's also that you *have* to in order to make a living, because you could never make a living if you didn't diversify . . . But . . . you're left so open to criticism for doing that, for singing with accompaniment. But the people who are criticizing would be happy that he walked around the field for the rest of his days and preserved the tradition. Nobody'd hear, but the tradition was preserved! (ibid.)

CONCLUSION

If we take the term *sean-nós* broadly, to mean the old styles of Irish unaccompanied singing in both Irish and English, how is the *sean-nós* managing to survive in twenty-first century Ireland? In singing clubs like the Góilín, and in the performing of singers like Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin and Len Graham, the answer is that the old styles survive by being brought into new musical contexts. For Len Graham, and for the thousands of listeners who have encountered the repertoire of singers like Joe Holmes and Eddie Butcher through his music, the change has involved moving the songs from intimate *céilís* among a handful of friends to public concerts, and to the even less intimate media of CDs and cassette tapes. For Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, new contexts include not only concert halls and recordings, but also jazz concerts in Scandinavia. Both Len and Pádraigín have recontextualized their songs by performing with accompaniment.

We will conclude this chapter by considering the trajectory of one particularly old song into the contemporary repertoire. Folklorist Tom Munnely recorded the songs of the Irish traveler John Reilly in 1968. The "travelers" (formerly called "tinkers") have produced many of Ireland's finest musicians up to the present, but as a group they are subject to wide distrust and a certain amount of persecution. The term "tin-

ker," now regarded as pejorative, originally described their occupation as tinsmiths, a viable profession before the advent of plastic. Tom Munnelly recalls that John Reilly

used to say of himself, "I'm a tinker, and a good one." And he was, because for many years afterwards, the pots he made, the tin cans, the little pails for milking cattle—he used to make tin ornaments as well. Plastic hadn't taken over farm implements, so you would get your pots repaired by the traveling tinker, by the tinsmith, and you would certainly buy all your tins, your tin ware. And, as I say, plastic hadn't replaced them there, so there was a comparative welcome, as artisans, to travelers in and around the countryside, up to the '60s (Munnelly in discussion with authors, 2001).

One of the songs which Tom Munnelly recorded from John Reilly was "The Well Below the Valley," an eerie ballad which seemed to have disappeared after a version of it was published by Francis Child in the nineteenth century. This extraordinary song captured the attention not only of folklorists, but of singer Christy Moore, who subsequently recorded the song with the group Planxty. Tom Munnelly remembers that

Christy Moore heard John sing a few times. I don't think he ever actually recorded him himself, but I managed to give him recordings, and he's included a good number of the songs in his repertoire: "Raggle Taggle Gypsies," "Lord Bateman," and "The Well Below the Valley."

I've always thought that Christy treated the songs that he got with respect; people have asked me, you know, "Does it not worry you, that it became almost a hit?" As far as I'm concerned, there's a song that was hanging on by the merest thread, from medieval times, and if there are now thousands of people who know it, and hundreds of people maybe who have it in their repertoire, nationally and internationally, I mean—well and good! Songs, they are meant to survive on the lips of the people, not be put away in bank vaults (ibid.).

Irish Music in the Global Marketplace



During the last forty years, the intimate world of house parties among family, friends and neighbors has given way to more public settings for singing and playing music. For musicians who have grown up or encountered music in more traditional contexts, performing Irish music today involves important aesthetic choices, balancing respect for the tradition against individual creativity and, for professionals, the need to make a living as a performer.

The dynamism of Irish music today is reflected in the many paths that musicians take in their approach to its performance. Contemporary performers range from purists, who want to preserve repertory and performance styles of the past, to modernizers creating syntheses that incorporate aspects of Irish traditional music in rock, rap, and other popular genres. Some are composers, such as the Chicago born fiddler Liz Carroll, whose new tunes fit into traditional forms. Many musicians wear multiple hats, depending on their circumstances and interests. For example, Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin and Len Graham are dedicated researchers and preservationists deeply involved with the community of traditional singers, and at the same time are innovators and professional performers, bringing their arrangements of songs into new contexts. Fiddler Martin Hayes seems equally at home as a member of the Tulla Céilí Band, playing tunes in the East Clare style of his father P. J. Hayes, or performing his own unique and virtuosic tune renditions on stage.

One of the main shifts in performance practice since the 1960s has involved the addition of accompaniment to songs, dance tunes, and slow airs. This change came about partly through the influence of the British and American folk revivals and partly through the work of several key musicians and groups—the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, Seán Ó Riada, and the Chieftains. Makem and the Clancy Brothers sang traditional Irish ballads in a sing-along style, accompanying