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Traditional Music and Irish Society: Historical Perspectives

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Martin Dowling

TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND IRISH SOCIETY: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

To Christine

Traditional Music and Irish Society: Historical Perspectives

MARTIN DOWLING

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General Editors' Preface

Popular musicology embraces the field of musicological study that engages with popular forms of music, especially music associated with commerce, entertainment and leisure activities. The *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* aims to present the best research in this field. Authors are concerned with criticism and analysis of the music itself, as well as locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context. The focus of the series is on popular music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a remit to encompass the entirety of the world's popular music.

Critical and analytical tools employed in the study of popular music are being continually developed and refined in the twenty-first century. Perspectives on the transcultural and intercultural uses of popular music have enriched understanding of social context, reception and subject position. Popular genres as distinct as reggae, township, bhangra, and flamenco are features of a shrinking, transnational world. The series recognizes and addresses the emergence of mixed genres and new global fusions, and utilizes a wide range of theoretical models drawn from anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, media studies, semiotics, postcolonial studies, feminism, gender studies and queer studies.

Stan Hawkins, Professor of Popular Musicology, University of Oslo &
Derek B. Scott, Professor of Critical Musicology, University of Leeds

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I am pleased to acknowledge the support of a number of individuals and institutions in the making of this work. In 2004 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland reluctantly granted me a career break from my post as Traditional Arts Officer in order to embark on the research which underpins this book. I spent the next two years working with a team of researchers studying contemporary Irish identities while holding a research fellowship funded by the Humanities Institute of Ireland at University College Dublin. I thank my colleagues in UCD, John Coakley, Alice Feldman, Theresa O'Keefe and Jennifer Todd for their collegial support and critical insights into contemporary sociology and politics. I wish to single out for special thanks Tom Inglis, the member of that team who took the most interest in my research on musical identities and whose own work on contemporary Irish society has been a huge inspiration to me. On that project, I interviewed over 100 musicians, and I am grateful to them all for their time and consideration. I am especially grateful to those whose interviews (listed in the bibliography) I cite in the final chapter of this work. I then held a second fellowship in the Humanities Institute of Ireland in UCD which gave me a further year to embark on the historical research which underpins this volume. I thank sincerely the Institute's then director, Mary Daly, for her support of my project, and the Institute's manager Valerie Norton and the other research fellows for cultivating a cheerful and productive working atmosphere. My research has been further supported by a Deis Traditional Arts Grant from the Arts Council of Ireland in 2007, a Research Leave from Queen's University Belfast in 2011, and a Research Fellowship from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2012. I also thank the Department of Music at Cardiff University for inviting me to give their Bird Lecture in 2009, which helped me develop Chapter 3.

The chapters of this work were developed from a number of my previous publications, all of which are listed in the bibliography. I would like to thank these editors and collaborators for improving my writing and sharpening my arguments: Marion Casey at *Radharc: a Journal of Irish and Irish-American Studies*, Jim Rogers at *New Hibernia Review*, Borbála Faragó and Moynagh Sullivan at University College Dublin, Michael De Nie and Sean Farrell, and Robbie Hannan at *Ulster Folklife*. I offer Robbie a further dollop of gratitude for carefully checking the usage of Irish in this book. I would also like to thank especially Alan Friedman of the University of Texas in Austin, guest co-editor of the Spring/Summer 2008 issue of the *James Joyce Quarterly*. Alan heard me speak on Irish music in the Revival at the American Conference of Irish Studies meeting in St. Louis in 2006, and invited me to present and perform at the academic conference on James Joyce

he was organising the following year in Austin, Texas. This invitation to consider Joyce from the perspective of traditional music, and to participate both musically and intellectually with local musicians in Austin and an international gathering of Joyce experts, was one of the most intellectually exciting events of my career.

I thank all my colleagues in music at Queen's University of Belfast, who have provided all kinds of personal and intellectual support while I prepared this volume for publication. I also thank the students with whom I have worked on the MA and PhD programmes in musicology at Queen's, upon some of whose work I rely heavily. My student Conor Caldwell stepped in to this project while finishing his own PhD to provide transcriptions and formatting of all the musical examples included here. Patrick McWilliams and Jason O'Rourke, two old friends, also stepped in at a late stage to provide me with superbly efficient and accurate editorial work. I thank all at Ashgate (Derek Scott, Heidi Bishop, Emma Gallon, and Sadie Copley-May) for being wonderfully supportive and efficient throughout.

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List of Abbreviations

FCAP	Feis Ceoil Association Papers, National Library of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
PRONI	Public Records Office of Northern Ireland
RIA	Royal Irish Academy

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Introduction
Modernity and Tradition

Some years ago I wrote a book on the so-called 'Ulster custom' of tenant right, through which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural tenants claimed property rights above and beyond their contracts with landlords.[1] The book was a result of an 'oblique strategy'[2] which involved the first of a number of sideways, self-displacing moves in my career. Somewhat late in my post-adolescence – at the same time that I was introduced to the academic study of Irish history and literature – I became obsessed with playing traditional music on the fiddle. I chanced upon two great teachers at the University of Chicago in 1982: the Yeats scholar Frank Kinahan and the eminent historian of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Emmet Larkin. Kinahan had alerted his PhD student, the poet Michael Donaghy, to the presence of a fiddle player at his lectures. I recall with pleasure Donaghy's arrival to my flat one day with a stack of LPs. He gave me a compressed introduction to the state of commercial Irish traditional music c. 1981, and what I heard that afternoon, as we used to say, rocked my world: Kevin Burke and Jacky Daly's exquisitely tasteful *Eavesdropper* album, solo albums by Tommy Peoples and Mary Bergin, Paddy Keenan and Paddy Glackin's album *Doublin'*, and of course all three albums by the Bothy Band.[3] Donaghy gave me a tape of the set list of his band Samhradh Music and I set about learning the repertoire and the arrangements. Soon I was playing gigs in fashionable spots on the near north side with this band of tweed-jacketed PhD students, and my vague plans for attending Law School began to unravel. I began to search for a vehicle which would allow me the time and space to immerse myself in the development of this craft, and to spend as much time as I could afford doing so in Ireland. Then, as now, there were no opportunities for the study of Irish music at postgraduate level in America, particularly for someone with an economics degree. The thought of pursuing this within the discipline of ethnomusicology never occurred to me. However I had developed an interest in

