

O'Byrne DeWitt: A Window on Irish Music Recording in America

by Méabh Ní Fhuartháin

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The displacement of the Irish people from their native land to the United States thrust them not only from a rural environment to that of an urban one, but also into a societal and cultural structure vastly different from that in which they had been brought up. Irish communities formed in such areas as the Bronx in New York, Dorchester and "Southie" in Boston, and the former Corktown area of Philadelphia. Within these ethnic enclaves focus was directed toward the maintenance of certain cultural characteristics. Evidently the perpetuation of Irish music was one of the traits considered important enough and strong enough by the emigrants in their search for meaning and purpose in the multicultural urban centers of the Eastern seaboard and Midwest, the destinations of a large majority of these immigrants.¹ The question of why the music of these transplanted people was and is actively and deliberately propagated must logically relate to its value and meaning for this community. "In order for a custom of belief to persist in a community it must hold meaning for the individuals who comprise this group. The identity of the Irish is no different."²

The many different faces which the popular Irish musical culture of the U.S.A. has donned throughout this century is indicative of the changing socialization preferences. This socio-musical history of the Irish immigrants of the twentieth century has, in turn, been captured in a unique manner due to the unprecedented technological explosion of the recording industry, which occurred over the last one hundred years. The subject of this essay is to endeavor to trace the development of the Irish music recording industry in America, through the family of the O'Byrne DeWitts.

"Over the period of 1900 to 1950 most of the important developments in the field of Irish music that did happen took place in the U.S.A."³ One of the most vital occurrences in Irish traditional music was the publication of O'Neill's collection of traditional Irish tunes in 1903 and 1907 respectively.⁴ As important, if not indeed more so, was the issuing and widespread dissemination of recordings of Irish music and song which took place in the U.S.A., beginning in the second decade of this century and continuing right through to the latter half of the 1960's. There is a distinct cutoff point at this stage, due to the subsequent folk revival movement which provided a platform for popular folk music that was intrinsically different to that which had gone before. Ellen O'Byrne DeWitt, and the legacy which was maintained by her family until almost 1970, can be said to have contributed immeasurably to the development and propagation of the ethnic recording industry in the U.S.A., with particular relation to Irish traditional music and song.⁵

Ellen O'Byrne, born circa 1875, originally hailed from Leitrim in the Northwest of Ireland. Like thousands of her fellow country people, she emigrated to the States. She was just fifteen years

of age. It was in New York that she met and married Justus DeWitt, a Dutch emigrant. Despite initial protests from the companies involved at the very idea of a female not only managing a store independently, but using her own name in its title, Ellen O'Byrne persisted and the O'Byrne DeWitt business was opened in 1900. It was, however, Ellen who was the driving force behind the business endeavors which the couple undertook. DeWitt provided keen financial acumen, while Ellen explored new and enterprising avenues which they could pursue. (Among other things they expanded and established a thriving real estate office.)

Among the many items which were for sale in the O'Byrne DeWitt store were musical instruments, such as accordions, and whatever cylinder recordings of Irish music Ellen could obtain. At this time, however, very little Irish music was being issued. John McCormack, whose career spanned the first half of this century, was one of the few artists being recorded in the first decade of the 1900's. His renditions of 'Kathleen Mavourneen' and 'Mother Machree' endeared him to diverse segments of the Irish-American community. However, this was entirely vocal music. In instrumental music virtually no Irish artists were being released. John Kimmel was a notable exception on the R.C.A. Victor label. Kimmel was Brooklyn born of German Irish extraction. His 78's of accordion virtuosity were first issued in 1907. Reg Hall says of his playing that, "Although not an Irishman, his style was closely related to the Irish tradition and was very influential in the music developed by later American-Irish accordion players."⁶ It seemed obvious to Ellen that there was a gap in the market which needed to be filled. She herself approached Columbia Records with a suggestion that they move into Irish recording.

