Ireland 1922: Music and Politics

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This talk is about events that took place in Ireland exactly a hundred years ago. As well as providing some background to a crucial period of Irish history, I'm going to touch upon two specific musical topics: a song that achieved popularity at the time and has remained in the repertoire ever since; and a recording by a musician whose output has massively affected the performance of tradition musical ever since. And at the time I want to mention three Protestant Ulster women who were influential in the preservation of Irish traditional music and culture in different ways, but whose role has subsequently been largely forgotten.

I'm sure many of you will already be familiar with the story of Ireland's struggle, South and North, for and against, independence from Britain, but for the benefit of those who aren't, I'm going to begin with a brief timeline of the events.

2

In the UK election held in December 1918, which closely following the end of the First World War and in the aftermath of the failed 1916 Easter Rising, the republican party Sinn Féin, led by Éamon de Valera, won around three-quarters of the Irish seats wiping out the Irish Parliamentary Party. Sinn Féin refused to take up their seats at Westminster - a tradition that has continued to the present day - and instead established a separate Irish assembly in Dublin called Dáil Éireann. This first met on 21 January 1919 and unilaterally declared an independent Irish Republic covering the whole of Ireland. Simultaneously, the first actions of what would be called the Irish War of Independence took place and this conflict raged for two and a half years until the middle of 1921, resulting in the deaths of around 2300 people. In September 1920, the British Government declared the Dáil to be illegal and from then on it was forced to meet in secret.

During the course of the IRA's guerrilla campaign, the Irish police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary, was provided with the support of what was in effect a paramilitary force of Temporary Constables who were mostly recruited from first world war veterans from across the UK. They were known as the Black and Tans because of their improvised uniforms of dark green and khaki (reflecting simultaneously their current roles in the Royal Irish Constabulary and their previous military roles). And as a result of the brutality of the Black and Tans and another group known as the Auxiliaries (who wore distinctive Tam O Shanter hats), and their engagement in reprisals and extrajudicial killings, their activities had a major impact on public opinion in Ireland and fostered considerable anti-British sentiment and support for the IRA.

On 3 May 1921 the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 set into law the partition of Ireland as an attempt by the UK to deal, once and for all, with the so-called 'Irish question'. This term was coined by Benjamin Disraeli in 1844, a year before the start of the cataclysmic Irish Potato Famine. Disraeli, who was then a Conservative backbencher, remarked that 'A dense population, in extreme distress, inhabit an island where there is an Established Church, which is not their Church, and a territorial aristocracy the richest of whom live in foreign capitals. Thus you have a starving population, an absentee aristocracy, and an alien Church; and in addition the weakest executive in the world. That is the Irish Question.'

As a result of the Government of Ireland Act, Northern Ireland was created from six of the nine counties of the historic province of Ulster that collectively had a Protestant majority (excluding Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan), with a devolved parliament at Stormont. However, the intended parallel Southern Irish government did not come into being because of the wide-scale opposition to its formation in the remaining 26 counties. The war of independence continued meanwhile until July 1921, by which stage the military situation had descended into stalemate and a truce was agreed on 9 July.

3

In the Dáil, politicians were divided between those who wished for an entirely independent republic (most significantly Éamon de Valera, then styled as President of the Republic) and those who were willing to accept an ongoing relationship with the UK through the empire rather along the lines of Canada. Although de Valera had begun the initial discussion with the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, strangely he left the negotiation in London to a delegation of 'plenipotentiaries' from the Dáil (who had permission to negotiate the treaty without referring back).

4

The Anglo-Irish treaty was eventually signed on 6 December 1921. The UK delegation was led by the wily Lloyd George along with Chancellor of the Exchequer, Austen Chamberlain; secretary of state for the colonies, Winston Churchill; and Lord High Chancellor, Lord Birkenhead. The team representing the provisional Irish Government included the journalist and politician Arthur Griffith, who had founded Sinn Fein in 1905; Michael Collins, military leader and strategist for the IRA in the war of Independence as well as being minister of finance in the Dáil; and the Anglo-Irish Protestant politician and writer best known *The Riddle of the Sands,* Erskine Childers, who acted as secretary for the Irish delegation. These three men would be dead by the end of 1922, Griffith from a stroke on 12 August, Collins assassinated in an ambush on 22 August, and Childers shot by a firing squad of the Free State army on 24 November. Collins famously remarked that in signing the treaty he was signing his own death warrant. [Pathe News Film]

