

Keeping the Tradition Alive: A History of Irish Music and Dance in New York City

by Marion R. Casey

In the Spring of 1991, the NYIHR presented "Keeping the Tradition Alive: A History of Irish Music & Dance in New York City." This was the first exhibit and series of interactive performances undertaken by the Roundtable.

From March 9 to May 5th, the exhibit was seen at the Museum of the City of New York where the Roundtable had the opportunity to showcase the cultural richness of the Irish in New York using the theme of music and dance. Twelve events complimented the exhibit, including four outstanding concerts: Thomas Moore's melodies by tenor James W. Flannery and harpist Deirdre Danaher; traditional music by sean-nos singer Seosaimhin Ní Bheaglaoich and four members of Cherish the Ladies in honor of Women's History Month; Tin Pan Alley songs by pianist Juliet Lambert and historian John Ridge; and Celtic Rock by the Kips Bay Ceili Band who provided a stunning finale to the series.

The Roundtable's spring meeting in 1991 was an all day symposium on March 9th which opened the series. It included panel discussions of "What is Irish Music?," "The Dancehall, the Ballroom & Broadcasting," and "The Feis and Teaching the Tradition." The symposium brought together speakers who were or are still active musicians, singers, and dancers, as well as scholars and critics, to explore the impact of New York City on the evolution of the tradition in America and in Ireland. During the next eight weeks, the Roundtable held demonstrations in concertina playing, step and ceili dancing, uilleann and war piping, song in the storytelling tradition, a lecture on women in Irish music by ethnomusicologist Mick Moloney, and a screening of Patrick Mullins' and Rebecca Miller's video documentary "From Shore to Shore: Irish Traditional Music in New York City."

The following article was written to try to sum up what was gleaned from the exhibit and performances. Marion R. Casey is a Ph.D. candidate in History at New York University and President of the NYIHR since 1988.

INTRODUCTION

A currently popular song written for the Irish American market implores us to "keep the tradition alive" and defines that "tradition" as "music, singing and dancing." Indeed, music and dance have played a diverse role in the Irish American community in New York City since 1900. At their simplest level, music and dance have provided a means of socializing which could take place almost anywhere. An informal house party or apartment "seisiun" were frequent and inexpensive ways for traditional musicians to meet while entertaining friends and relations from home. The city's Irish dancehalls and ballrooms became one of the most common Irish immigrant experiences of the twentieth century, as well as an important means of acculturation.

Employment opportunities for New York Irish musicians were varied, ranging from vaudeville acts to cabarets to orchestras, while the degree of lucrateness was dictated by changing tastes. Technological innovations, such as the radio and records, created new work for musicians but also exposed the Irish to their classical or "art" music, as opposed to the folk music tradition. This fostered cultural diversity and subtly changed the meaning of "Irish" music for an entire generation.

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For an important period during this century, music and dance were even used politically as they became propaganda for Irish cultural nationalism. This new twist on "Irishness" was made easier in the second and third decades of this century as radio and records gave Irish and Irish Americans greater access to the badges of cultural identity, just at a time when immigration from Ireland began to slow down.

The transmission to the next generation of an ethnic identity that was closely linked to traditional music was also a motivating factor behind the creation of Irish music and dance schools in the city. Although New York City's subway network was the key to a traditional music treasure-trove for adult musicians, the urban environment did throw up obstacles for children as geographic mobility scattered the Irish to the limits of the five boroughs and beyond. The schools represented the formalization of the time-honored means of learning music and dance, which had been old teaching young within the intimate confines of the home.

These schools, in turn, provided competitors for an annual "feis" or festival of Irish culture which was, for over fifty years during this century, the most prominent public display of Irishness in the city after the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

IRISH MUSIC & DANCE IN NEW YORK'S SOCIAL LIFE

The richest Irish musical legacy was composed with dancers in mind and thus was an integral part of rural community life in Ireland.¹ At informal evening gatherings of neighbors in the home, talk and local gossip often evolved into singing and dancing. Continuous emigration from Ireland to New York over the last two hundred years transmitted this tradition across the ocean. Musical instruments such as the fiddle, the melodeon (replaced by the 1920s with the accordion), the flute and the whistle were especially suited to dance music. Their "portability" encouraged frequent gatherings of musicians and dancers, on board ships making the transAtlantic crossing as well as in the apartments of New York City.

From simple country types of dances, most often associated with crossroad or patron-day gatherings from the 18th to the early 20th century, emerged the more structured "ceili" and solo (or step) dancing. In New York, such socializing quickly made itself at home in more formal public spaces. Francis Xavier Hennessy's "Organization of Old Country Irish Step Dancers" held a semi-annual concert and ball beginning in the 1890s. At their 18th event on October 15, 1902, "an extra Hall (Tammany Annex)" was "specially engaged for Step Dancing only, and Tammany Hall main floor for principally Irish Sets and Round Dancing."²