With a proviso that the O'Byrne DeWitt store would purchase an initial five hundred copies, Columbia agreed to record some Irish sides. Justus DeWitt, Jr., Ellen's son, was promptly dispatched to Celtic Park on Long Island in search of prospective musicians. Celtic Park at that time (circa 1915) on Sunday afternoons had an open air informal concert of Irish music. Musicians and singers alike would perform on a long platform and donations were accepted from the onlooking crowd. Jim Morrison recounted a story his father, the famed flute player James Morrison, told him:

Every Sunday afternoon found him at old Celtic Park playing away and that night would find the group playing somewhere else. He had a full rich life of music and friends. One Sunday evening while on a short cut through old Calvary cemetery from Celtic Park, on the way to Penny Bridge, they took so long lifting tunes and lighting their pipes that when they reached the other end they were locked in the cemetery. They had to climb the walls—flutes, fiddles and all—to get out. People thought they were ghosts!

Justus DeWitt saw Eddie Herborn and John Wheeler perform at this venue, on accordion and banjo respectively. He immediately issued an invitation to them to record some sides for Columbia. This historic recording took place on the fifteenth of September 1916. The most frequently requested tune by customers in the O'Byrne DeWitt store was the 'Stack of Barley' and so this was among the first records made. In order to secure sales

of these recordings, Ellen O'Byrne had diligently plodded from "door to door", as it were, to guarantee that the records would be purchased. Widespread interest in ethnic recordings among large companies like Columbia did not take place until the 1920's. One can surmise that it was only the dogged determination of Ellen O'Byrne that ignited their interest in Irish music recordings at that early date.

"In line with the startling revelation that the coloured and rural communities in the States were prepared to buy records of their own music in hundreds of thousands, a number of American companies began to tap the wealth of Irish traditional activity in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago."⁸ Both Columbia and Victor Records began to realize the commercial potential of the huge ethnic communities now living in the States. Columbia established a series specifically for its ethnic recordings entitled the Columbia 33000-F series. Meanwhile, R.C.A. Victor was also establishing an extended Irish catalogue. Victor has the distinction of releasing the first commercial recording of an Irish-born musician, namely Patsy Touhey on uilleann pipes in September 1919. The O'Byrne DeWitt store was reaping a very tidy profit throughout this time from the sale of these records.

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*Advertisement, The Gaelic American, 6 December 1919.
Courtesy of Patrick J. Mullins.*

In 1926 Ellen O'Byrne died. She had three children, two sons and one daughter. Due to familial disputes it was the second son, James DeWitt, who inherited the entire business in New York. It was, however, Justus DeWitt, Jr. who was to engage actively in the field of Irish music and succeed on both a financial and aesthetic level. He was born in Manhattan in 1898. While genealogically-speaking he was half Dutch and half Irish, he maintained that culturally he was all Irish. As a child his mother regaled him with stories of Ireland, its history and its music and song. His involvement with Irish music and song in

his adult life were, to him, merely continuing an inbred identification with his Irish cultural heritage which he had carried with him from childhood. Wishing to make a clean break with life in New York after the death of his mother, Justus DeWitt, Jr. decided to move to Boston.

On arriving in Boston, DeWitt immediately opened his own business. He obtained premises in Roxbury, which at that time (1920's) was an enclave of Irish immigrants and those of Irish descent. Joe O'Leary, who directed the highly popular and successful Irish dance band "O'Leary's Irish Minstrels," assisted DeWitt in establishing his business. It was he who initially located the store space on Warren Street in Roxbury for DeWitt. O'Leary and his band had released their debut recordings in that same year on Columbia.⁹ The Minstrels were based in the Hibernian Dancehall, in Roxbury, but the Intercolonial was also operating at this stage. The Intercolonial was a Canadian-owned premise in which Irish functions were held continuously.¹⁰ Dances at these venues were highly popular and drew crowds from all around Boston.

O'Leary's Irish Minstrels were one of the most popular local Boston acts. Joe O'Leary, a native of Maine, played accordion, and the music the Minstrels played consisted of all types of traditional dances and waltzes. "Non-traditional music," that is, that which was not Irish, was rarely played by this band. O'Leary ran the only radio show in Boston for Irish music on WEEI. The program was based around the band. The radio was an exceptionally important medium, not only for the promotion of the band itself but also for the sale of records. This show was very successful and, by 1930, O'Leary had given up his daytime job and was devoting himself entirely to music. Dennis Clark's observation about Pat Stanton's radio show in Philadelphia (one of the longest running ethnic radio shows ever), is equally valid with regard to O'Leary's show in Boston; it was a "remarkable fusion of folkculture and modern technology. . . This communications innovation on behalf of Irish culture detached from its homeland has been a critical function for the preservation and continuation of an ethnic subcultural inheritance in the American environment."¹¹