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[1] Martin W. Dowling, *Tenant Right and Agrarian Society in Ulster, 1600-1870* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999).

[2] The term comes from Brian Eno's diary of 1995. See Brian Eno, *A Year With Swollen Appendices* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp. 34-5.

[3] Kevin Burke and Jackie Daly, *The Eavesdropper* (New Canaan, CT: Green Linnet Records, 1981); Mary Bergin, *Feadóga Stáin.* (Dublin, Gael Linn, 1979); Tommy Peoples and Paul Brady, *The High Part of the Road* (New York: Seanachai Records, 1976); Paddy Glackin and Paddy Keenan, *Doublin'* (Dublin: Tara Records, 1978); The Bothy Band, *1975* (Dublin: Mulligan Records, 1975), *Old Hag You Have Killed Me* (Dublin: Mulligan Records, 1976), and *Out of the Wind, Into the Sun* (Dublin: Mulligan Records, 1977).

economic history after attending lectures by the severe Arcadius Kahan, a pioneer of Russian economic history.[4] I wrote exam papers for Emmet Larkin on Kenneth Connell's *The Population of Ireland: 1750-1845* and Raymond Crotty's *Irish Agricultural Production: its Volume and Structure*.[5] Larkin also introduced me to Jim Donnelly's *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question*.[6] Though this magisterial work bored most of my more literary-minded classmates, I was enthralled by Donnelly's meticulous study of the economic base of Irish society, namely, its property system and agrarian economy. When I discovered that Donnelly was working at the University of Wisconsin-Madison – in my home state where resident fees for postgraduate programmes were low and, even more crucially, where my girlfriend was also enrolled – many light bulbs went on in my head. Letters from Larkin and Kinahan persuaded Donnelly to suppress his concerns about my lack of historical training and my decidedly unimpressive grade point average and accept me onto the history PhD programme. The oblique strategy was put in motion: a PhD in Irish economic history, gigs in the Midwest, part-time academic work, practice and more practice, and the possibility of a research scholarship to Ireland.

The strategy was successful, but it required that I separate the business of my historical training from my musical life. After all, music at that time had little significance in the writing of Irish history. Until recently performers, collectors and other enthusiasts, rather than academics, have been the main custodians of our understandings of Irish traditional music. Within the academy, Irish traditional music has often fallen into the category of another 'world music', subject to the largely ahistorical discipline of ethnomusicology, a perspective which subtly reinforces the popular understanding that such music is timeless, unchanging, and 'ancient'. This is a very longstanding perspective. Peter Burke's influential narrative of the appreciation of popular culture, in which literate elites withdrew from plebeian culture during the Renaissance only to rediscover its attractiveness in the Enlightenment, has received some criticism.[7] However the narrative applies nicely to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland. With the growing self-

[4] See Peter Gatrell, 'Russian Economic History: The Legacy of Arcadius Kahan' in *Slavic Review*, no. 1 (Spring, 1991).

[5] Kenneth Connell *The Population of Ireland: 1750-1845* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1975); Raymond Crotty, *Irish Agricultural Production: its Volume and Structure* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1966).

[6] James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

[7] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1978), pp. 3-23. For a critique of the application of Burke's model to early modern England, see Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 15. For the application of Burke's framework to Ireland, see Sean Connolly, '"Ag Déanamh *Commanding*": Elite Responses to Popular Culture, 1660-1850', in James S. Donnelly, Jr. and Kirby Miller (eds), *Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), pp. 1-29.

confidence of the Anglo-Irish came appreciation of peasant culture as a repository of antiquarian essence. Research by Joseph Cooper Walker, Charlotte Brooke, Edward Bunting, George Petrie and others can be now seen as originating an academic musicology of Irish traditional music.[8]

It is striking that this early intellectual interest in Irish music did not carry through to the twentieth century. The revisionist debates which have occupied professional historians in recent decades have left prevailing understandings of music largely untouched. Indeed, in the Irish imagination, and even perhaps in the imagination of academics, Irish music has served as a bulwark against the destabilising force of contemporary debates. It sustains the notion of, in Joep Leerssen's words, 'Ireland as Chronotope: a place with an uneven distribution of time passage, where time is apt to slow down and come to a standstill at the periphery'.[9] As my postgraduate studies progressed I began to notice how Irish music had functioned at Irish studies conferences. After the serious business of demythologising, revision, and deconstruction was done, academics gathered to gossip at receptions and dinners, buoyed by cheap wine and the reassuring ambience of Ireland's timeless music. Serious reflection on Irish music had been more directly supported by institutions outside of higher education circuits such as the Irish Traditional Music Archive, Na Píobairí Uilleann, Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy, and other summer schools and festivals.[10] As a result, the literature relating to Irish traditional music studies was disparate, uncoordinated by a disciplinary research programme, addressed to a wide variety of audiences, disseminated in scattershot fashion. The 'canon', if there was one, was composed of rough guides, pocket histories, coffee table photo-essays, sleeve notes to commercial recordings, book-length companions to television programmes, personal profiles and reminiscences, introductions for the uninitiated, and a few unpublished doctoral dissertations. The result is that in most surveys and explorations of Irish culture published in recent decades, Irish traditional music was almost completely neglected.[11] The situation is now

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[8] Joseph Cooper Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786); Charlotte Brooke, *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789); Edward Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin, 1840); George Petrie, *Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin, 1855). For Petrie as a 'pioneering musicologist' see Jimmy O'Brien Moran, 'Irish Folk Music Collectors of the Early Nineteenth Century: Pioneer Musicologists', in Michael Murphy and Jan Smaczny (eds), *Music in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 94-112.