Irish dancehalls and cabarets were an increasingly popular forum for music. It seemed to matter less what was played or danced in these venues than the fact that music and dance continued to be a means of socializing for Irish immigrants and their second generation offspring as it had been in Ireland. American standards and Tin Pan Alley favorites became staples of the dancehalls and cabarets, but so too did Irish set dances like the "Siege of Ennis," "The Stack of Barley," and "The Highland Fling." There were dancehalls representing almost every area of Ireland; for example, in 1932 the *Irish-American* reported that "mirth reigned supreme" at Murphy's Hall, 229 East 47th Street where

there was "always an opportunity to meet the boys and girls from Cork, Kerry and Limerick, as Professor Jack Murphy sends forth the best from the bandstand."³ In 1937, Shields Acme Hall, at 7th Avenue and 9th Street in Brooklyn, was advertising itself as "the only Irish Ballroom in Brooklyn" and boasted, "Everything is set in style to suit the taste of the most exacting dance fan."⁴ As one Irish American recalled, "Most Irish men and women were beautiful dancers and they loved the Irish waltzes in particular. For those who knew the more intricate traditional dances, the county halls were full of the sound of fiddles and concertinas."⁵

From the 1930s, similar venues along 103rd Street in Rockaway Beach attracted Irish and Irish Americans vacationing in nearby summer rentals. While "Matty Reardon's in Rockaway used to play those Kerry polkas and sets all night long,"⁶ a hybrid version of Irish music was performed at other summer resort spots by the McNultys. Billed as the "Royal Family of Irish Entertainers," Ann, Pete and Eileen McNulty were a mother, son and daughter team. "Ma" McNulty was an accomplished accordion player in the mostly male Irish music world, but her act included popular songs like "A Mother's Love is a Blessing," "The Darling Girl from Clare," "McNamara from Mayo," and "Mother Malone." The need to maintain "traditional" music and dance styles was less important to young Irish and Irish Americans than the need to socialize with people like themselves. In this way, the dancehalls helped the acculturation process by exposing them to American and Irish American music and dance in a socially acceptable environment.



Patrick Walsh, a native of Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, with his orchestra in New York City, circa late 1940s. Photo by George Gunning, courtesy of Patrick F. and Kathleen Kearney Walsh.

The highlights of the social calendar in the Irish American community were the dances of the various county organizations, with the epitome being the annual ball of the United Irish Counties Association. What made this event distinctive was that, from about the 1930s, it was held in the ballroom of a city hotel rather than in an ordinary dancehall. This, plus an Irish orchestra and a Grand March led by the formally dressed UICA officers, lent an air of sophistication to the socializing.

After the second world war, one of the most popular night spots in the Irish American community was the Tuxedo Ballroom on

East 86th Street near Third Avenue. On a typical Saturday night in 1950, the *Irish Echo* noted that the Tuxedo was "capacity full with people listening to their favorite Irish songbird Mary Carton, leading her own orchestra that had made her a popular recording artist for Decca Records."⁷ As in the pre-war dancehalls of the city, such ballrooms as the Tuxedo, City Center and the Yorkville Casino provided "immigrant and second-generation audiences" with a means of socializing "in a community milieu while dancing to Irish-American popular songs, American standards, country-western, and in the 1960s, rock 'n roll."⁸

However, Irish folk music did have its place in New York. Celtic Hall on West 54th Street opened in 1892 and "was long a center for Irish traditional music."⁹ Various branches of the Gaelic League and, after 1950, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (The Musicians' Association of Ireland) held monthly ceilis (dancing sessions) at which traditional musicians could gather. But it was the ambiance of the informal house party which naturally drew traditional musicians together: "Certain homes came to be known as gathering places. The players would hold forth alone and in unison, breaking occasionally for a cup of tea or the exchange of news. New tunes would be introduced and welcomed, the one who brought them treated with special respect. The sessions often lasted until dawn. No one wanted to suggest adjournment, as if they might not meet again. Each dance tune was an old friend, a reminder of happy times."¹⁰

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Many traditional musicians also played popular music because, as the saying went, 'jigs and reels didn't pay the rent.' "The opportunities open to Irish musicians in New York [in the 1920s] were many, with an almost insatiable demand for good musicians in the bars, restaurants, clubs and ballrooms frequented by the large emigrant population."¹¹

Not only was there work in the Irish American community for traditional musicians willing to play popular standards but there was abundant opportunity for classically trained musicians on the dancehall circuit. A dancehall band was a more lucrative proposition than solo fiddling. The traditional fiddle player James Morrison (1893-1947), for example, played for a time during the late 1920s with the Erin's Isle Ballroom Orchestra in Brooklyn, and "eventually he bought his own dancehall."¹² Traditional musicians usually played by ear, but Morrison knew "all the keys and fingering positions of the art violinist and could read musical notation."¹³ This was an advantage when arranging music for an ensemble.