The 1920's had been, for the most part, a prosperous decade, no less so for the recording industry than for any other enterprise. DeWitt cites those years as being a boom time for the Irish record market. However, the crash of 1929, and the ensuing depression, was to shatter the entire business. 1932 saw total record sales in America hit an all time low of five million. This was in comparison with some thirty two million in 1927.¹² While record sales were abysmal at the start of the decade, the appeal of the dance halls continued to rise, and this was reflected in the popularity of bands like O'Leary's Irish Minstrels and Paddy Killoran's Orchestra. This development in ensemble music for dance hall settings that occurred in Irish music directly paralleled the boom of the swing bands of popular American culture. The popularization of an "urban" American dance culture was not inhibited by ethnic division. The Irish community produced a hybrid adaptation, using their own music married with a dance hall phenomenon, to meet the needs of their own people. It catered well to the newly evolving cosmopolitan Irish-American psyche. While maintaining a distinct Irish basis, it was clearly a genre which was suited to and indeed developed for the large dance halls. Halls, like the Intercolonial and the Hibernian, became the focus of social interaction for the Irish that was conducted primarily through musical events.

In the meantime DeWitt actively courted the Irish music market of Boston from his store. DeWitt sold any Irish records that were available, drawing mainly from the Columbia and Victor listings.

He had record players for sale upon their introduction to the market and various instruments and music books; in addition he ran a highly lucrative travel business. O'Leary and DeWitt were closely associated throughout this time, and in 1930 O'Leary offered him a slot on his radio show to advertise. He charged DeWitt \$15. During the depression the price of 78's plummeted from 75¢ to 35¢ or less.¹³ DeWitt still thought it was financially fruitful to advertise on O'Leary's show. DeWitt promptly devised a commercial for selling accordions and records. This was a combined advertisement for booking passages to Ireland through O'Byrne DeWitt Travel Ltd. DeWitt cleverly encouraged people to bring a victrola and some records with them when traveling to Ireland, in order to create business.

Besides O'Leary's band, some of the other artists who were popular at that time and whose records would have been for sale in the DeWitt store were the Flanagans, a dynamic pair of brothers from Waterford who both sang and played; John Feeney, Sean Doherty, both singers, and Paddy Killoran's Orchestra. All of these artists were on the Columbia label. (The Flanagans, who mainly recorded with Columbia, can actually be found on several other labels such as Gennet, Zonophone, Topic and Victor.)¹⁴ Other contemporary acts, such as John McGettigan and his various hybrid bands, and Dan Sullivan and his Shamrock Band, were on the R.C.A. Victor label. Of the bands which were not Boston-based, the majority were in New York and would visit the dance halls in the Boston area.

One of the greatest successes on the Decca label were the McNultys, a New York family of singers and instrumentalists. Justus DeWitt maintained that this was the sole reason that Decca stayed interested in Irish material longer than any other company. The McNultys' recording career with Decca begun in 1936. Their output encompassed a vast number of sides. The band consisted of Ma McNulty, who played accordion, and her son and daughter, Peter and Eileen. Various ensembles of instruments were used and Eileen occasionally included dancing in the act. While DeWitt himself maintained that the McNultys did not really play the dance hall scene, employees of the DeWitt travel agency recounted their memories of the McNultys playing in Boston on occasion.¹⁵

The Decca Recording Company initiated their American business enterprise in 1934. They had previously been an English-based company. They effectively took over the R.C.A. Victor market. An ethnic record series was quickly established, of which Irish music played a huge part. The McNultys, while recording for Decca, appeared on their Foreign Language 12000 series. Decca issued some Irish artists on their pop series, for example Phil Regan and Pat Harrington. This may have been due to their appeal to a broader spectrum of the musical consumership in Decca's eyes. The fact that a Hungarian gentleman was in charge of the selection of material for ethnic recordings may also have had some bearing on the apparent lack of consistency between the "pop" series and the Foreign Language series. DeWitt was used by Decca in an unofficial advisory capacity at this time.

