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Narratives Associated With Irish Fiddle Tunes: Some Contextual Considerations

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D Sharkey wrote to *Ceol* in 1964 inquiring what connection exists between the title of a reel and the tune itself. "Drowsy Maggie" suggested to him an old woman sleeping by the fire. "Roaring Mary" was a musical portrait of a garrulous, quarrelsome old maid. He suggested "Chicken Reel" as a prime example of onomatopoeia.¹

Sharkey is perhaps right; there might be a relationship between tunes and their titles, if one ignores that fact that all these tunes have variant titles in other parts of Ireland. Indeed, I myself have speculated about the relationship of tunes to their titles. Were the colorful titles of traditional Irish fiddle tunes the serendipitous creation of some wry, long-forgotten genius or do the titles have a cognitive reason for their existence? Are there narratives in existence to account for the creation of the tunes, and are these narratives remembered and told by traditional Irish musicians? In what contexts are they told? These are some questions I set out to answer in my research and fieldwork with traditional Irish musicians in the United States, which has become concentrated in Rochester, New York.²

It was easy enough to establish the existence of such narratives in both Irish and American tradition. I myself have heard old-time American fiddlers relate narratives associated with their tunes, and I have found that other fieldworkers have encountered this practice among their informants.³ Indeed, Dr. Judith McCulloh told me that one of her informants related stories about his tunes as a matter of course. Some examples of American fiddle tunes and their associated narratives have even been released on commercial recordings. One example is "Who's Been Here Since I Been Gone" on *Shaking Down the Acorns*, Rounder 0018, recorded from the Hammons Family in West Virginia. D. K. Wilgus investigated the cluster of legends concerning a hanged fiddler often associated with fiddle tunes in this country, the British Isles, and Ireland. An example of one of these stories is the "neck legend," so to speak,

in which a man is accused of a crime and sentenced to hang. As the noose is about to be slipped over his neck, someone hands him a fiddle and tells him that if he can play a tune on it, he will prove his innocence. Of course, although everyone knows that the man has never played a fiddle before, he plays a tune and is freed. (In some versions, he hangs anyway.) The tune he played bears his name after that—perhaps “The Last of Callahan” or a similar title. Wilgus determined that it is impossible to establish an organic relationship between the tunes and the legends, and it is also impossible to tell which came first, the tunes or the legends.⁴

It would appear, on the surface, anyway, that a rich lode of similar narratives also exists in Ireland. There is both a vital interest in storytelling and a strong instrumental tradition in Ireland, and an examination of the recordings of traditional Irish musicians yields evidence of a tradition of relating narratives to fiddle and pipe tunes. However, most of this material seems ultimately traceable to two sources: Seamus Ennis and the Doherty family of County Donegal. Ennis, himself a fieldworker, has released one recording devoted exclusively to pipe and whistle tunes associated with narratives.⁵ Notes to Ennis’ other recordings often allude to narratives associated with the tunes on the LP, and he continues this practice when he supplies the notes for other people’s recordings as well.⁶

The Doherty family of County Donegal has also been responsible for recording both narratives and tunes. Alan Lomax collected Mickey and Johnny in the 1950’s, and some of their material was released on “The Folksongs of Britain” series on Topic records.⁷ Johnny is the only member of the family still alive, but his latest LP bears several narratives associated with fiddle tunes.⁸

The stories that Ennis and the Dohertys tell fall into three types. The first explains how a tune got its name, and may be a memorate or widely known as a folk tale apart from any association with a fiddle tune. An example of this type of story is the narrative which Seamus Ennis associates with “The Pinch of Snuff” reel, about a mortal who joins the fairies to snare a bride at her wedding. If the fairies can make the woman sneeze three times without anyone saying “God Bless You,” they can take her away with them. On their third try, the mortal cries out “God Bless You,” the fairies tumble him out of the rafters where they have been hiding, and the bride is safe. Henceforth, the reel that the musicians have been playing for the dance is called “The Pinch of Snuff” in honor of the occasion. This story was known in Ireland as a folktale, and was collected by T. Crofton Croker, who entitles it “Master and Man.”⁹ Another

example of this type of tale is "The Girl Was Smart for the Fiddler," a fiddler's version of the air "Casadh an tSugain," or the "Twisting of the Hayrope," recorded on "The Folksongs of Britain" series by Mickey Doherty.¹⁰