Membership in Local 802, the New York musician's union, was a passport to better paying jobs. In the early 1930s, the fiddler Hugh Gillespie earned \$55 an hour by broadcasting live Irish music over various local radio stations. He recalled that "it was impossible at that time to broadcast, record or play in dance halls if one was not a union member." He and Michael Coleman "would fill numerous requests which came scarcely ever from Irish people but from nearly every other nationality represented in New York."¹⁴ At the time, no fewer than 22 radio stations broadcast programs for the Irish audience in Greater New York.¹⁵

James A. Hayden emigrated from Co. Kilkenny in 1907 and began his entertainment career as a radio announcer with WGBS in New York. Shortly thereafter, he was in constant demand as an emcee on the growing Irish dancehall and ballroom circuit, later combining his duties with that of social editor for the new newspaper *The Irish Echo*. In 1930, Hayden began a weekly live radio show which featured performances by musicians such as

John 'Galway Accordion' Kelly, 'Irish' Eddy Dunne, Jack Haley, Michael Tully, and Billy McElligott. From 1938-1943, Hayden took his show on the road; there were dozens of venues to play in those days, including eleven Irish dancehalls in Harlem between 125th and 138th Streets.¹⁶

James Hayden's daughter Dorothy inherited both her father's radio program "Irish Memories" and his stage show after his death in 1943. After the war, Dorothy Hayden's troupe (now including Mickey Carton) played not only festivals, church concerts and dances but appeared seven times on the Ed Sullivan Show and played the Palace Theatre in 1951. Timmy Cronin led her Irish dancers, who wore tap shoes; although strictly forbidden in traditional Irish stepdancing, the taps were a concession the Irish Memories Stage Revue made as they increasingly played to American audiences.

From the 1920s, there was also "a constant demand by the record companies" for traditional musicians to make commercial recordings.¹⁷ By 1921 several small independent record labels had come into existence to serve the emerging Irish record-buying market, catered for until then chiefly by the Edison, Victor and Columbia companies.¹⁸ For example, the famous uilleann piper Tom Ennis (1889-?) opened a music shop on Columbus Circle in New York in 1920 where he sold, among other things, his own recordings.¹⁹ Through over eighty tracks which the virtuoso fiddler Michael Coleman (1891-1945) recorded in New York during the 1920s and 1930s, the Sligo style and repertoire came to dominate fiddle playing both in America and in Ireland. The medleys of tunes that Coleman put on record continue to be staples of the traditional musician's repertoire. In 1925, Coleman and flute player Tom Morrison earned \$300 for one Columbia recording session, a testimony to the popularity and commercial value of his records.²⁰

POPULAR IRISH AMERICAN MUSIC

The growing affluence of New York's Irish American community from the turn-of-the-century also provided a ready market for the producers of Broadway light musicals and for the sheet music of Tin Pan Alley. Many of the songs written in this genre are forgettable ditties full of social and historical inaccuracies about the Irish. However, there were some notable exceptions that crossed over from Broadway to immense popularity on the Irish cabaret and ballroom circuit. Songs like "Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral (That's An Irish Lullaby)" (1914), "Mother Machree" (1910), and "Little Bit of Heaven, Sure They Call It Ireland" (1914) all originated on Broadway. The most successful and prolific composers and lyricists were Chauncey Olcott and Ernest R. Ball.

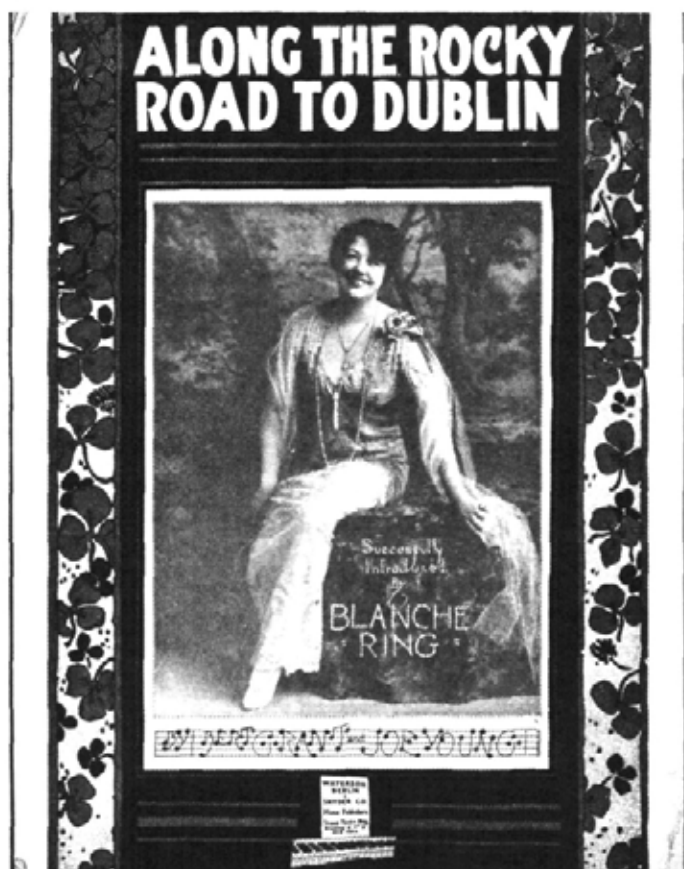
From the 1890s up to the 1920s Buffalo-born Chauncey Olcott (1860-1932) was a matinee favorite with Irish American audiences. He combined his excellent singing voice with a long succession of musical stage plays featuring nostalgic portraits of Irish life and character. Olcott was the author of the popular standards "My Wild Irish Rose" (1899) and "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" (1912).²¹

There were efforts made by the Irish American community to counteract insipid characterizations of the Irish by such non-Irish stage and song writers. Interestingly enough, these efforts focussed on the promotion of Irish music and dance as "art" rather than "folk" traditions, perhaps because traditional musicians were not unknown performers on the vaudeville circuit. For example, the great uilleann piper Patsy Touhey earned a living by starring in "vaudeville skits, trading jokes and slapstick with his partner, Charles Burke. The show always included plenty of Irish nostalgia and a finale of piping to which his wife, Mary, danced."²² While this and the Tin Pan Alley genre are illustrations of the important adaptation of Irish traditional to American popular culture, they were not the only manifestation of "Irish" music in the city.