1934 marked the end of prohibition in America which also provided an additional shot in the arm for dance hall culture. The latter half of the 1930's were prosperous for those involved in the business of Irish music, with the continued interest of Decca and Columbia in ethnic recordings and the growth of radio as a vehicle of promotion. Wartime came upon the American nation and with it came the cessation of the production of Irish records. During the war companies were not allowed to issue new records due to a lack of shellac.¹⁶ DeWitt ran an exchange scheme

whereby people could return records for a few pennies. He in turn would deliver these to the record companies where they were recycled. Throughout this bleak period, DeWitt financed two radio shows per week of Irish music on WMEX in Boston. With a complete vacuum in the record field, this was no mean feat. His philosophy on the maintenance of the radio shows was that he would have a ready-made market, once the war was over, for Irish records. He was convinced the large companies would again produce and release Irish records and as predicted, Decca did. DeWitt had been promised sole distribution rights. However, this arrangement was short-lived and Decca ceased production thereafter of anything of an Irish nature.

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 Dan Murphy's Door—The Half Door—Song of the 32
 Counties—A Mother's Lament—Shall My Soul Pass
 Through Ireland—Dawning of the Morning—At the
 Close of an Irish Day—There's a Sweetheart—
 Mother's Love is a Blessing—Miss Fogarty's Christmas
 Cake—In Old Ballymoe—Groves of Kiltosvan, and
 many others.

BY JACK FEENEY

The Tanyard Side—Teddy O'Neale—Shawl of Galway,
 Gray—Moonlight in Mayo

BY MICHAEL COLEMAN

Paddy Clancy's Jig—Liffey Banks—Shaskeen—
 Crowley's Reel—The Banks—High Level Hornpipe—
 O'Rourke's Reel—Many others.

BY MYLES O'MALLEY

Off to California—Connaughtman's Rambles—
 Londonderry Hornpipe—Keel Row—Four Hand Reel—
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Advertisement, *The Irish World*, c. 1947. Courtesy of Patrick J. Mullins.

In the latter half of the 1940's for the first time in over thirty years, none of the larger record companies in America were issuing any Irish music. One private company was operating out of Providence. It was a small-scale operation and was run by one man out of his own interest in Irish music. This was the Celtic label, owned and operated by Francis Fallon. The most well-known artist recorded by Celtic was Mickey Carton. Carton had

twenty-four records on the Celtic label. "Justus O'Byrne DeWitt sought to fill this gap in the Irish record market by founding the Copley recording company in the late 1940's. During the next ten years Copley issued a wide range of Irish and Irish-American material aimed at the more commercial Irish market."¹⁷

Ellie Logan, a longterm employee of the DeWitt company recalled DeWitt's decision to begin producing Irish material:

*The reason we went into it was there was nobody doing Irish stuff at the time. The only thing available was Decca and then Celtic [when Decca finished]. . . We used to import things from Ireland too, from H.M.V., Delia Murphy and all those old things. And then from England after we got Irish stuff. . . There was a void in that market. There wasn't any decent Irish stuff on record, besides the old stuff. So I think that's what motivated Mr. DeWitt going into the business—to offer people something new for a change. That's what started it all.*¹⁸

The 1950's saw the heyday of the Irish dance bands. The "star" of the Copley recording company, Joe Derrane, along with his All Star Ceili Band, were among the musicians who provided the entertainment at Boston dances at this time. The functional role of these dances in the lives of the Irish communities of the U.S.A. can not be emphasized enough. This decade saw a new influx of immigrants from Ireland. Their arrival served to resuscitate any waning interest in the cultural facets that might have been occurring. Milton Gordon suggests the importance of "international" as well as "internal" factors that affect ethnicity.¹⁹ By "international" he implies the influence of new immigrants replenishing the strength and dynamics of the ethnic group. In its application to the Irish model of the 1950's in the U.S.A., the incoming Irish greatly strengthened the subculture of Irish music. Both Irish musicians and those people without a musical background fulfilled the primary criteria for supporting the entire culture of the Irish dance hall, and all that it entailed. That criteria was simply to be Irish in America. Larry Reynolds states that on his arrival in the U.S.A. he submerged himself totally in Irish culture.²⁰ Kerby Miller states that some linguistic and cultural traits are more assiduously conserved by immigrants than by their counterparts at home.²¹ This strict adherence to what is seen as cultural purity was a concerted effort to maintain, in this case, an untainted musical tradition. Ironically, as stated already, the entire Irish dance band phenomenon was a cultural reaction and adaptation to an urban, cosmopolitan environment, and so had already removed the music from its traditional background. This was the clientele to which the Copley label was catering.