5

6

A rancorous debate on the treaty was held in the Dáil which continued until 7 January 1922. Major points of contention were the oath of allegiance to the British crown and the fact that the Free State (rather than the hoped for republic) covered only 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland because of the previous devolution of Northern Ireland. The treaty was finally approved by a slim majority of 7 (64 v 57) and this heralded the eventual formal creation of the Irish Free State exactly a year after the signing of the treaty, on 6 December 1922. The treaty was subsequently taken to the Irish people through a proxy vote in June 1922, in a proportional representation general election in which the pro-treaty candidates received 75% of the first preference votes. The split meant that pro-treaty Sinn Féin led by Michael Collins received 58 seats while the anti-treaty Sinn Fein candidates took 36 seats, with Labour holding 17 (the final 17 being divided between the farmers party, the businessmen's party and independents).

In order to use it as an effective referendum on the treaty, a pact had been signed before the election by the two opposing factions of Sinn Féin in which they agreed not to stand against each other in constituencies held by one or the other group and to cooperate in a subsequent coalition government. However, the anti-treaty members of Sinn Fein decided to withdraw from the Dáil, leaving the pro-treaty members in control.
Less than a fortnight after the election, the civil war broke out when anti-treaty members of the IRA who had been occupying the Four Courts building in Dublin since April were attacked under the order of Collins (who was responding to British pressure to act against them).

7

Effectively the IRA, which had broken into two elements, one now forming the basis of the Free State national army (though significantly expanded) and the other a guerrilla force mounting a similar campaign to that against British rule. Ironically, the tactics employed by both sides sometimes appear similar to those of the reviled Black and Tans. Remarkably, William Cosgrave, the first President of the Irish Free State said in 1922 that 'executions have had a remarkable effect….I am not going to hesitate and if we have to exterminate 10,000 republicans, the 3 millions of our people are bigger than the ten thousand.'[1]

In the period up to February 1923, somewhere between 1500 and 4000 combatants and civilians were killed in the Free State and bitter division was created which took generations to heal. Indeed, the two main Irish political parties who have governed Ireland since the formation of the Irish Free State, Fine Gael (literally the 'Irish Race' or Gaelic Nation) which renamed in 1933 from the earlier Cumann na nGaedheal [1900] and Fianna Fáil ('warriors of Ireland') formed in 1926 were born from the pro- and anti-treaty elements of Sinn Fein.

8

I want to turn now away from the political details and move to two brief examples of music in Ireland at the time, both related to the politics of the time and as cultural developments. Historian Dermot Ferriter quotes the writer and historian P. S. O'Hegarty, who was a member of the supreme council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, attending a Feis Ceoil in Munster in 1902 and remarking that 'Something in the songs … something in the music … something in the atmosphere gripped me and I seemed to be put in touch with something far back in the race … for the first time I saw the whole of Ireland'.

The Feis Ceoil movement was co-founded in 1897 by the first of our trio of Ulsterwomen - Annie W Patterson and the playwright and first president of Sinn Féin, Edward Martyn. Annie Patterson was an Ulster Presbyterian from Lurgan in County Armagh who held the first DMus awarded to a woman by the National University of Ireland, and indeed the first anywhere in Great Britain and Ireland. [n.b. Fleadh Cheoil for traditional music, CCE began 1951]. Established on a similar model to the Welsh Eisteddfod the Feis Ceoil are competitions for musicians. As well as having classes for classical performers, part of the festival was devoted to 'national music' with sections for singers, harpists, pipers and fiddlers. Writing in the *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society* eight years later in 1905, Robert Young wrote that 'Within the last ten years there has been quite a revival of interest in our old Irish music, and the credit for this is mainly due to the energy and zeal of the organisers of the Feis Ceoil meetings, held in Dublin and Belfast.