John McCormack's reputation as an Irish tenor was made on both the opera and concert stages. He also recorded over 580 records, most on Victor's Red Seal label during the 1920s and 1930s. For years his was the definitive version of such favorites as "Kathleen Mavourneen," "Mother Machree," and "The Foggy Dew." His signature piece was "I Hear You Calling Me."²³ McCormack's popularity as a singer of sentimental Irish ballads had a huge impact on the Irish American community. For example, the Bronx-born Irish tenor Robert White (son of the "Silver-Masked Tenor" Joe White) recalled, "The biggest influence underneath or over everything for my singing was John McCormack because we had all of his records. . . the McCormack stuff was very strong, and of course in my neighborhood McCormack's name was magic. He was the Bing Crosby, Pavarotti, in one, and Elton John. I mean, everyone. He was it."²⁴

On the other hand, Victor Herbert's *Irish Rhapsody*, composed in 1892, illustrates the way in which traditional and classical Irish music could be married. It was written for the Gaelic Society of New York's annual Feis Ceoil agus Seanachus (Culture and Music Festival) held on 20 April 1892 at the Lennox Lyceum. It is a classical work for orchestra based on melodies used by Thomas Moore as settings for his verses, such as "Garry Owen," "Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms," "St. Patrick's Day," and "Erin, Oh, Erin." "The *Rhapsody* became so popular that it was played to death. . . It was so brilliant and facile, so associated with Irish festivities, and so adaptable to various ensembles that it killed itself as an independent concert number."²⁵

Such "Irish" music on the classical concert stage in New York still drew upon accepted Irish traditions. Artists like Victor Herbert



A Bert Grant and Joe Young composition for Tin Pan Alley, circa 1910. Sheet music courtesy of John Ridge.

(1859-1924) and John McCormack (1884-1945) helped to popularize the art songs of Thomas Moore (1779-1852), many of which were inspired by traditional Irish melodies written for the harp. Herbert's and McCormack's recordings helped spread the gospel of respectable Irish music but, with the proliferation of Irish radio programs in the metropolitan area during the 1920s, the cause was also helped by artists like harpist/arranger Josephine Smith [see page 41] and tenor Seamus O'Doherty, who broadcast "exceptionally fine program[s] of Gaelic and classical airs."²⁶

Irish music was not immune to American musical styles and influences. As the century progressed, non-traditional instruments (such as the piano, saxophone, drums and banjo) and dances like the polka appeared in the repertoire of Irish bands and influenced musical arrangements. The saxophone, for example, was a feature in 1930s cabaret entertainments, and also in post-World War II ballroom orchestras like those of Andy Kerrigan, Patrick Walsh, and Brendan Ward. Electric instruments, British and American dance numbers (like "The Hucklebuck" or "Da Do Ron Ron"), and a country-and-western flavor were distinct elements in the Irish showbands which began appearing in the city during the 1960s and 1970s. Such hybridization in the music was another important means of acculturation; the "music served as a bridge between the traditional way of life left behind in Ireland and the new, contemporary American pace and lifestyle."²⁷

this revival of interest in traditional music had was that it brought Irish music out of intimate house sessions and ethnic festivals into concert and more formal performance settings. An entire generation of enthusiasts knew "Irish" music in this way and lost its connection with the Irish dance tradition for which it had been originally composed.



Acclaimed New York composer and arranger Josephine Patricia Smith, date unknown. Photo courtesy of Rita McLoughlin Fitzpatrick.



Album recorded by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem in Columbia Records' 30th Street studio, New York, circa late 1960s. Courtesy of Joan M. Casey.

For many Irish emigrants who came to New York during the 1950s and 1960s, these orchestras and showbands played the only "Irish" music they knew. On the other hand, while guitar and banjo had often been used for tempo on early Irish traditional music recordings made in New York, they received an added boost in popularity when used by the Clancy Brothers during the 1960s folk music revival. Perhaps the most important effect that

CULTURAL NATIONALISM

After 1900, Irish American newspapers and organizations pointed out the dignity of their ancient culture, especially when demonstrated through classical programs and the "feis." It was the opinion of the *Irish World* that the most satisfying Irish entertainment to be had in the city was that provided by the feisanna of the Gaelic League; in 1910, the paper reported that at the 8th annual Brooklyn feis, "there was music and singing and oratory and declamation and dancing—all good and all thoroughly redolent of Irish Ireland—and all happy as well as elevating."²⁸

This concept of an "Irish Ireland" was part of the cultural nationalism of the Gaelic Revival, which from the late nineteenth century had emphasized the pursuit of Irish language, literature and sports to awaken national feeling. Ceili dancing, for example, was popularized in New York City from the turn-of-the-century by such "revival" organizations as the Brooklyn and New York Philo-Celtic Societies, the Gaelic Society of New York, the Yonkers Celtic Society, and the Greenpoint and Harlem Gaelic Leagues.