[9] Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 226.

[10] See www.itma.ie, www.pipers.ie, and www.willieclancyfestival.com, all accessed 19 December 2013.

[11] Readers who are familiar with (and here the list is easily lengthened) Terence Brown's *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), Brian Fallon's *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture, 1930-1960* (Dublin, Gill & MacMillan, 1998), Luke Gibbons' *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), Harry White's *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural*

evolving rapidly, as the research underpinning these essays makes clear. Panels devoted to Irish traditional music have begun to appear more regularly at Irish studies and musicological conferences, and Irish studies journals on both sides of the Atlantic have welcomed essays on many aspects of the subject.[12] Significantly, much of this activity has been generated by performers of traditional music who have acquired academic training, albeit in ethnomusicology programmes rather than programmes focused on Irish studies. Two recently published encyclopedias of Irish music have captured much of this recent work.[13]

Yet the lateness of these developments raises questions about the way in which the field of Irish studies has been structured, the way it structures and circumscribes its objects of study, and the changes that are underway in the current conjuncture. Recent social and political change in Ireland may explain the increase in the perceived significance of traditional music. After all, it has been bound up in the north of Ireland with the politicisation of cultural traditions, and in the south with representations of a globalised and competitive identity. Literary critic Joe Cleary has suggested that these developments coincided with a fundamental shift within the core disciplines of Irish studies. Cleary suggests that the most decisive shift in contemporary Irish culture in recent decades

> is not that comprised by recent mutations within the literary field itself but rather the apparent displacement of literature *tout court* from the central position it had occupied since the Revival. That Revival … was an overwhelmingly literary phenomenon whose 'giants' were all writers. Contemporary Irish writing, even at its very best, has produced no writers of comparable ambition, erudition, and complexity, or international stature, and in fact the most internationally distinguished and consistently innovative figures of the contemporary Irish cultural scene at present are not its writers but its singers and musicians …

Cleary goes on to argue that,

> in a country in which literary critics monopolize cultural debate and in which specialists in European classical music dominate the academic study of music at the university level, the socio-cultural significance of this quite dramatic musical

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History in Ireland, 1770-1970, or Richard Pine's *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005) will hopefully see how enriched those important works might have been by a more sustained engagement with the trajectories of Irish traditional music within broader developments in Irish culture.

[12] For a preliminary list of this growing body of work, see Martin Dowling, 'Rambling in the Field of Modern Identity: Some Speculations on Irish Traditional Music', *Radharc: A Journal of Irish and Irish-American Studies*, vols. 5-7 (2004-06), pp. 109-10, n. 5, 7.

[13] Fintan Vallely (ed.), *The Companion to Irish traditional Music*, 2nd edition (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011); Harry White and Barra Boydell (general editors), *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2013).

> 'renaissance', which has now extended in multiple directions over several decades, has received astonishingly little critical analysis.[14]

For Cleary, such decisive shifts are best understood by using the framework developed by Frederic Jameson, Perry Anderson, and others for analysing the way aesthetic culture 'transcodes' or mediates seismic movements of the dominant mode of production. From this perspective, Ireland's unique culture comes from a peculiar combination of peripherality and proximity to the dominant forces of historical change in Europe and the globe. Ancient and Medieval Ireland were too remote from the institutions of the Roman Empire and European feudalism for these to find a proper footing. Ireland nevertheless eventually found itself disturbingly close to a state destined to break out of that medieval mould earlier and more dramatically than any other in Europe, with the result that 'Ireland was the only country in that geographical area to be subjected to a sustained, thoroughgoing, and culturally traumatic experience of colonisation'.[15]

Cleary's framework resonates strongly with the view of historical change I had developed while training at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where reading and discussion of Marxist economics and historiography was open-mindedly encouraged by the liberal historians there. The most important leftist historian in the postgraduate curriculum was E.P. Thompson. His *Making of the English Working Class*, his essays collected in the volume *Customs in Common*, and his essay 'Class Struggle Without Class' were required reading.[16] My book on the 'Ulster custom' of tenant right might be viewed as a long 'Irish' footnote to a passage in Thompson's essay 'Custom, Law, and Common Right'[17] where he distinguished between the early onset of an organic dialectic of property law and customary rights in England from the later colonial imposition of the concept 'across the Atlantic, to the Indian sub-continent, and into the South Pacific, by British colonists, administrators, and lawyers'. Thompson had emphasised how the organic development of the laws and concepts of agrarian capitalism in England 'were transported and imposed upon distant economies in various phases of evolution. Now it was law (or 'superstructure') which became the instrument of organising (or disorganising) alien agricultural modes of production, and on occasion, revolutionising the material base'.[18]

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[14] Joe Cleary, 'Towards a Materialist-Formalist History of Twentieth Century Irish Literature', *Boundary 2*, 31:1 (Spring, 2004), pp. 238-40.