9

Annie Patterson was involved more broadly in nationalist movements at the time. She was a member of the Gaelic League (the organisation created in 1893 to promote the Irish language with another Protestant, Douglas Hyde, as its president) and composed its rallying song 'Go Mairidh ár nGaedhilg slán' (or 'Long life and health to our Irish language'), with its chorus which translates as 'Early, late, east, beyond, I will only speak beautiful Irish'. This was premiered at their first Oireachtas [or gathering] in Dublin in 1897 (an event that can be seen as a sister language-based event to the Feis Ceoil). She had a successful career as a composer, a choral conductor, an

10

[1] Ferriter, 281.

organist, the author of several books including a biography of the composer Schumann, and in 1924 was appointed as a lecturer at University College Cork.

Now in the Dublin Feis Ceoil of 1903, the class for tenor solo singing was won by a certain John McCormack. Born in Athlone in 1884, McCormack went on from his early success in the Feis Ceoil to become one of the outstanding singers of his generation - someone who held a similar popular status to Pavarotti in more recent times. Such were his earnings from recording and performing, in 1917, the year he naturalised as an American, he could afford to donate $11,458 to the US war effort, an amount that would translate to around $250,000 today, allowing for inflation.

11

As well as being a remarkably successful operatic singer with a wonderful voice, he was also a prolific recorder of Irish popular songs. In May 1913 he released a recording of one called ‘The Foggy Dew’ on the Victor label. This was the setting of an Irish melody collected by a certain Charlotte Milligan Fox with a text written by her sister Edith. A variant of a song found widely across the Britain and Ireland, it tells the story of a girl who advises a young man who asks after her that she will marry a boy whom she will meet in the foggy dew. Naturally enough, the enquiring chap of the first verse becomes the spouse of the final one.

And here we find the second of our Ulsterwomen, Charlotte Milligan Fox, a Methodist and Unionist born in 1864 in Omagh, Co. Tyrone, whose father was a businessman, an antiquarian, and a writer. One of eleven children, she studied the piano and composition at the Frankfurt Conservatoire, the Royal College of Music and the Milan Conservatoire. After her marriage in 1892 she moved to London and become involved in the movement to revive Irish traditional culture. In 1905 she founded the Irish Folk Song Society, effectively seceding Irish music from the Folk Song Society formed in 1898. The society’s mission was ‘to collect all the unpublished traditional airs and ballads of the Irish race, and to print and publish as many as possible from time to time in the Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society’. And the journal also encouraged the creation of new English lyrics for tunes for which there were no known words.

The journal continued after Charlotte’s untimely death in 1916 until 1939. In an obituary published in the Journal in 1918 the great Irish folklorist AP Graves described her importance and working method:

> Her departure in an entirely Irish direction gave a great impulse to the promotion of our native music. She was so indefatigable in the pursuit of what … became such a passion to her that she spared nothing for it - time, money and life itself. She traversed the North and South with pencil and music paper, and then with the phonograph, taking down Irish airs and Irish words, colloguing in her delightful way with high and low, farmer and beggar-woman, piper, harper, fiddler and ballad singer, marchioness and milkmaid. She was indeed here, and everywhere as an organizer, lecturer, speaker, collector.

12

‘The Foggy Dew’ that was sung by McCormack was published by Charlotte in 1910 in a collection of tunes called *Songs of the Irish Harpers* and in a note, she comments that ‘This beautiful air was taken down from the singing of Mr. McGarvay, of Dublin.’ This was probably Cathal McGarvey, an ardent Irish nationalist who owned a pub and tobacconist called An Stad in Dublin which was a meeting place for cultural and political activists. He was the author of the lyrics to the song ‘The Star of the County Down’. Charlotte’s text is attributed in the score to E. Milligan - her sister Edith

(later Edith Wheeler who wrote the words of a song widely popularised by The Clancy Brothers and sung by many others, including the Sinéad O'Connor, The Wolfetones and Barbara Dickson called 'My Singing Bird').

But this is not the end of the story, for the tune that Charlotte had preserved and McCormack had recorded was given a fresh text by Fr Charles O'Neill, a Catholic priest from Portglenone who was seconded in 1918 to St Peter's Cathedral, in the Divis Street area of the Falls Road in Belfast. A supporter of armed struggle against British rule, he was a friend of Patrick Pearse, Éamonn Ceannt and Joseph Mary Plunkett all of whom were executed after the 1916 rising. According to Eugene Dunphy:

