

# Folk Memory of the Urban Irish

## Dennis Clark

Beneath the nationalism, political striving and religious motivation of the Irish in America there has existed a subsoil of nourishing cultural heritage that is difficult to define precisely, but which has been profoundly influential. The great migrations from Ireland in the 1800s brought to America a people divested of the more elaborate forms of institutional culture. The old Gaelic order had been demolished by oppression and neglect; the English language adopted as a means of survival in a world where famine, political rapacity and landlord cruelty made survival a desperate game indeed. Libraries, the graphic arts, orchestral music, higher education, learned fraternities and all the more developed forms of cultural transmission had, for most of the Irish people, been all but precluded. As a result, the immigrants to the United States were culturally emaciated. But the bones were there, and they contained the folk heritage that had sustained the Irish as a distinct people over the ages.

Historians are apt to overlook the folk strength of an impoverished people. First of all, the folkways rarely include documents, and historians are obsessed with old papers, records and written accounts. Second, the study of folkways is really a distinct field. It requires skills and perceptions that historians usually lack. It is only in recent decades that the field has become fully developed, and now historians are starting to borrow its ideas, its techniques of oral recording and its analysis of simple artifacts. For the Irish who came to America in times when literacy was not common, when few had documents or records of their lives, the exploration of cultural heritage of a folk nature is imperative to evince an understanding of their thought and identity.

Dr. Henry Glassie of the University of Pennsylvania in his work *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, has shown how utterly impregnated life in the Irish countryside has been with a folk consciousness made up of a myriad of details of memory, lore and invention. People coming from this rural world of ancient stories, intimate rituals and custom-saturated memory were, naturally, going to bring with them a treasury of cultural recollection, trivia and everyday outlook that would be fundamental to their identity and behavior.

Storytelling and the language bonds of small group interaction, oratory and sermons, folk speech and dialect were all involved in this vital and keenly cultivated oral tradition. Like

the rest of the Irish folk legacy in America, this linguistic bond was interwoven with the urban situation in which most of the Irish found themselves. As a heavily urbanized group, the Irish maintained themselves in a complex balance with other groups in city conditions. This is another reason why this feature of their life has not been fully studied, for those who investigate folk communities and pursue anthropological studies of culture naturally prefer simple social situations, isolated communities and circumscribed areas for inquiry, since that makes it easier to trace the elements involved. The intermingling of the Irish with complex urban social structure makes it difficult to definitively outline their cultural networks and forms. It must also be considered that the Irish are a huge group in American history, not a tiny tribe or isolated fishing community.

There would be scholars who would argue that the Irish really did not have many common bonds. It has been asserted of them, as of the Italian immigrants, that they really had no sense of mutual history or ties in the early nineteenth century and only developed these in America. This is, I believe, misleading. There was a cultural affinity among the Irish even though they may have been sorely divided by counties, by religion, by parochial interests. Sharing the same island that was scarred with struggles, gave them a feeling of deep belonging. Although English-speaker and Irish-speaker did not have the same views of the world, still they knew they were part of the same world and were conscious of a common link to Ireland's past and its affairs. Protestant nationalists did campaign for Catholics. Irish-speakers did urge their children to learn English.

Mayomen did make common cause with Donegal men in agrarian campaigns, support for religious movements like temperance and in opposition to measures of English rule. Throughout the island there were accepted unifying ideas, traditional lore and consciousness. Although this may not have amounted to clearly defined nationalism in the early 19th century, it still did symbolize a culture shared by Irish people predating modern nationalism.

One of the clearest expressions of this "under-culture" is to be found in the musical tradition that has been so brilliantly recorded and documented by Mick Moloney. His work, and that of dozens of exponents of the Irish folk music revival, has shown that this music is entwined thoroughly with the history and memory of the people of Ireland, fully expressive of their spirit and redolent with the

gifts of their singing and playing. The same could be said for the traditional dancing that relates to the music. In America this tradition persists up to the present, but it has also been an enriching influence in general American minstrel music, band music, vaudeville, musical comedy and popular music productions and presentation. Few historians refer to this musical stream, although Kerby Miller (*Emigrants and Exiles*) does rely upon part of it to argue about the nature of Irish reaction to emigration. For the most part, however, this ubiquitous musical tradition which was such an everyday part of Irish spirit and tradition is not seen as a component of the cultural consciousness of Irish-Americans that underlay their formal social organization.

This collective memory and cultural affinity became

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THE LIMERICK EIGHT—WINNERS OF THE 8-HAND REEL AT LAST OIREACHTAS.

