

From Ceili to Courtship: A Reminiscence

by Dennis J. Clark

Dennis Clark has written extensively on the Irish in America and especially on the Irish in Philadelphia. His most recent book is Erin's Heirs: Irish Bonds of Community (1991). He serves as an advisor for the forthcoming NYIHR/Irish Institute book on the history of the Irish in New York City.

To be young is to dance, or that is the way it should be. I had gone to high school dances in Philadelphia, but the real revelation of dancing as psycho-physical liberation came with my discovery of Irish dancing in New York in the 1950's. There had been some good Irish dances in San Francisco and in Los Angeles when I was in the army, but New York in the 1950's was different. It was quite safe to be out into the small hours of the morning and to ride the subways, so that dancing till 2:00 a.m. and revelling thereafter was acceptable. Besides, New York was all glamor then.

As the head of the St. Brendan Society at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, my group of friends, all Irish-Americans and veterans of World War II, were bent on living life to the fullest, and finding college "girls" who were Irish like us would, we were sure, lead to the fullness of romance. So, having surveyed Philadelphia, we found it wanting. It was a city where people were said to have "Quaker's Feet," that is, a heritage of Quaker modesty that deterred dancing. We set out for New York.

There was at Hunter College an Irish Society similar to our own, and its members were, we believed, far more chic, sophisticated and fun seeking than Philadelphia counterparts. Hunter College had a splendid downtown house for social functions at Roosevelt House, and we became eager to go to the ceilis held there, where we could gulp gobble soda bread and thrill to the charms of classy young Hunter College students.

Among the stunning dance partners at these gatherings were Joanne Brasil, Nancy Sherry, Eileen McGroarty and Nancy Sullivan. They wore Irish Society pins, laughed a lot, and were, we thought, wonderfully worldly. Our competition were guys from Fordham, but they were mostly discredited because they had held a dance at their university and had offended the Hunter ladies by (hard to believe these days) snapping their brassiere straps while "straight" dancing.

By far the most alluring of the female dancers for me was Josie O'Callaghan, who had Russet hair and wore a black velvet "choker" band around her slim neck. Her parents were from Cavan and Monaghan, and the musical history of the family reveals the fate of much of Irish folk music in America. The children were all set to learn to play instruments, but the delights of the big city distracted them and they never reached proficiency. The father of the family played the flute, and Josie the violin, but their performances were short. Resolution failed.

Perhaps it was the baneful influence of an uncle of the family, Canon James Marron in Cavan, that marred their musical ambition. Canon James was a legendary character who held sway in parishes where he forbade *any* dancing. He was also notorious not only for pursuing courting couples and breaking up their trysts, but also for dividing the local movie theater down the middle with chicken wire to segregate the sexes in the dark of the film performances.

There was another uncle to the family, however, Father Victor Marron, and he was a champion of Irish music to be contended with. Still, his nieces and nephews baffled him. He had been parish priest in Clones in Cavan, a renowned musical center, and everywhere in his far flung missionary work, he organized Irish music gatherings. He would film them, too. He held fund raising dances in California, New Jersey and far Australia. "Here are your cousins in New South Wales. Watch the steps of this one!" he would say as the film ran noisily, but without sound accompaniment. He had Latino kids in San Diego dancing away, at any rate.

The Hunter College dances brought us rollicking through The High Caul Cap, The Walls of Limerick, set dances galore, and watching in semi-exhaustion the step dancers who would perform jigs for us while we rested. Nancy Sherry seemed the best at that, and Josie and her friends, Mary Mulligan and Nancy Sullivan, grudgingly admired that talent.

From those dances we moved on to those at the Manhattan Center, the backroom in Shannon's bar on Third Avenue, any place where the pipes called and the fluter trilled. The New York chapter of the Gaelic League was a delight for us. That group held dances after the Irish lessons, and whirling, melody raving occasions they were, with the Roscommon Rambles and the Kid on the Mountain sending us skipping giddily through our sets. Joseph Cotter had a soft eye for Mary Mulligan, but he would separate himself from her long enough to give us tunes on the flute. I sometimes sang as the dancers caught their breath, songs like *A Mhile Gradh* and *The Darling Girl from Clare*. It was a world of musical excitements and the leaping vitality of young romance.

Taking girls home from dances was half the delight, and the long ride from Manhattan to the East Bronx on the Lexington Avenue line gave time to engage in those soulful dialogs that are an inescapable part of young love. And, young love there was, indeed, for I had become utterly impassioned with Josie O'Callaghan. Never mind that her brothers and sisters thought I was a clod and an interloper from some idiot town like Philadelphia. Never mind that they made me do the dishes on my visits. It was all tolerable if only Josie would go to the dances with me.

You could go to Mattie Haskins shop on Third Avenue in those days, and behind a curtain in the rear was a collection of Irish records. How I saved for and bought the old Michael Coleman records and those of the McNulty Family and the recordings of the ceili bands we had heard on the radio. That was where I first bought Josie presents. At length, after a proper four year courtship, we did marry. When the children came tumbling along and life's burdens increased, we seemed to cease dancing. It is staggering now to think of the furious energy we lavished on our dancing craze when we were in our twenties. It is hard to believe. You would have to be young to believe it.

[It is with great sadness that we note Dennis Clark's death on 17 September 1993. Suaimhneas Dé dá anam.]

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