13

> On 21 January 1919 O'Neill attended the first meeting of Dáil Éireann at the Mansion House, Dublin. He listened despondently as the Speaker, Cathal Brugha, read aloud a list of names of Irish men incarcerated in British jails. Éamon de Valera, who fought at Boland's Mill during the Rising, was one of many names cited as being 'imprisoned by foreigners'. When the Mansion House gathering agreed to adopt the principles of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic as outlined by Patrick Pearse and his comrades, despondency gave way to hope.[2]

Rather than using his own name in the musical score of the song, O'Neil employed the appropriate Irish pseudonym for a priest of Iascaire or 'fisherman'. A new, highly dramatic piano accompaniment was provided by Carl Hardebeck an English-born (1869) blind organist of German extraction who had settled in Belfast in his twenties. Hardebeck said after 1916 that he 'believe[d] in God, Beethoven and Patrick Pearse!' The song was first performed by an eighteen-year-old Belfast boy called Seamus O'Doherty, who later sang it in New York in October 1920 at a very large outdoor event at which De Valera was the primary speaker. By 1921 the song was widespread among nationalists in the North of Ireland, and it seems that it was regularly sung by IRA detainees at Ballykinler [Co Down] internment camp concerts. On their release, they carried it throughout the country and it became one of the anthems of the war of independence, and a favourite of republicans in the Civil War.

O'Neill's original lyrics, recall the events of Easter 1916 and combine the potent themes of the Catholic faith, 'perfidious Albion' and self-sacrifice (comparing that of the Easter rising with World War One and referencing Suvla and Sedd-el-Bahr in Gallipoli where Irishmen formed a significant number of the 250,000 casualties on the Allied side between 1915 and 1916). Although it has been very widely recorded by groups such as the Wolftones, the Dubliners, Sinéad O'Connor, none follow O'Neil's original text exactly. It read as follows:

The Foggy Dew

As down the glen one Easter morn to a city fair rode I
There armed lines of marching men in squadrons passed me by
No pipes did hum nor battle drum did sound its loud tattoo
But the Angelus bell o'er the Liffey's swell rang out in the foggy dew.

Right proudly high over Dublin Town they hung out the flag of war

[2] 'A Hundred Years in the Foggy Dew', *History Ireland* , Vol. 27, No. 1 (January/February 2019), 32-35

'Twas better to die 'neath an Irish sky than at Suvla[3] or Sud-El-Bar
And from the plains of Royal Meath strong men came hurrying through
While Britannia's sons, with their great guns sail'd in by the foggy dew.

The night fell black, and the rifles' crack made perfidious Albion reel
'Mid leaden rain, seven tongues of flame did burn o'er the lines of steel
By each shining blade a prayer was said, that to Ireland her sons might be true
And when morning broke, still the war flag shook out its folds in the foggy dew.

But the bravest fell and the sullen bell rang mournfully and clear
For those who died that Eastertide in the springing of the year
And the world did gaze with deep amaze, at those fearless men but few,
Who bore the fight that freedom's light might shine thro' the foggy dew.

'Twas England bade our wild geese go that small nations might be free
But their lonely graves are by Suvla's waves or the fringe of the great North Sea.
O! had they died by Pearse's side or fought with Valera too
Their place we'd keep where the Fenians sleep, 'neath the hills of the foggy dew.

Back to the glen I rode again and my heart with grief was sore
For I parted then with valiant men I never would see more
But to and fro in my dreams I go and I kneel and pray for you,
For slavery fled, O rebel dead, when you fell in the foggy dew.

Now the invocation of Padraic Pearse in these lyrics brings us to the third of our Ulsterwomen, Charlotte Fox's younger sister, Alice Milligan, of whom Thomas MacDonagh, the poet and playwright who was executed after the Easter Rising said in September 1914: "Alice Milligan, Ulster Protestant, Gaelic Leaguer, Fenian, friend of all Ireland, lover of Gaelic Catholic as of her own kith, strong in faith and in hope and in charity, clear of eye and of voice, single-minded, high, inspired and inspiring, humorous and solemn, taking encouragement and praise and blame and rebuff as they come, without thought of herself, with thought always of Ireland's cause – Alice Milligan is the most Irish of living Irish poets, and therefore the best.' Quite an accolade and perhaps something of a rebuff to the darling of the Irish literati, WB Yeats.