[15] Joe Cleary, 'Towards a Materialist-Formalist History', p. 209.

[16] E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', *Social History*, x, no. 2 (1978), pp. 133-65.

[17] Dowling, *Tenant Right*; E.P. Thompson, 'Custom, Law and Common Right' in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1991), pp. 97-184.

[18] Thompson, 'Custom, Law, and Common Right', p. 164.

Thus, I began to see human societies as an ensemble of geographically distinct 'social formations' which were more or less compatible with the development and universalisation of global, capitalist, modernity. These formations were *political* and *economic* in the way markets and states were structured and regulated; *visual*, in the way the landscape was organised; and most importantly *social*. In another influential essay, Thompson was concerned with the fates of a 'social or communal psychology of ownership' maintained by a 'grid of inheritance' in the face of state and landlord sponsored agrarian capitalist competition. 'The customary grid', he wrote,

> was as intrinsic to inheritance as the grid of banking and of the stock exchange is to the inheritance of money. Indeed, one could say that the beneficiary inherited both his right and the grid within which it was effectual: hence he must inherit a certain kind of social or communal psychology of ownership: the property not of his family but of his family-within-a-commune.[19]

Thompson's research revealed the piecemeal and gradual evolution of this engagement, marked by minor losses and victories inside and outside the legal system stretching across decades and centuries.

The unfolding of this narrative of modernisation was no less protracted in Ireland, and it was marked occasionally by violent encounters and serious ruptures to the entire existing social fabric. For example, I learned to that the seventeenth century was marked by a 'general crisis', a concept first articulated by Hugh Trevor Roper and Eric Hobsbawm in the pages of the journal *Past and Present* in the 1950s.[20] During this long crisis a protracted and violent reorientation of highly competitive European states occurred. The English state, founded on world-beating agrarian productivity and mercantile strength, was the most precociously dynamic, aggressive, and successful.[21] The differences between the rapidly increasing power and ambition of this state and the mixed structures and customs of a partially feudalised and politically decentralised Gaelic Ireland widened throughout the sixteenth century. Irish structures and customs were based on a pastoral economy, where economic and political power flowed primarily from control of livestock. On the contrary, the English system produced social and political power from the land on which that livestock fed and trod, or from other forms of physical capital, or again from financial accumulation through rent and taxation of a settled populace of tenantry. In contrast to a system that promoted the accumulation and

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[19] E.P. Thompson, 'The Grid of Inheritance: a Comment' in J. Goody, J. Thirsk, and E.P. Thompson (eds), *Family and Inheritance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 337.

[20] These are collected in Trevor Aston (ed.) *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660* (London: Routledge, 1965).

[21] Geoffrey Parker and Lesley M. Smith (eds), *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1978).

concentration of political power, the Irish social formation was characterised by more centrifugal forces. Two examples of this are the curious legal tradition of gavelkind, where large tracts of land could suddenly and frequently change hands, and the centrality of the cattle raid in social relations, where the outcome of a confrontation might suddenly reduce a wealthy family to penury and result in the constant migration of powerful figures and their large entourages of livestock and people.[22]

I also learned to see the long, erratic, and incomplete transition from the traditional world to modernity as a movement from traditional fullness to modern emptiness. The *forms* of things persist into modernity, but their *contents* are emptied out. In this emptying-out process, exemplified in Marx's famous analysis in volume one of *Capital*, the 'use value' of things are eclipsed by their 'exchange value', their rich particularity effaced by a universal equivalence. They become commodities.[23] This transformation of components of the habitat to commodities occurs by way of the replacement of what Pierre Bourdieu called 'manifest social relations' with exchange relations. So in traditional societies like the Kabyle of Tunisia studied by Bourdieu, 'the social distribution of labour and its products is effected by a wide variety of customs, traditional ties, overt relations of power, or, conceivably, conscious decisions'.[24] The pre-eminent indicator of this transition is the treatment of land, and everything that is produced from it, as a commodity. Bourdieu draws attention to this process and the outrage and re-evaluation this heretical attitude provokes in the peasant who was formerly inclined

> to maintain a magical relationship with the land that made it impossible for him to see his toil as labour. … Everything in the peasant's practice actualises, in a different mode, the objective intention revealed by ritual. The land is never treated as a raw material to be exploited, but always as the object of respect mixed with fear: it will 'settle its scores', they say, and take revenge for the bad treatment it receives from a clumsy or over-hasty farmer. The accomplished peasant 'presents himself' to his land with a stance appropriate when one man meets another (i.e. face to face) and with an attitude of trusting familiarity he

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[22] Dowling, *Tenant Right*, pp. 13-16; Marianne Elliot, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (London: Allen Lane Penguin, 2000), pp. 30-45. For the Gaelic pastoral economy, see A.T. Lucas, *Cattle in Ancient Ireland* (Kilkenny: Boethius Press, 1989); K.W. Nicholls, *Land, Law, and Society in Sixteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: National University of Ireland, 1976); Mary O'Dowd, 'Gaelic Economy and Society', in Ciaran Brady and Raymond Gillespie (eds) *Natives and Newcomers: The Making of the Irish Colonial Society* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1986). For studies of the feudal manor in Ireland, see James Lyttleton and Tadhg O'Keefe (eds), *The Manor in Medieval and Early Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).

[23] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, introduction by Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowlkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), pp. 123-78.

[24] Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 149-50.