A second type of story explains how a tune was created by a musician, and, hence, is primarily etiological. A widely known example of this type of story is the story associated with "The Dark in the Morning" jig, which was printed as early as 1938.¹¹ This story concerns a contest between two pipers, one from Ireland and the other from Scotland, who are competing against each other to see who can play more tunes. The two play all day and all night, and by late in the night they have both exhausted their repertoires. The Irishman gets up for a breath of fresh air, hoping he will remember one last, contest-winning tune. As he stands in the doorway, he hears the larks rising and singing in the morning air, and their song gives him an inspiration for a tune. He returns to the house, buckles on his pipes, and plays "The Lark in the Morning." Admiringly, the Scotsman admits defeat.¹²

A third type of story explains how the tune was learned by a musician, and is likely to be a memorate, usually quite short. This is the only type of story that I have heard in my fieldwork, and it has led me to believe that the Irish music tradition has not linked *traditional* narratives with fiddle tunes. I suspect that both the Dohertys and Seamus Ennis are atypical of musicians in Ireland, and that they are all storytellers who link their performances of stories with musical performances whenever possible. I have found that they *are* atypical as far as Irish traditional musicians in the United States are concerned. Even those who were born in Ireland and learned their music there do not tell stories relating to their tunes, and they never in fact learned such stories. Even though O'Suilleabhain in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* suggests collecting legends and stories that an informant may know about the tunes he plays,¹³ my fieldwork indicates that this tradition is moribund, if indeed it ever flourished. Those of my informants who are themselves collectors of books and recordings of Irish music, and hence could have learned stories from print or disc, have never bothered. The stories are not important to them; and they are not necessary in the contexts in which the music is played.

After extensive correspondence, fieldwork, and observation of several contexts in which traditional Irish music is played, I have been able to draw the following conclusions concerning the lack of use of narratives associated with traditional Irish fiddle tunes: There are few, if any, narratives associated with Irish fiddle tunes

because the multiple social contexts in which the music is played do not lend themselves well to storytelling, and the tunes are remembered by the musicians in other ways than by their titles. In other words, the verbal code of the title usually bears no relationship, no matter what Sharkey says, to the tune itself (as Wilgus observed about the hanged fiddler legends and the tunes with which they were associated) and a fiddler does not have to know the title of a tune to remember the melodic structure of the tune itself.

Of course, instrumental traditions are *tune-centered* rather than *text-centered*. This is especially true of the Irish tradition: instrumental accompaniment for songs was largely unknown until recently. Although in folksong the tune may help in remembering key parts of the text¹⁴ there is no such text/tune relationship between fiddle tunes and their titles, and even less between a tune and a narrative that might be associated with it. Typically, musicians in the Irish tradition have little enough regard for the titles of their tunes; O'Neill remarked about one of his informants, "While he had a wonderful assortment of good tunes, he seemed to regard titles for them as of little consequence—a very common failing."¹⁵ Further reinforcement to ignore the title of a tune—and any narratives that might be associated with it—is provided by the social contexts in which the music is played.

There are many social contexts in which traditional Irish music is performed; contemporary musicians play their music in pubs, at sessions,¹⁶ at folk festivals, Feisanna, and in concert appearances. However, the traditional context for Irish music was the dance, and indeed, most of the tunes played by Irish musicians today are dance tunes, even though they are often played at a tempo entirely unsuited for the dance. (In sessions I have attended in New York City and in Rochester, very little dancing has occurred.) Dancing occurred in Ireland at any opportunity: at house parties, fairs, patterns, weddings and wakes, and local musicians were essential to the success of the dances.