Copley's output does not in any way compare with that of Columbia or Decca's hey day. Nevertheless, during the time in which it flourished, Copley made a significant and important contribution to the field of Irish music recording. Copley issued a total of twenty-nine albums on their own label. Most of these had extended play records (EP's) subsequently taken from them. These would normally consist of the four most popular tracks from the album in question. An example of this is the release E.P.-10 IRISH BALLADS by Ruthie Morrissey. All songs contained on this record are taken from DWL9-603 IRISH BALLADS by the same artist. DeWitt's business of distribution, including a significant mailing list consisting of twelve thousand names, continued simultaneously with the production of Copley's own recordings. Scottish and Canadian artists were also to be found in Copley's catalogue. Once Copley's reputation built up, Decca showed interest and eventually became a distributor in

New York for DeWitt. He also established distribution through agents in Chicago, Cleveland and Philadelphia.

Both vocal and instrumental performances were issued on the Copley label. However the main criteria for both was that the subject matter in question be strictly Irish. The music's recording potential was not only considered from just a commercial aspect, but also from an aesthetic viewpoint. Acts such as the McNulty's or Johnny Powell and his Band were highly successful artists in their own right. Naturally their records had some commercial viability. On the other hand, the duets of Frank Neylon and Paddy Cronin, for instance, on flute and fiddle respectively, were at this time (according to DeWitt) recorded for their musical excellence rather than their potential money-making abilities as recording stars. Overwhelmingly, the majority of Copley recordings consisted of dance bands and vocalists. Only three of the twenty-nine albums released were by solo instrumentalists.



Copley Label, c. 1962. Courtesy of Patrick J. Cahillane, Jr.

The musicians received a fixed sum as a fee, due to DeWitt's refusal to give percentage of sales or royalties unless the musicians in question insisted. He claimed that the uncertainty of sales made selling even a few hundred copies of a given recording ambitious. At the same time, some records did sell up to 10,000 copies.²² Thomas O'Brien, for example, recorded three singles for Copley and received \$200 as his payment. This was a different method from the way in which Decca had paid their musicians. For instance, Mickey Carton, who signed an initial two year contract with Decca, got one nickel per record, with \$600 as payment up front.

The normal procedure DeWitt followed was to approach a certain artist whom he had heard personally, or of whom he had heard good account. The instrumentalist, or singer as the case may be, then went into the studio. The original disc was sent back to DeWitt for approval before the final cut for release was made. A substantial outlay of cash was needed to print and purchase five thousand covers, at 25¢ each. The photographs which appeared on the Copley sleeves were usually acquired from the Irish Tourist Board. Some of the recording was done in Boston, but a large amount was actually recorded in New York, either in the Decca or R.C.A. studios there. An initial order of one thousand copies would be made and further lots of three or maybe five hundred would be ordered once the original batch sold out. This continued for some years until Decca decided to move their business from New York to California. DeWitt would have had to purchase records from the West Coast if he wished to continue. This effectively sounded the death knell for the DeWitt business as regards actual production of their own records. It was

not financially feasible to transport the records that distance and realistically hope to cover costs.

Throughout this period of Copley recording, Justice DeWitt, Jr. continued to sell various instruments and music books in his store. Gavin MacShimu recalled that the windows in the shop were always filled with shiny new instruments—drum sets, saxophones and many accordions.²³ Sheet music was also sold and Copley actually published some itself. It was published as the O'Byrne DeWitt Irish music series. In addition, DeWitt also had two accordion instruction books written by Jerry O'Brien, a local musician who had made several records for Copley. Both he and Billy Caples, another prominent Boston musician, gave accordion lessons in the O'Byrne DeWitt store. DeWitt also published one song book, entitled *Irish Song Book—An Album of Popular Favorites*.