> would show a respected kinsman. Only the application of categories alien to his experience (those imposed by economic domination and the generalisation of monetary exchanges) brings up the distinction between the technical aspect and the ritual or symbolic aspect of agricultural activity.[25]

For land to become private property, to be fully exchangeable in the 'free' market, it must lose the cultural content it once had. I placed my study of Ulster customary tenure squarely in this context, identifying custom as a form of resistance to the pure commodification of land, the long struggle of Ulster farmers to retain something of the customary meanings and particular histories (that is, the *content*) of their farms in the face of market forces and the efforts of progressive landlords to obliterate that content. Through a custom called 'tenant right' farmers preserved for themselves something like the stable, grounded identity available only in a vanishing traditional world.

My first book was researched and written within the now shrunken field of 'social and economic history', which was not a particularly savvy career plan on my part. University departments in this field were rapidly closing down in the 1980s and 90s, and leftist social scientific perspectives on the historical evolution of capitalism have been largely pushed to the margins of academic life. This is a travesty, given how insightful these perspectives are regarding, for example, the global economic meltdown of 2008.[26] In any case, the left intellectual tradition retreated to the more protected terrain of literary and cultural studies, and my perspective drifted in that direction as well. I began my investigation with the intention of analysing tenant right prices, but ended up writing about a phenomenon that was ideological, symbolic, and in the sense that Marx gave to the commodity, magical. Readers of *Tenant Right and Agrarian Society* may not fully appreciate that this book was a *cultural* history. The Ulster custom of tenant right eventually came to have economic and political significance in the nineteenth century. However, in its first century of development it was primarily a cultural phenomenon, a means of representing the ongoing negotiation of property relations in the wake of conquest, plantation, and the economic expansion of the eighteenth century. It was formed out of the nagging incompleteness of the plantation, and the tenacity of families in the face of uncertainty, vulnerability, and reversal. First mentioned in reference to graveyards and other symbolically charged pieces of ground, the term 'tenant right' slowly began to appear more and more regularly in the correspondence of estate managers before finally entering fully into public political discourse in the nineteenth century.[27]

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[25] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 175.

[26] See for example David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

[27] Dowling, *Tenant Right*, pp. 269-333.

The story I told in my book about tenant right provided me with a framework for a narrative about the history of Irish traditional music. Originating in the wake of traumatic and unstable conditions of the seventeenth century, finding 'new foundations' and putting flesh on a 'new anatomy' in the eighteenth,[28] intensifying with the acceleration in size and productivity of the rural economy during the 'age of revolution', and entering into public discourse in an age when the individual was being refashioned as *homo economicus* and citizen, where kingdoms and communities were reconstituted as nations of rights-bearing individuals – this trajectory of Irish modernity has been lodged firmly in my mind through the writing of my first book and colours my conception of this work. In Chapters 1 and 2, I have drawn heavily on a range of works by Irish social historians to place Irish music in this historical context. This context sets the stage for the later chapters, which are more narrowly focused on the position of traditional music in crucial political conjunctures of the twentieth century. There I draw on critical writers on national culture and ideology – including Eric Hobsbawm, Terry Eagleton, and Benedict Anderson. I also draw on the work of Slavoj Žižek, applying his psychoanalytic readings of popular culture, historical events, and political ideologies in my analysis of the place of traditional music in public discourse.

This perspective raises some intriguing questions, not all of which can be adequately addressed in this book: How do the histories of Irish music, song and dance relate to Ireland's unique predicament of proximity/peripherality, as Cleary described it? How did Ireland's peculiarly non-feudal pre-modernity mould the legacy of what was eventually called Irish traditional music? If the Elizabethan, Cromwellian and Williamite conflicts in Ireland destroyed the economic infrastructure of the country, and the decades following each of these amounted to little more than recovery, consolidation, and stabilisation of a now English-dominated mode, could the development of musical cultures be any different? Whether conditions like these produce the type of social stability needed for the cultivation and development of musical traditions, the extent to which orally transmitted skills of music making survived in the seventeenth-century countryside, and the extent to which the renegotiation of society at all levels had musical aspects, are also open questions. How did the musical 'grid of inheritance' operate across the ruptures and setbacks of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries? If it took over a century to finally establish a coherent culture of productive life with features like the Ulster custom of tenant right, and nearly a further century for the custom to enter public political discourse, how could the establishment of a musical culture which coherently transcoded or mediated the new framework have taken less time? These questions inform my investigation of seventeenth and eighteenth-century sources in Chapter 1. How did the eventual grounding of the agrarian base of society in modern property relations

[28] David Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000); Toby Barnard, *A New Anatomy of Ireland: The Irish Protestants, 1649-1770* (London: Yale University Press, 2003).

in the nineteenth century relate to the modernity of musical cultures? How do the development of Irish musical cultures relate to the Irish modernist conjuncture of the early twentieth century, and to contemporary Irish post-modernity? How does the term 'Irish traditional music' – which is, after all, not much more than a century old – come to have meaning and coherence? These questions inform the narrative of Chapter 2.