The musicians I have interviewed in Rochester grew up in Ireland and learned many of their tunes by playing for dances there and by listening to other musicians who were playing for dancing. One of my informants, a fiddler and accordion player, is from a district in County Mayo that had few other musicians. He played for dances and weddings twenty miles away from his home—a considerable distance in an area without cars or railroads. Another man, a fiddler, grew up in County Clare and played at informal crossroads dances and at other affairs throughout the countryside. It was common enough for both musicians to be playing at dances where

other musicians showed up and wanted to play. In these cases, the musicians would take turns so that they could dance as well as play. In this way, also, they could learn tunes from each other, but the musician who was playing could not pause to tell stories or even relate the title of a jig he had stuck in the middle of a set--the dancers would not have stood for it.

For example, one of the musicians I interviewed described a house party in his native County Mayo:¹⁷

...And, ah, sure, your house would be full. You might have too much, you know. It would be like a public, ahm—you just announce a dance...everybody that would hear of it would come, maybe they'd come from five miles away, for that matter. I seen 'em doing that, and oh boy—I've seen the houses, and they'd be, oh they'd be—really too full—they'd be really too many for dancin', you'd be out there to dance and you wouldn't be able to dance—you may be only able to dance one square dance or one set dance at a time, see. ...Now before that set was finished, you better take your place for the next one, or you wouldn't get, you wouldn't get dancing, you'd just start—you'd queue up. ...I seen that many a time. And [if] you didn't get up, you'd have to wait—you'd have to stand up and hold your place for the next dance.

Obviously, no leisurely verbal exchange can occur among musicians with so many people waiting to dance, no matter how informal the social context.

The Irish in America have not lost their love for dancing, and in Irish-American communities traditional group dancing, though on the wane, is still enjoyed. However, the Irish musicians in Rochester do not play for many dances now. The heyday of dances seemed to be during the 1950's and early 1960's when dances were held frequently at the Harp's Club (the home of the local Gaelic football team), or at the local chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. These dances were considered of such importance that they were occasionally covered in the Society pages of the Rochester newspapers. At these events, local musicians were very important and were featured prominently—but they achieved their importance because they furnished music for the dance. Before playing at one of these events, a few musicians might gather to rehearse some stock numbers: reels, jigs, perhaps a hornpipe, and some set dances such as "The Siege of Ennis." Some dances were very popular in the community, and these certainly would be played. Set dances—dances to which certain specific steps are performed—would probably be announced by title. Often, however, the musicians would play reels or jigs without announcing what the titles of the tunes were.

House parties, another occasion for dancing, were more formal with fewer dancers and perhaps fewer musicians taking part. The musicians might play together at these events without prior rehearsal. But however informal the social context, the stress on dancing was still heavy. Two of my informants played frequently for house parties in Rochester during the 1950's and 60's, and they would often play together with other musicians. This was more fun for the musicians because it allowed a good deal of interchange between them. However, this interchange was primarily of an extra-verbal nature, and they seldom exchanged information about the tunes they were playing.

A recently developed context for traditional Irish music is the pub night or session. The pub night held in Ireland or England is analogous to the sessions held in this country in Irish clubs or in bars in cities with a large population of Irish-born inhabitants. In Rochester, the Irish musicians have organized an "Irish Musicians Club," which, until recently, met in the social hall of the now-defunct Harp's Club, and is now being held in the back room of a bar in the city. Once a month, Irish and Irish-Americans gather for an evening of Irish music, Guinness Stout, Harp's Lager, and socializing. The Session provides an opportunity to observe the musicians in a very informal musical interchange in comfortable surroundings among friends. And the things that they say and do and don't say and do—provides clues about the importance of both narratives and titles to the tunes they are playing.

In this context, which is characterized by informal give and take, *very little information* is exchanged about the tunes being played, and, in fact, musicians may go from one tune to another without mentioning even so much as a title, much less telling a story about the tunes. To illustrate what tune he might be interested in playing for another musician, a musician may lilt a few bars of the tune; that is, use nonsense syllables to illustrate vocally what the tune sounds like: "Do you know the one that goes diddle-aya-dum." He may also play a few bars of the tune on his fiddle. In this way he provides a concrete, easily associated code for his auditors and does not confuse them by giving a title with which they may or may not be familiar.