In 1928 the *Irish World* newspaper urged readers to encourage Gaelic and classical Irish radio programming: "Realizing that the radio is now the most powerful weapon of spreading the truth about Ireland . . . Irish radio owners are asked to write the various stations when the programs offend or when they please, and thus make their influence felt for bringing this great

medium to their side in enlightening America about their race and its culture and combatting anti-Irish propaganda." The paper saw this letter-writing campaign as a method of counteracting requests to play anti-Irish songs.²⁹

The revival movement was biased towards the interests of the middle class and therefore Irish folk music received little attention until after Ireland received independence in 1922. From then on it was elevated to nearly equal status with the Irish language as "an expression of the nation's mind" and as an appropriate means of cultivating national distinctiveness: "Irish traditional music began to be afforded a new and welcome respect."³⁰ It is significant to note that many of the people responsible for the successful promotion of traditional Irish music and dance in New York City during this century had been exposed to such Irish nationalism in Ireland before emigrating.

TEACHING THE TRADITION

The *Irish Advocate* newspaper teemed with dancing advertisements on the eve of the first world war: Professor Joe Garry provided "Irish Figure Dancing Instruction" in Gannon's Hall at 65th Street and 3rd Avenue; the Armagh Young Ladies Dancing Class met every Sunday evening at the West Side Property Owners Hall at 9th Avenue and 50th Street; and at the annual ball of the Eccentric Firemen, Local Union No. 56, there was an "exhibition of the Four-Hand Reel and Jig by teams selected from the leading Irish Dancing Classes."³¹

The instruction of children was particularly important in the history of Irish music and dance in New York City. Irish-born parents made a special effort to expose their American-born children to these Irish traditions through formal lessons. Often the impetus was social, since all ages were called upon for a "party piece" when relatives and friends gathered in the homes and apartments; thus, to be able to dance a step or play a tune was both an accomplishment and a tie to a rich cultural heritage. Going for lessons, rather than learning in the home, also brought the second generation into regular contact with each other; this became their common link to an Irish identity which was increasingly hard to maintain as the Irish moved out of Manhattan's old neighborhoods into the boroughs. At the same time, the feisanna of the Gaelic League and the United Irish Counties Association provided a competitive goal for children. Of course, the key to these successful results was the musician or dancer who decided to teach.

Two of the earliest Irish dancing masters in New York City were Thomas P. Hill, born in Cork City in 1890, and James T. McKenna, born in Castleisland, Co. Kerry, circa 1885. Cork, Kerry and Limerick were counties famous for their travelling dancing masters and for great schools of Irish dancing.³² The "Cork-Kerry" style of dancing was prevalent in New York until the middle of this century when it was replaced with a slower, more graceful style from the north of Ireland, introduced to the city by Peter and Cyril McNiff.³³

By the time Tommy Hill emigrated to New York in 1911, he had won first or second prize in over 150 dancing competitions. Within one week of his arrival in the city, he won first prize in each stepdancing event at the Gaelic League Feis held in Celtic Park, Woodside.³⁴ Hill gave instruction in jig, reel, hornpipe, figure dancing and set pieces. Like the travelling dancing masters in Ireland, Tommy Hill brought his lessons to children in different boroughs of New York; in the 1930s he was teaching at the Irish American Civic Association and the Star of Munster Ballrooms in the Bronx, at the Mayo Ballrooms in Yorkville, and in the V.F.W. Hall in Bliss Station (Woodside). He was the first teacher

of his daughters Dorothy and Rita who later performed with him as a cabaret act for the O'Reilly Brothers' restaurants (Third, Seventh, and Eighth Avenues).

"Professor" McKenna was a dancing master whose advertising slogan was the "School that gets Results."³⁵ Supposedly due to a bad leg, he was never seen to dance a complete step himself yet he taught hundreds of children in New York City. McKenna's classes were popular with Irish parents because his lessons were always taught to live music, often by musicians like Joey Flynn and Vinny O'Connor.³⁶ His students demonstrated Irish stepdancing at the 1939-40 World's Fair. In the 1950s a combination of advancing age and the drastic change in the style of Irish stepdancing being taught in the city forced McKenna into retirement. Several of his students went on to become dancing teachers themselves.