Recently I have been given a manuscript of a song, 'Erin's Lovely Home', which ties together the themes of my first book and this one.[29]

Ye tenantry of Ulster join and sympathise with me
We all must fight for tenant right, or lose our property
Land-Lordism it must be checked or for the time to come
We shall be slaves, robbed of our rights,
On Erin's Lovely Home
Say I am bequeathed a farm of land, as nature laid it down
And the price I pay per acre, is the one half of a pound
It is composed of marshy ground, with many a rock and stone
It would not support a family
On Erin's Lovely Home
Say I'm bequeathed £100 from some relation near
And I do get one hundred more with her I love most dear
I spend it on improvement and hope the time will come
When we shall live in peace and rest
On Erin's Lovely Home
Our fences quicked run parallel most beautiful do show
Our fields with artificial grass, most beautiful do grow
Our houses are compactly built, we hope the time will come
When we shall live in peace and rest
On Erin's Lovely Home
But hark, the landlord here he comes to view our house and land
He says ten pound of extra rent of you I do demand
Are you prepared to pay it? If not then you must roam
And leave to me the house and farm
On Erin's Lovely Home
Alas we cannot leave our farm where love and toil began
Alas we cannot leave it, our money is all done
We have to pay now ten per cent, and that too for our own
Such is the state of things just now
On Erin's Lovely Home

[29] On a manuscript in the possession of Peter and Isabel Woods of Lisburn, County Down, which states 'A very old song collected by Matt Meharg, Ballyboley, Ballyclare' and 'Author Tom Clements, Ballyboley'.

Our children we can't advance nor educate them right
They have to work laboriously from morning dawn till night
We can't afford strange men to board, nor wages give to none
The landlord's rent must not be short
On Erin's Lovely Home
When we appeal to parliament to ask for a redress
They laugh at our calamity, and mock at our distress
For ruled by aristocracy, or case is never known
Oh would it were democracy
On Erin's lovely home
There is a land of liberty, far, far across the sea
You ask me why I don't go there, and thus I answer thee
Because I am a patriot, and do not wish to roam
All I do ask is tenant right
On Erin's Lovely Home
Success attend our gracious King, long may he wear the crown
I don't dislike the landlords or wish to put them down
But the natural value of the soil is all that they can own
It's all that justice does demand
On Erin's Lovely Home.

This song is built on the sturdy frame of what Hugh Shields called the 'new' ballad, where a story is told in stanzas of four lines, each with six pulses or stresses, the first and second pair often ending in rhyme.[30] Though the melody does not survive with the manuscript, there are many likely possibilities in the nineteenth-century ballad repertoire. I will not dwell any further on the message of this song or its social context, though readers of my first book will recognise how well it resonates with deep issues surrounding the crucial nineteenth-century questions about land, capital, and polity in Ireland.

I introduced 'Erin's Lovely Home' here to bring to light a connection between the sociocultural history of my earlier book and this one. That connection involves a conception of 'tradition' as a modern phenomenon, which keeps pace with the development of modernity. This insight derives from my adoption of certain senses of the term 'modernity' which may not be widely shared by those who write about Irish traditional music. So, for example, when Sally K. Sommers Smith suggests that the couplet 'traditional music' and 'modern world' sounds at first 'like an oxymoron' and asks what she regards to be 'serious questions about traditional music's survival in the modern world: How much change can traditional music absorb without compromising its ability to encapsulate a time, a place, a national

[30] Hugh Shields, *Narrative Singing in Ireland: Lays, Ballads, Come-All Yes, and Other Songs* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993), pp. 84-112.

identity?' it is clear that we are on different wavelengths.[31] Modernity, in my view, has the character of what the French *Annales* historians called a *longue durée*, and is more in tune with the sociological approach taken by Michael Böss and Eamon Maher in a volume entitled *Engaging Modernity*, where it is argued that:

> many of the basic problems and dilemmas that people of the earlier period [the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] faced and experienced in engaging modernity are fundamentally similar and have only taken a new colouring today from changed circumstances in our late modern society, such as, for example, globalization, the expansion of consumer culture, social differentiation, educational reforms, the rise of the welfare state, changing sexual roles, developments in international politics, the process of secularization and increased prosperity.[32]

If Sommers Smith sees contemporary upheavals threatening a formerly stable tradition, my take on modernity places these in the context of a tradition that originated within and has been propelled through history by the dynamism of modernity. Traditional music is not the survival of some ancient and timeless manifestation of the essence of Irishness or the Celtic spirit, but rather a modern pursuit that kept time with the dramatic and sometimes violent modernisation of Irish society in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The modernity of traditional music can be described in terms of its origins, its form, and its aesthetic development. Regarding origins, I will draw attention in Chapters 1 and 2 to the introduction of the repertoire, style, instrumentation, and social contexts typical of Irish traditional music in the eighteenth century, and the faintness of the imprint of musical culture from previous centuries. Regarding form, consider what I have said about the commodification of things. It is not hard to see eight bars in common time, the basic unit of the music, as an aesthetic form perfectly adaptable to the commodity form. Indeed this aesthetic form only had to wait for technology to catch up to it to be fully realised. Consider, for example, the 78 rpm recording. The dominant performance arrangement of three tunes played twice each, or two tunes played three times, corresponding roughly with one figure of a set dance,

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[31] Sally Sommers Smith, 'Irish Traditional Music in a Modern World', *New Hibernia Review* x, no, 2 (2001), p. 111. My intention is not to otherwise criticise this essay, which contains important insights on the impact of the decline of regional styles, the rising importance of commercial recordings, and the significance of online musical communities for the contemporary field of traditional music.