14

She had collected Irish tunes with her sister and had written a number of new lyrics of her own. Like Charlotte, she was very sensitive to the structure and sound of Irish song. In her poem, 'Till Ferdia Came', written during 1922-3, she combines the current civil war and the combat that took place at a ford in the river between the mythical Ulster hero Cuchulain and the champion of Connacht, Cuchulain's half-brother Ferdia. She writes:

And in these days of blood and tears
The words re-echo in my ears,
As many a comrade yields his life
To former friends in desperate strife;
I think of Collins in the West,
The life blood clotted on his breast:
And like enough the hand that slew him
Not long before pledged fealty to him,
With many another fighting man

[3] Gallipoli campaign. Sud-El-Bar = Sedd-el-Bahr.

Linked to the cause Republican;
And when through Dublin's street they bore him,
Draping the flag in honour to him,
We mourned to think of other days:
His fearless feats, his merry ways
"Death was a jest, the fight a game
Till to the ford Ferdia came".

I'd like to return now to P.S.O'Hegarty's response to the music at the Feis Ceoil I mentioned earlier in the talk. This is interesting because in fact traditional music in Ireland has a rather strong and distinctive regional identity that is displayed in the way it is performed. These were not hard and fast rules and the regional identity often related to the way musicians from particular families or from specific locations tended to play.

As an example of the regional style, we could compare an ornate and florid style of playing that is found in County Sligo with a much plainer one from County Donegal. I mention Sligo for a particular reason and that is because of the influence on Irish music both in Ireland and internationally, of the fiddler Michael Coleman, a man who came from Knockgrania, near Ballymote in County Sligo. Coleman enter the Sligo Feis Ceoil twice, in 1909 and again in 1910 and was third on each occasion, though he did come first as a dancer in 1909. While developing his craft, he played at local house dances. For a while in 1914, Coleman lived in Manchester with his policeman brother. In October 1914, at the age of 23, he moved to America, just as McCormack had done before him and soon found work playing in bars and gatherings of Irish people such as concerts and dances (there were some 28 Irish dance halls in New York alone). He began recording with the Shannon label in 1921, but it was a recording for Vocalion in 1922 of a reel medley called 'The Boys at the Lough', accompanied by J Muller on the piano which made his name as an outstanding fiddle player. We can hear on these early recordings his bright, incisive tone, his excellent intonation, strong rhythmic drive and rapid pace.

15

His success continued through the 1920s, though the financial crash of 1929 and the depression largely took him out of the public eye. Although he made more recordings in the 1930s and 1940s, he became increasingly addicted to alcohol and died in 1945.
In the words of Harry Bradshaw, 'his 80 commercially made records set standards for generations of players. His tune selections and settings became deeply ingrained in the tradition and were adopted by countless musicians throughout Ireland. His greatest legacy must be that his influence can still be heard in the playing of young musicians today.'

What then of the Sligo style of playing - what are its characteristics?

If we compare how the the bow was used on the violin in Sligo and Ulster playing in earlier times we find a tendency in the northern players (including those in the Rosses area of Donegal) to have more widely used saw-like alternation of down and up short bow strokes and somewhat less in the way of ornaments - the various cuts, taps and rolls that decorate individual notes.

The Sligo style, by contrast, involves much more slurred bowing, in other words playing more than one note in each bow stroke, particularly across strong and weak beats as well as a lot more ornamentation. In the case of Coleman, though not all of his contemporaries from Sligo such as the US-based James Morrison and Paddy Killoran, he tends to play the figure known as a treble (three repeated notes) starting on the downbow. This helps to

give his playing great drive and vigour as well as a certain quirkiness caused by weak beats being played on a strong bowstroke.

But as Bradshaw remarked, it is not simply his way of playing the music that has influenced later generations, it is as much his choice of tunes and the pairing of them which is still widely followed by many musicians. Indeed, his style has become a standard of playing Irish music for many people worldwide and this influence began exactly at the time we have been looking at today, albeit imported back from America.

To wind things up, 1922 was one of the most crucial years in the history of Ireland and also one of the most difficult. The independence achieved through the Anglo-Irish Treaty and formation of the Irish Free State resulted in polarisation and civil war the effects of which would be felt for generations. And music would reflect those divisions but also help to overcome them, whether through the performance of musicians like McCormack and Coleman, cultural events such as the Feisanna Cheoil, or the preservation of traditional music encouraged and exemplified by the Journal of Irish Folk Music.