Some musicians were also dancers. Francis Xavier Hennessy, an "Irish Union Piper and Violinist" advertising himself as an "A-1 Professional" in 1914, offered violin lessons for \$1 each ("children under 15 half price") and taught "step dancing, waltz and two step."³⁷ Like Tommy Hill, the fiddler James Morrison emigrated to New York in 1918, marking the occasion by winning in the Gaelic Society of New York's Feis. Morrison was also known to his many students as "The Professor" and taught fiddle, flute, banjo, and accordion on Manhattan's Upper West Side at 96th Street and Amsterdam Avenue from about 1926. He teamed up with James McKenna in the late 1930s and they "became the most successful teachers of Irish music and dancing in New York."³⁸ One of Morrison's students recalled how he used to demonstrate rhythm for the fiddle by dancing—"He would put down the fiddle and batter out the rhythm with his feet on the floor,"—underscoring the intricate connection between music and dance in traditional Irish culture.³⁹

Dozens of teachers have carried on the work of these men in New York City over the years. Some teachers, such as violinists Martin Mulvihill and Pete Kelly, formed their students into bands (Eire Og, Tara Ceili Band, and the Shannonnairs) which successfully toured Ireland. Women became active as teachers, including Peggy Smith who taught dancing throughout New York and New Jersey during the 1940s and 1950s and Maureen Glynn, who took over her father's school of music in the early 1970s.

PUBLIC EXPRESSION

The St. Patrick's Day Parade is an expression of Irish ethnicity and also an indicator of the New York Irish community's social connections. Irish music associated with the parade includes both fife and drum bands, and warpipe bands. The earliest fife and drum bands, usually connected with various city parishes, played a limited repertoire including "The Wearing of the Green," "God Save Ireland," and "The Old Folks at Home."⁴⁰ By the 1930s, three county associations (Cavan, Down, and Tyrone) paraded fife and drum bands which included established traditional musicians, such as the piccolo player Paddy Finlay (1884-1950).⁴¹

However, pipe bands are now more indelibly associated with the parade. At about the time the parade moved onto Fifth Avenue in the 1920s, three groups of kilied pipers also made their debut—the Irish Warpipe Band, the County Armagh Pipers, and the Emmet Irish Pipers. The revival of the warpipe tradition dates to the turn-of-the-century in Ireland; it was promoted in New York City from at least 1914 through the Irish Pipers Club, which charged a \$10 initiation fee and held weekly practices at the Irish Counties Hall, 211 East 45th Street.⁴² A surge in the number of pipe bands marching in the St. Patrick's Day Parade

came in two stages: after 1945, when many Irish county societies and A.O.H. branches organized pipers and after 1960, with the proliferation of the bands of the Emerald Societies (employment-related organizations). The first of these latter bands was the New York City Police Department Emerald Society Pipe Band which debuted in 1961.⁴³

One of the most significant contributions to the cultural life of New York City began in 1932 when the United Irish Counties Association held its first Feis, or cultural festival. While the original motivation for the establishment of an annual Feis in New York City was akin to the concepts of cultural nationalism,⁴⁴ the UICA Feis actually succeeded in drawing the attention of a much wider audience to the ancient culture of Ireland. Within ten years of its inception, the New York Feis had gained national press coverage with headlines that annually noted a record attendance. In 1942, for example, while the Burlington, Vermont News reported that "25,000 strong" were expected at the UICA Feis, the Brooklyn Tablet gave an impressive post-Feis figure of "more than 15,000 Irish men and women from all parts of the United States in the greatest turn-out ever recorded for the historic festival."⁴⁵

The Feis was usually a one day event at which there were dozens of competitions for amateurs covering voice, choirs, solo instruments, bands, Irish language, storytelling, recitation, step and figure dancing, essay and design. Most competitors were between

the ages of eight and eighteen. The modern Feis served a variety of purposes which visually symbolized the role of music and dance in the Irish community. First, it is fondly remembered as a great day out for the family, that included picnics and a chance to meet old friends in a congenial environment (it was usually held outdoors, on the grounds of Fordham University or Hunter College). Second, the Feis' competitions provided a focus for Irish American children; their year-round pursuit of lessons in the city's Irish music and dance schools was given an opportunity for public presentation and a chance to measure their skills against others.

By mid century, the organizers of the UICA Feis saw the event's purpose in two very important ways—as a means of fostering ethnic identity among their own people, but also of encouraging pluralism. In 1955, Judge James J. Comerford, as Chairman of the Feis, wrote: "It also helps, at a time in America when rapid change in the tastes of the public toward dancing and singing is the vogue, to preserve the traditionally correct style for dancing Irish dances and to keep the love for traditional Irish songs and music which has existed for over two hundred years in the United States from decaying. . . Having been presented each year consecutively since 1932 in New York, it is now an established cultural institution which focuses the attention of the American people on the culture of Ancient Ireland. Being intended for all Americans, irrespective of their national origin, color or creed, the Feis is an instrument which sows seeds of good will not only in New York but across the United States."⁴⁶

The longevity and success of the UICA Feis led to a demand for the expert advice of the New York organizers in the establishment of similar Irish music and dance festivals around the country. In addition, one of its spin-offs was the annual Feis Winners Concert, which mixed Irish styles and talents for public performance rather than competition. A similar annual extravaganza of musical diversity was the "Night of Shamrocks" put on by the Emerald Musical Society from 1947.