[32] Michael Böss and Eamon Maher (eds), *Engaging Modernity: Readings of Irish Politics, Culture, and Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), p. 10. The editors adopt a concept of modernity, articulated by Peter Wagner in *Theorizing Modernity* (London: Sage, 2001), that is close to the one I articulate in this chapter. Again, here is a collection of essays on Irish identity, informed by perspectives from sociologists and historians, rich in insight into literary engagements with Irish modernity, which might have been greatly enriched by reflection on traditional music.

also corresponds perfectly with the duration of a side of the 78 rpm record. The three-minute track, amounting to approximately 24 eight-bar segments, is just one possible construction, but it has proved to be incredibly durable and marketable, lasting for decades longer than the 78 rpm format itself, and manifesting itself in a wide variety of live performance contexts from early vaudeville and radio to *Riverdance*-era spectacles.[33] This is not to deny the importance of constructions suited to other commodity forms, from the eight-bar radio jingle to the twenty-minute recorded meditations by fiddlers Kevin Burke or Martin Hayes.[34] The same, of course, is true of the ballad as commodity form. David Lloyd highlights the pliability of the ballads, capable of incorporating the burlesque as well as the rarefied, classical references and contemporary slang, the language of the military and the racecourse. The commodity value of songs was continually reinvigorated and their currency with developments in the public sphere maintained. Their form was stable, but their content was in continuous flux.[35]

Modern in its origins, modern in its form, Irish traditional music is also modern in the history of its aesthetic development, sharing with other art forms in the processes of rationalisation affecting both the social context and function of the music as well as its technical and expressive development. I will generally avoid aesthetic questions in this work. Nevertheless, aesthetic developments are integral to the historical sketches offered here. The historical moment when traditional music severed itself from its original context as accompaniment to dance, opening up both the development of musical material within the strict confines of its form, and also opening up the autonomous development of dance itself, is an exciting and problematic modern development. There perhaps lies the basis for the great flowering of creativity reflected in collections of George Petrie, Patrick Weston Joyce and Francis O'Neill.[36] Moving closer to the present, we have yet to place in meaningful perspective the creative revival of the third quarter of the twentieth century. During this period, composers such as Ed Reavy and Paddy O'Brien, amongst others, pushed back the boundaries of the form

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[33] Perhaps the most influential single recording in the history of Irish traditional music was one such three-minute selection, the renowned Sligo fiddle player Michael Coleman's recording of the three reels 'Tarbolton', 'The Longford Collector', and 'The Sailor's Bonnet' for Decca Records in 1934. Seventy-five years later, it is still not possible to play the first tune in a session without the other two following, nor is it possible to be recognised as a competent traditional musician without knowledge of these tunes. The selection is included on *Michael Coleman 1891-1945* (Dublin: Viva Voce, 1991).

[34] Kevin Burke, *If the Cap Fits* (Mulligan Records, 1978); Martin Hayes, *Live in Seattle* (Green Linnet Records, 1999).

[35] David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), pp. 95-7.

[36] Petrie, *Ancient Music*; P.W. Joyce, *The Irish Song Book: With Original Irish Airs*, ed. Alfred Perceval Graves (London, 1895); Francis O'Neill, *O'Neill's Music of Ireland: Eighteen Hundred and Fifty Melodies: Airs, Jigs, Reels, Hornpipes, Long Dances, Marches, etc., Many of which are Now Published for the First Time* (Chicago: Lyon and Healy, 1903).

of the music, opening up terrain upon which contemporary composers Tommy Peoples and Liz Carroll have blossomed.[37] This period is also characterised by important innovations in individual and ensemble playing, melodic juxtaposition, harmonic filling-in, and creative use of both key changes and rhythm changes, new scenarios for performance, and a general elevation in the technical rationality of the instruments themselves and standard of technique used to play them.

I intend to pursue these issues of the form and aesthetic development of Irish traditional music in more detail in a future work. My focus in the first three chapters of this book is on the intriguing connection and tension between the 'traditional' and 'modern' aspects of Irish vernacular music. One of my themes will be that at crucial stages of Irish political history, Irish elites tended to view the actual contemporary practice of music, song, and dance by Irish people as *all too* modern, so that the tradition itself required reconstruction. A consistent attribute of the history of Irish traditional music is the concern for the speed and direction of change, combined with an ignorance or misdiagnosis of the potential of new articulations of the music. As we have learned from Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and others, the construction of national identities requires the fixing of cultural images, objects, and narratives.[38] In pre-literate contexts unmediated by the developing master narratives, communities are merely 'performed' in face-to-face rituals and spectacles, and marked by tombs, monuments, etc. In Anderson's diagnosis of modern nationalism, communities do not become 'imagined' as nations until they are written. Literacy, the advance of print capitalism, the development of the modern novel, the usurpation of sacred and communal languages by the vernacular of the state – all these participate in this unfolding process.[39]

The problem is that while a literary 'imagined community' advances toward coherence, the vernacular culture below moves to its own rhythm. The period from the late eighteenth century through the Napoleonic period was a highly innovative phase in the history of traditional music. The invention and refinement of a new kind of bellows-blown pipes modelled on the pastoral pipes of lowland Scotland, and the invention of characteristically Irish forms of social dancing, are two examples of significant developments. To these, contemporary antiquarians like Edward Bunting and Thomas Moore were largely oblivious, preoccupied as they were with the preservation and rearrangement of a dying and outmoded bardic repertoire. As I have already mentioned, David Lloyd has identified exactly this problem in the confrontation between the hybrid and fragmented character of the enormous

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[37] Joseph M. Reavy (ed.), *The Collected Compositions of Ed Reavy*, intro. Mick Moloney (Drumshambo, Co. Leitrim: Green Grass Music, n.d.); Eileen O'Brien (ed.), *The Definitive Collection of the Music of Paddy O'Brien 1922-1991* (Ayrshire: J.D.C. Publications, 2009); Liz Carroll, *Collected: Original Irish Tunes* (n.p.: Liz Carroll, 2010).