This is particularly advantageous because in the United States Irish musicians commonly associate with musicians from all parts of Ireland. Although the general melodic structure of the tunes seem to be common property among the musicians, the titles of the tunes vary from county to county, and it is sometimes difficult to determine if other musicians know a tune by mentioning the title

alone. This localization of titles makes it much easier for the musicians to communicate by lilting, whistling, humming, or playing a few bars of the tune since this *is* easily recognized by their fellows. One of the musicians played for me a tune which I knew as “The Teetotaler” or “Temperance Reel.” Yet, he gave it a title he had learned in his youth in County Clare. Had he mentioned the title of the tune in a session, it is unlikely anyone else would have known the tune, except his brother, since they are the only two musicians from County Clare in the group. On the other hand, once he begins playing the tune, lilt it, or whistles a few bars, the other musicians will recognize the tune as one they know and join in. This type of exchange—in which titles are not even mentioned—does not encourage the musicians to exchange narratives about the tunes they are playing, if they do, in fact, know them.

The problem of associating titles with tunes is one of which traditional Irish musicians are aware, as the following exchange testifies. Titles often become a barrier to communication, and the problem is resolved by a musical example. One night at the Harp’s Club, we were discussing a tune called “The Gold Ring” (which I knew had a related narrative—see below), and one of the musicians (A) played his version of the tune. It was not the tune the rest of us had in mind, and the following discussion ensued between A and B, another fiddler who knew a different version of the tune in question:

A: That’s one version of it. Not a very good one.

B: That’s not the tune....

A: That’s not the same one you’re talking about, is it?

B: Oh, same name.

A: Yeah. That’s one they call “The Gold Ring.” But, like you say, the problem with titles is that everyone gives the tune the wrong title.

Other methods are used in referring to tunes. Sometimes when a tune is referred to by a title, the reference may be made more specific by referring to a popular recording of the tune, or by noting its appearance in O’Neill’s collection of Irish music.¹⁹ This is also done if the tune is played or hummed. One night at the Harp’s Club, the following exchange took place between a young American musician who was attending the session for the first time and one of the mainstays of the session, a fiddler. The latter mentioned several tunes the two might play together, and the younger musician knew none of them. Then the fiddler said, “Here’s one you might know—it’s on the Chieftains’ record,” mentioned the title, and hummed a few bars. The young man did, indeed, know the tune, and the two played it together. The musicians might also refer to the context in which they first heard the tune played. For example, someone

might say to one of the people at the session, "Play that tune you learned at so-and-so's party," or "Play the one that the fellow from Ithaca played last month at the Harp's Club," associating the tune with the person who played it for the first time—usually not a regular at the session.

Another development in the history of Irish traditional music has been its performance on the concert stage by semi-professional or professional musicians who learned their music as traditional musicians. Although this type of performance probably became widespread through the Vaudeville circuits (indeed, O'Neill in his *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* alludes frequently to concert or Vaudeville performances by the musicians in his book²⁰), it is only recently that recordings of concert performances have made it easier for the folklorist to analyze how a traditional musician presents and performs his music when confronted by a large audience that may or may not include members of his own reference group. Although this dimension of performance demands a separate study of its own, and the responses of performers in this context seem to be controlled, to some extent, by their familiarity with the context, many performers do utilize "patter" between tunes as an adjunct to the music itself. This patter may take the form of narratives, but it is usually brief, sometimes just relating the title of the piece the performer is about to play. At other times the performer may use the patter to inform his audience about the history of a tune he is playing, if he knows it, or may describe how he learned the tune, or tell about the musician who taught it to him. Perhaps the patter may evolve into a brief story about a notable musician who played the tune the performer is about to play.

An example is the following narrative which was used by Liam O'Flynn, an Irish piper, to introduce a tune he played at a concert at the University of Pennsylvania:

[I'm going to play]...a reel, one that comes from County Kerry. And, like a lot of the traditional tunes, it got its name from the man who popularized it. He was a fiddle-player named O'Keefe, and ah by all accounts he was a very witty, very human sort of a person, and there're all sorts of funny anecdotes about him. Ahm, one in particular I recall.