Technological influences such as radio and television were other important means of publically expressing Irish culture. Tomas O'Faircheallaigh, for example, demonstrated Irish dancing on the radio in 1932 for WCBS.⁴⁷ CBS was also the first station to broadcast on television a demonstration of Irish dancing in 1945; one of the dancers on this occasion was Bronx-born fiddler Andy McGann, who recalled being led to stepdancing and Irish music through radio programs.⁴⁸ Television's "The Ed Sullivan Show" was also the venue for the McNiff dancers, but perhaps the most important impact of modern media was on the popularization of the music of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem in the 1960s. For the first time since the days of Coleman and Morrison, Irish folk music was exposed to audiences in a non-traditional manner. The result was a surge in interest and respect for Irish culture, especially the musical arts.

CONCLUSION

New York City has always been the cultural capital of Irish music and dance in America. The metropolis has nurtured a spectrum of Irish musical activities, from sessions, lessons, and competitions featuring traditional jigs and reels to the ballroom, concert hall and recording studio. As definitions of what constitutes "Irish" music have changed, especially in the last one hundred years, Irish immigrants have sought to preserve their rich tradition but also to integrate it with America's vibrant popular culture. The result has been more than one type of audience for Irish music, more than one type of Irish musician, and more than one type of Irish dance.

(Continued next page)

**THE UNITED IRISH COUNTIES ASSOCIATION
OF NEW YORK, INC.
27TH ANNUAL
FEIS
FESTIVAL OF IRISH CULTURE**

**LITERATURE
MUSIC - ART**

**DANCING
ORATORY**

HUNTER COLLEGE IN THE BRONX
BEDFORD PARK BOULEVARD WEST AND JEROME AVENUE, BRONX
COMMENCING AT NOON
SUNDAY, JUNE 21

Honorary Chairman
VERY REVEREND LAURENCE J. MURPHY, S.J.
President of Fordham University
President PATRICK J. BRADY
Chairman JOHN P. CASHIN

Subway poster designed by Patrick MacSweeney of Brooklyn, 1959.
Courtesy of Rita McLoughlin Fitzpatrick.