The production of their own records stopped at the beginning of the 1970's, but the DeWitt company continued the business of repressing and distribution for some time. 1986 was the year that the O'Byrne DeWitt company finally ceased selling all records and instruments. Throughout its investment in the field of ethnic recording, they endeavored to provide the Irish community with access to the type of music which appealed to their whole way of life. The dance halls, which began in the latter half of the second decade of this century, and consequently the bands which played in them, were a direct reaction to the ever-developing socialization process that affected the Irish immigrant communities. While these immigrants were anxious to shed any image of countrified Irishness, they were nevertheless quite willing to ascribe to and support some aspects of Irish culture once they were presented in a suitably cosmopolitan guise. The 1950's saw the heyday of the dance halls and Copley records, for the most part, served the patrons of the halls. With the subsequent demise of the entire dance band reign, so too did Copley recording go down. The business can be seen as a reflection of the cultural mindset of the consumers to which it catered, and it also leaves a rich and valuable legacy of music in its wake.

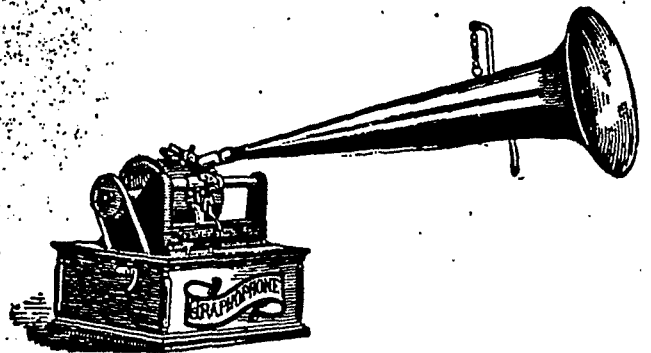
FOOTNOTES

- ¹ D. FitzPatrick, Introduction, *Irish Migration 1801 to 1921*, pp. 1-3, Dungal Press, 1985.
- ² Cynthia Sughrue, "The O'Shea Dancing School as a Socio-Cultural Medium in a Boston Irish Community", *Working Papers in Irish Studies*, no. 85-3 (1985) p. 11.
- ³ Seamus MacMathúna, "Coleman, Morrison and Killoran", *Treoir*, Imleabhair 18, no. 1, Dublin.
- ⁴ Francis O'Neill's collections are a milestone in the history of Irish music in this century. They were the first collections of any substantial size to concentrate on dance music alone. The most important of his publications were two books. The first contains over 1800 tunes, while the second, the more well known of the two, has 1001 tunes. It is commonly called just "The 1001".
- ⁵ Much of the information contained in this essay was obtained through interviews done by myself and Dr. Mick Moloney with the director and other workers of the O'Byrne DeWitt Company.
- ⁶ Reg Hall, "Review: Irish Dance Music", *Traditional Music*, no. 2 (London 1975).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁹ Richard Spottswood, *Ethnic Music on Record*, Volume 5, (University of Illinois Press).
- ¹⁰ Through to this day there are strong ties between the Irish and Canadian communities in Boston. For instance, the local Canadian American Club is the center from which Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann runs almost all of its activities.
- ¹¹ Dennis Clark, *Erin's Heirs: Bonds of Community* (University Press of Kentucky, 1991), Chapter 3.
- ¹² Leo Walker, *The Wonderful Era of the Great Dance Bands* (Berkeley: Howell North Books, 1964).
- ¹³ Interview with Justus O'Byrne DeWitt by Mick Moloney, Dedham, MA, March 1978.
- ¹⁴ For further information see *The American Record Label Book* by Brian Rust

(New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1978).

- ¹⁵ Interview with Ellie Logan by Méabh Ní Fhuartháin 9/19/1991. Ms. Logan is now the co-owner of the O'Byrne DeWitt Travel Agency and worked for the company throughout its recording era.
- ¹⁶ Shellac is a substance used in the manufacture of phonograph recordings and also used for military purposes. Therefore during wartime its military worth took precedence over its use to produce records.
- ¹⁷ Mick Moloney, "Irish Ethnic Recordings and the Irish-American Imagination", *Studies in American Folklife*, XIII, No. 1 (1982).
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 15.
- ¹⁹ Milton Gordon, *Human Nature, Class and Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- ²⁰ Interview with Larry Reynolds by Méabh Ní Fhuartháin, Watertown, MA, November 1991. Larry came to the States in 1953. He is a prominent member of the Irish musical community in Boston and is head of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Boston.
- ²¹ Kerby Miller, "Emigrants and Exiles", *Irish Historical Studies*, XXII (1980).
- ²² *Ibid.* p. 13.
- ²³ Gavin MacShimu, "O'Byrne DeWitt: From Irish music to travel agency", *Boston Irish Reporter*, October 1991.

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