One day apparently he was ahm visiting the nearby village and there was a session of music going on and ah they stayed in the pub all day long playing music and telling yarns and so on. And towards the end of the day, this man O'Keefe, Padraic O'Keefe, ahm he had no way of getting home so he borrowed a bicycle from a friend of his and promised he'd have it back ah the next time he was in the village. So, the next time he came back to the village, ah he didn't have the bicycle with him and, but he promised the friend definitely the next time he'd bring the bicycle back, and it happened

again and again that Padraic would come to the village with no bicycle. And he began to get very tired of this fellow constantly asking for his bicycle, so finally anyway when he asked him for the final time ah he said, "Come over here to me a minute," he said, and he opened his mouth wide, he said, "Take a look in there, now," he said, "And see if you can see the handlebar of a bicycle." Apparently he, as they say at home, he drank the bicycle. [Laughter from audience.] Anyway, this is a very fine piping reel, and it's "O'Keefe's Reel."²¹

On this level, narratives of all kinds serve a useful function in a concert performance context as a means of amusing, entertaining, and—perhaps—enlightening an audience. Indeed, a crowd-pleaser for the Boys of the Lough is a story that Cathal McConnell and Robin Morton tell about a jig called "The Gold Ring" just before Cathal plays a superb rendition of the tune on the tin whistle.²² However much as a story such as this charms audiences and adds affability to the concert performance, the currency of such stories in domestic oral tradition seems virtually nonexistent, judging at least by their absence from the repertoires of the Irish musicians in Rochester. Indeed, both the contexts in which the music is played and the common failure to associate titles with fiddle tunes by traditional Irish musicians both argue against the existence and use of narratives associated with Irish fiddle tunes.

NOTES

This paper is a revised version of one presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in New Orleans, Louisiana, on 25 October 1975. Although I have decided to keep their identities anonymous in this paper, I would like to thank the Irish musicians whom I have interviewed in Rochester, New York, for their contributions to this paper. I would also like to thank Skip Evans, Marie Brate, David Fry, Ted McGraw, and my wife, Carol, for various contributions they made to this paper in earlier stages of preparation. My thanks, also, to Dr. Kenneth S. Goldstein, who provided access to his excellent personal library for purposes of research, and who commented on the contents of this paper at the New Orleans meeting.

¹D. Sharkey, "Correspondence," *Ceol* 1(1964): 30.

²Part of the field work on which this paper is based was funded by a research grant from the Faculty Research Committee at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky. I am grateful for their assistance in this project.

³Particularly helpful in this respect were Dr. Judith McCulloh and Dr. Charles Wolfe. I spoke with both of them at the meeting of the Popular Culture Association in St. Louis, Missouri, in March of 1975.

⁴D. K. Wilgus, 'Fiddler's Farewell': The Legend of the Hanged Fiddler," *Studia Musicologica* VII(1965): 195-209.

⁵Seamus Ennis, *Seamus Ennis*, Masters of Irish Music Series, Leader Records LEA 2003.

⁶Ennis' other recordings are: *The Wandering Minstrel*, Topic 12TS250; *The Pure Drop*, Tara TLP 1013; *Seamus Ennis*, Gael-Linn CEF 009 (notes and spoken material in Irish); and *The Bonny Bunch of Roses*, Tradition TLP 1013. A new release on Innisfree Records was not available at the time of writing. Ennis has also appeared on other recordings as a singer and instrumentalist. On *Traditional Music at Newport 1964, Part 2*, Vanguard VRS 9183, he tells the story "Ditherum Doo Dah," which also appears on his Leader recording. This tune *cum* narrative has also been recorded by Joe Heaney, an Irish singer and storyteller, on *Come All Ye Gallant Irishmen*, Philo 2004. Ennis supplied the notes for Tommy Potts, *The Liffey Banks*, Claddagh CC 13, and alludes in several places in his notes to narratives associated with the tunes.