NOTES

- ¹ Brendan Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1986; originally published 1971, revised 1977), p. 55.
- ² Advertisement, *The Gael* (New York), October 1902, p. 336.
- ³ "The Round-Up," *Irish American Advance*, 12 March 1932, p. 10.
- ⁴ Advertisement, Twenty-first annual souvenir journal of the Tommy Hill Association, 12 March 1937. Photocopy in possession of the author.
- ⁵ Donal O'Donovan, "Dorothy Hayden" in *Dreamers of Dreams: Portraits of the Irish in America* (Bray, Co. Wicklow: Kilbride Books, 1984), p. 59.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ *Irish Echo*, 7 October 1950, p. 8.
- ⁸ Rebecca S. Miller, "'Our Own Little Isle': Irish Traditional Music in New York," *New York Folk Lore*, XIV: 3-4, 1988, p. 105.
- ⁹ W.H.A. Williams, "Irish Traditional Music in the United States," in D.N. Doyle and O.D. Edwards, eds., *America and Ireland, 1776-1976: The American Identity and the Irish Connection* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 289, and Miller, op.cit., p. 102.
- ¹⁰ Liner notes by Barry O'Neill, *The Wheels of the World: Classics of Irish Traditional Music* (Shanachie 33001).
- ¹¹ Liner notes by Harry Bradshaw for *James Morrison, The Professor* (Viva Voce 001), p. 5.
- ¹² Harry Bradshaw quoted in Gary Parker Chapin, "Sligo Fiddling: Michael Coleman and James Morrison," *Strings*, March/April 1992, p. 44.
- ¹³ O'Neill, op.cit.
- ¹⁴ Liner notes by Tony Engle and Tony Russell, *Hugh Gillespie: Classic Recordings of Irish Traditional Fiddle Music* (London: Topic Records Ltd, 12T364); Harry Bradshaw, *Michael Coleman, 1891-1945* (Viva Voce 004, 1991), p. 61, also quotes Hugh Gillespie: "We were paid \$50 for those [live] radio programmes."
- ¹⁵ Bradshaw, *James Morrison*, op.cit., p. 5.
- ¹⁶ O'Donovan, op.cit., pp. 57-59.
- ¹⁷ Bradshaw, *James Morrison*, op.cit., p. 5.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 4.
- ¹⁹ For brief biographical notes on Touhey and Ennis, see liner notes by O'Neill, op.cit.
- ²⁰ Bradshaw, *Michael Coleman*, op.cit., pp. 1-3, 55.
- ²¹ John Ridge, "Irish Music on Broadway," slide lecture at the Museum of the City of New York, 13 April 1991.
- ²² O'Neill, op.cit.
- ²³ Liner notes by Max de Schauensee, *John McCormack Sings Irish Songs* (RCA Camden CL-407), circa 1958.
- ²⁴ Oral history with Robert White, 4 January 1982. Bronx Regional and Community History Study, Interview No. 3 (transcribed), Lehman College (CUNY), Bronx, New York.
- ²⁵ Edward N. Waters, *Victor Herbert: A Life in Music* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 66. In 1908 Herbert joined the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, a fraternal organization established in New York in 1784. He immediately began to influence their annual dinners by arranging old Irish airs for the entertainment and composing their theme song "Hail to the Friendly Sons." In 1915 Victor Herbert was elected their President and a Glee Club founded. Since that time, the Glee Club of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick has annually presented a public concert of Irish and traditional Gaelic songs, as well as show tunes and operatic numbers.
- ²⁶ "Tune in on This," *The Irish World*, 16 June 1928.
- ²⁷ Miller, op.cit., p. 105; and Patrick Farrelly, "On the Road with Brendan Bowyer," *Irish Voice*, 15 December 1990, p. 26.
- ²⁸ "8th Annual Feis Ceoil, Brooklyn Gaelic Society," *The Irish World* [?], 12 February 1910.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1981), pp. 146-147, 208.
- ³¹ Advertisements from the *Irish Advocate*, 13 January 1914, p. 2; 7 February 1914, p. 5; and 3 January 1914, p. 8.
- ³² John P. Cullinane, *Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing in the New York Area* (Cork: Ballineaspig Publications, 1991), p. 2.
- ³³ Ibid., pp. 18-19. This change also affected Irish musicians who were playing for dancers at the Feis; whereas one tempo had been suitable up to this point, now musicians had to cope with 'fast' and 'slow' style dancers. In 1959 the Irish Musicians Club and the Irish Dancing Teachers Commission of America met in New York to debate this point and standardized tempos to metronome speeds. Ibid., p. 22.
- ³⁴ George Daly, "Life Story of Prof. Thomas P. Hill," in the journal of the Tommy Hill Association, op.cit., p. 2.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Cullinane, *Aspects . . .*, op.cit., pp. 3-4.
- ³⁷ Advertisement, *Irish Advocate*, 3 January 1914, p. 2.
- ³⁸ Bradshaw, *James Morrison*, op.cit., pp. 6-7.
- ³⁹ Bradshaw interview in *Strings*, op.cit., p. 44.
- ⁴⁰ John Ridge, *The St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York* (New York: St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee, 1988), p. 120.
- ⁴¹ Liner notes [circa 1989] by Harry Bradshaw, *Fluters of Old Erin: Flute, Piccolo and Whistle Recordings of the 1920s and 30s* (Viva Voce), p. 9.
- ⁴² "The Irish Pipers Club," *Irish Advocate*, 14 February 1914, p. 3 and 21 February 1914, p. 2.
- ⁴³ Robert J. Hogan, "A History of the Pipes and Drums of the Emerald Society, New York City Police Department," *New York Irish History* (Journal of the New York Irish History Roundtable), Vol. 5, 1990-91, p. 21.
- ⁴⁴ For example, the program for the fifth feis included the following statement: "We greet you as fellow Gaels, whose minds are filled with the consciousness of a heritage second to none, and whose patriotic souls are stirred that today they may witness a revival of the glory and the beauty that is the true Irish culture." Official Program of the Fifth Annual Feis, United Irish Counties Association of New York, Inc., 10 October 1937. Such sentiments were tempered as the years went by to reflect a greater consciousness of the Feis as an American event.
- ⁴⁵ "Irish Gather 25,000 Strong," *News* (Burlington, VT), 9 June 1942 and "15,000 at Tenth Annual Feis," *The Tablet* (Brooklyn, NY), 20 June 1942. Courtesy of a scrapbook of clippings in the possession of Rita McLoughlin Fitzpatrick.
- ⁴⁶ James J. Comerford, "The Feis" in the Program for the 23rd Annual Feis of the United Irish Counties Association of New York, Inc., 29 May 1955.
- ⁴⁷ John P. Cullinane, *Further Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing, Part Two* (Cork: Ballineaspig Publications, 1990), p. 139.
- ⁴⁸ "Irish Film at Philo Celtic Ceili Nov. 2," *Irish Echo*, 2 November 1957, p. 10; and Earle Hitchner, "Andy McGann: An All-Time Great," *Irish Voice*, 21 July 1990, p. 19.

President's Message (Continued from page 2)

\$97,000 from the Irish Institute; \$7,500 from the Irish American Cultural Institute; and \$1,100 from the New York Council for the Humanities; (6) guided and administered the joint project with the Irish Institute to produce *The New York Irish*; (7) curated the "Keeping the Tradition Alive" exhibit and series of programs at the Museum of the City of New York; (8) instituted regular newsletters, press releases, financial statements, annual reports and computerized membership; (9) developed a membership brochure; (10) inaugurated an annual cemetery walking tour; (11) coordinated Roundtable participation on panels at two Irish Studies conferences.

The end results of this expansion have been an increase in visibility in the Irish American community and an increase in membership (from 150 in 1987 to 419 in 1992). The Roundtable is now frequently approached to participate in activities that relate to the Irish ethnic presence in New York City. It satisfies a need for quality historical programming in the New York Irish/Irish American community. Its emphasis on encouraging research even by amateur historians and genealogists leads to an infectious excitement that is the dynamism behind the Roundtable.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to be a part of the Roundtable, and I sincerely look forward to its continued success.

Best wishes,

Marion R. Casey

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