[38] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, and Reality* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[39] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 9-37.

repertoire of ballads collected in the nineteenth century. Nationalists required the culture to be 'monologic in its modes of expression' and the adulterated repertoire be purged of its foreign and plebian accretions.[40] An analogous complaint was heard with regard to the even more vigorous proliferation of dance tunes in the late nineteenth century, as evidenced in volumes like Captain Francis O'Neill's massive and now canonical collection.[41] Reacting to the overwhelming volume of such collections, Annie Patterson, a founder of the Feis Ceoil Association and a close observer of the music scene during the Revival, complained that 'a rustic performer, gifted with some originality of invention and a fair memory, might well invent half a dozen or so of these airy trifles and, Catterton-like, pawn them off on collectors as "antient" folk music. For, given the Gaelic spirit and the knack of melody construction, one could go ahead with this sort of thing *ad libitum*'.[42] The post-famine decades also saw rapid developments in dancing and instrumentation, much of it unpalatably foreign. The new fast two-hand dances (of which there were myriad variants), German melodeons, and the piano – all later to be incorporated into the tradition – provoked ire from pulpit and op-ed column alike. There was, in short, a deep distrust among cultural elites of the creativity and inventiveness exhibited within the field of what became known as traditional music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So, according to Joep Leerssen, when elites involved with the construction of Irishness faced 'a choice between the return to the pristine example of antiquity or the vigour of a living demotic tradition', they plumped for the former every time. 'The cultivation of the ancient, pre-Norman past', Leerssen continues,

> with its aristocratic society and refined culture, intersects with … the cultivation of the contemporary peasant, with his homely humours and artless charm. Despite their great differences, these two elements – past and present – become linked and even conflated because both represent an un-Anglicized, ideal Ireland. … past and present also meet because both are imagined as situated outside factual history: the one in a mythical prelapsarian past, the other in a dehistoricized chronotope situated in the margins of the world as we know it.[43]

At the end of his illustrious career, Captain Francis O'Neill, who had spent a lifetime among traditional musicians, wrote a letter summarising the state of Irish music in the early twentieth century: 'There certainly must be a defect in the

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[40] Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, p. 97.

[41] Francis O'Neill, *O'Neill's Music of Ireland: Eighteen Hundred and Fifty Melodies: Airs, Jigs, Reels, Hornpipes, Long Dances, Marches, etc., Many of Which are Now Published for the First Time* (Chicago: Lyon and Healy, 1903).

[42] 'Niamh' [Annie Patterson], 'Music Notes', in *Journal of the Ivernian Society*, 7:25 (Oct-Dec 1914), pp. 40-41. This was one of several similar comments from Patterson in this journal in 1914 and 1915.

[43] Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination*, p. 225.

Irish character, always glorifying the legendary and historical past, and leaving to the future the realisation of their dreams. The present – the only time within the compass of our energies – gives us but slight concern as long as our leaders dope us with vainglorious praise and holiday oratory'.[44] O'Neill's career overlapped with the hectic innovations of the first recording technologies, the technical perfection of the uilleann pipes and the mastery of the instrument by virtuosi like Patsy Touhey,[45] the rise of a whole generation of virtuosic fiddle and flute players, the advance of techniques on the new free-reed instruments, the vigour of new styles of ensemble playing and dancing – all of which were occurring in a transatlantic context. Very little of this was appreciated by elites with their sights set on the ancient past and the impoverished western Irish seaboard. Here perhaps lay a clue to the resilient popularity of traditional music, and the starting point of yet another research agenda. If, as Luke Gibbons implies, cultural nationalist master narratives (as well as their colonial and imperial counterparts) 'attempt to co-opt and control the more unruly narratives of vernacular history, in which the past was … worked into the very texture of social experience',[46] traditional music might be regarded as a field in which resistance to such co-option and control is continually reactivated. The kinds of preliterate, face-to-face, 'unmediated' cultures Anderson counterposes to the modern 'imagined community' survive, and indeed thrive, as fields of cultural interaction in a *post*-literate age. Indeed they may provide a means of resisting discourses of national identity that have become boring, irrelevant, and/or – as in Northern Ireland in the last three decades of the twentieth century – downright dangerous.

Traditional music therefore has an ambiguous and productive place within Irish modernity. It registers both the experience of severance and individuation, of the ideas of freedom and autonomy, and at the same time the experience of the reconstruction of sociability and history in the context of this atomised field. In the following chapters it will be seen that the pace of change of traditional music is sometimes quite rapid, indeed *too* rapid for nationalist and conservative ideologues. Even so, its modus operandi is such that its usual pace is slower than the run of the economy and politics. It lies in the slipstream, not the mainstream or forefront of culture. This is the source of the political ambiguity of the aesthetic, and the reason why the conservative responses to modernity have the potential to preserve the seed of liberal, even radical values even while they appear to be dominated by identity politics and commodification. I believe traditional music has the potential to speak truthfully in many voices: discursively in song, kinetically in dance, sonically in music. I hope that the historical perspectives offered in the following

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[44] Francis O'Neill to Rev. Séamus O'Floinn, 15 October 1918. O'Neill Collection of Irish Traditional Music, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

[45] Pat Mitchell and Jackie Small (eds), *The Piping of Patsy Touhey* (Dublin: Na Píobairí Uilleann, 1986).

[46] Gibbons, *Transformations*, p. 15.

chapters will enable traditional musicians to connect their repertoire and style to the contexts in which they originated. Awareness of the way in which traditional music has developed over the last three centuries, and how it was situated in a variety of social and political contexts, will hopefully reinforce the importance of traditional music as a healthy form of sociability and historical connection. I hope that such awareness will also set musicians free from the politics and history that often constrain artistic practices, so that when the opportunities come, they can seize the moment and express themselves authentically.

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