⁷See *Songs of Courtship*, Vol. 1, Topic 12T157, 2:4a; and *Jack of All Trades*, Vol. 3, Topic 12T159, 2:8.

⁸*Johnny Doherty*, Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann CL-10. Johnny Doherty's other solo LP was *Pedlar's Pack: Songs, Stories and Fiddle Tunes*, English Folk Dance and Song Society LP 1003, now out of print. Recordings of the Doherty family have also been released on cassette tape by Soundpost Recording Studios in Devon, England: *The Fiddler and the Fairy: Tales and Tunes*, FSA 073; *Pedlar's Pack: Songs, Stories and Fiddle Tunes*, FSA 074 (reissue of EFDSS LP); and *The Star of Donegal: More Fiddle Talk and Tunes*, FSA 075. For more information about Johnny Doherty, see Paddy Tunney and Francis Collinson, "John Doherty: Fiddler King of Ireland." *Chapbook* 4(1967), 9-16.

⁹See *Seamus Ennis*, Leader LEA 2003, 1:1, for a recorded version of this story. Printed versions of folk tales containing other versions of the story are: T. Crofton Croker, "Master and Man," *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, 3 vols. in 1 (London: John Murray, 1825-1828; reprint ed., New York: Lemma Publishing Corp., 1971), pp. 181-198; William Butler Yeats, ed., *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1893), esp. pp. 84-85; Douglas Hyde, ed., "Sean MacAnally," *Mayo Stories Told by Thomas Casey*, Irish Texts Society Vol. XXXVI (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland, Ltd., 1939), pp. 223-227.

¹⁰See *Songs of Courtship*, 2:4a. The tune is well known as a slow air in Ireland, and there are numerous recorded examples besides this one. For a vocal rendition, see Joe Heaney, *Irish Traditional Songs in English and Gaelic*, Topic 12T91. The story is widely known and was used as the basis for the play "Casadh an tSugain" by Douglas Hyde.

¹¹Nial McCormick, "How the Tune 'The Lark in the Morning' Was Composed," *Bealoideas* VII(1938); 114.

¹²A recorded example is *Seamus Ennis*, Leader LEA 2003, 2:4. I have a recording of a Scotsman telling another version of the story and lilting the tune in my personal collection.

¹³Sean O Suilleabhain, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Hatboro, Penna.: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1963), p. 688.

¹⁴See Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss, *Anglo-American Folksong Style* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 65-66.

¹⁵Capt. Francis O'Neill, *Irish Folk Music: A Fascinating Hobby*, Introduction by Barry O'Neill (Chicago: The Regan Printing House, 1910; reprint ed., Darby, Penna.: Norwood Editions, 1973), p. 18.

¹⁶I use the term "session" to mean a gathering of musicians for the express purpose of playing music as music, and not for dancing.

¹⁷Interview recorded in Rochester, New York, on 24 July 1975.

¹⁸This exchange and the one following were recorded at the Harp's Club on 14 June 1975.

¹⁹Capt. Francis O'Neill, *O'Neill's Music of Ireland: Eighteen Hundred and Fifty Melodies*, Arranged by James O'Neill (Reprint ed., New York: Dan Collins, 1963).

²⁰Capt. Francis O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians with Numerous Dissertations on Related Subjects*, Introduction by Barry O'Neill (Chicago: The Regan Printing House, 1913; reprint ed., Darby Penna.: Norwood Editions, 1973).

²¹The anecdote is transcribed from *Liam O'Flynn: Uilleann Pipes and Tin Whistle*, Folklore Society of the University of Pennsylvania FSUP-T101, a tape recorded at a concert held in November, 1971.

²²I have a recording of the story and the tune performed by Cathal and Robin at a Boys of the Lough concert in New Jersey on 18 March 1973. The tune, "The Gold Ring," was recorded on the Boys of the Lough, *Second Album*, Rounder 3006 (Trailer LER 2090), without the story. Seamus Ennis has recorded another version on his Leader album.