Limerick’s Heritage of Irish Song

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Irish-speaking Limerick and Clare formed, to some extent, a cultural unit centred on Limerick city. This article seeks to ‘listen in’ to Irish song in the region, both to the purely folk tradition and to the semi-learned kind using manuscripts. Studying some of the songs that were preserved for us—complete with their music—it investigates the part they played in the daily life of the Irish-speaking community, and attempts to savour their impact on the singers and audiences of the time. In some cases the verses are here restored to the authentic music for the first time in our day.

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At the beginning of the last century Co. Limerick was to a great extent Irish-speaking. The earliest estimate we have of the number of Irish speakers in the county is that published by Christopher Anderson for 1818, namely over 170,000, more than 60% of the population. This figure is consistent with later estimates, and with the census returns from 1851 onwards which took account of language. Although the greater average density of Irish speakers was in the southern half of the county, it seems clear that elsewhere, even close to the city and within its precincts, Irish remained the vernacular of particular communities or groups long after the average for their region (barony or town) would have given a low indication in a census report. As late as 1840 the Mercy Sisters in St. Mary’s Parish in Limerick city had a language problem in the night school which they started for adults, to prepare them for the sacraments:

Many who attended could not speak English, so to deal with this problem the Superior took up the study of the Irish language with the aid of one of the Poor Clare Sisters who was an Irish speaker. They compiled a simple catechism and spent much time learning how to instruct their ‘pupils’ in the rudiments of the faith through Irish.

The part of Co. Clare adjoining Limerick city—the barony of Bunratty Lower—was between 50% and 80% Irish-speaking even after the Famine, according to the 1851 census. Presumably it had been fully a Gaeltacht area at the turn of the century.

Limerick was the big town for the entire hinterland on all sides. County boundaries were of little practical significance to the ordinary folk. And the people of Clare oriented towards the city just as much as did the people of Co. Limerick. In Irish literary circles we think...
Castle Street, Limerick,
where an Irish literary circle frequented the house of Seán Ó Maoldomhaigh.
(Lithograph, by W. F. Wakeman 1842, courtesy of National Library)
of Brian Merriman, of Eugene O’Curry and his brothers, of Peadar Ó Conaill, or of Donnchadh Ruaidh Mac Conmara who said in one of his poems:

I Luinneach na gcuiirm for Sionna na gcraolbharch,
Ait ar shloigeas go minic na píonta mo dhaethin.⁵

We shall see that to a remarkable extent this region of Thomond had a common heritage of Irish song. Cultural traditions are not circumscribed by administrative boundaries. A good illustration of a mixed Limerick and Clare literary company was that which frequented the house of Seán Ó Maoldomhnaigh in Castle Street (see lithograph on facing page), opposite King John’s Castle, in the 1770s. One of Seán’s Irish manuscripts is now preserved in the British Museum, hidden from recognition under its catalogue name, Egerton 150. It is a miscellany of texts of various kinds of interest to its owner, from old learned tales to contemporary songs, entered at different times by four of Seán’s friends, all of them poets as well as scribes. They were: Seán Lloyd, a Limerick man who spent much of his life in Co. Clare,⁶ but was living “near the weighthouse in Limerick” in 1775;⁷ Aindrias Mac Mathúna, who “kept a tan-yard in Limerick”;⁸ Diarmuid Ó Maolchaine from beside the Ogarney river in Co. Clare,⁹ and Séamus Bonville, a neighbour of Seán’s in Thomondgate. Seán himself added a list of contents, with the personal note:

Seán Ó Maoldomhnaigh do shaothráigh na níthibh atá scríobhtha insa leabhar seo. Go dtuigí Dia grása agus trócaire dá anam ar son a shaothair agus do anam go bhfuil air. A.D. 1774.¹⁰

Some of the songs in this manuscript were the scribes’ own compositions; others were by one or other of the Maigue poets, who were still living—indeed Seán Ó Tuama was no more than ten minutes’ walk away over in Mungret Street, and probably enjoyed the friendship of this literary circle. A living tradition, then, at the learned or semi-learned level. Some years ago I had an opportunity in the British Museum of studying this manuscript, Egerton 150. And I was reminded of what John Stevens wrote in his introduction to Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court:

There is something deeply fascinating and stirring to the imagination in handling an old book or manuscript. Like any household stuff, a book is the thing itself. This cover was held, these pages were turned, these lines were read by people long dead who have left perhaps scarcely a name behind them. At moments like these we feel the closeness of the living past, its solid physical presence. And yet, this sense of ‘the warm reality’ quickly and inevitably gives way to a sense of bafflement. What fascinated us by its closeness now fascinates us by its mystery. How little we know, how little we can ever know, of those who wrote and read and owned the very books that lie in front of us. We should like to see—or, better, hear—them talking to themselves or one another, observe their gestures, accent and intonation, enter into their world of feeling and thought, into their certainties and doubts. But, because we cannot now challenge them, their familiar and well-loved ‘objects’ present a perpetual challenge to us.

⁵[In festive Limerick on the Shannon with its slender ships, where I drank down my fill of pints.] R. Ó Foghludha, Donnchadh Ruadh Mac Conmara (1933), p. 9. Donnchadh Ruaidh is believed to have been born in Cratloe.
⁶His little book on that county, originally printed in Ennis in 1780, has recently been reprinted (Whitegate 1986) under the title A Tour of Clare. For an account of Lloyd see B. Ó Madagain, op. cit. (1980), pp. 67-68, fn. 154.
⁸Ibid., p. lxv.
¹⁰S. Ó M. worked on the things that are written in this book. May God grant grace and mercy to his soul for his work and to any one who will pray for him: A.D. 1774.] Flower, op. cit., p. 395. Spelling and punctuation modernised. For other manuscripts which have survived from individuals among these scribes see B. Ó Madagain, op. cit. (1980), index.
I wish to take up that challenge this evening and try to eavesdrop on Seán Ó Maoldomhnaigh’s house in Castle Street as he entertains his friends, hoping to gain a better understanding of the tradition which they cultivated and enjoyed.

The first thing that will strike us is that the poems in this or other manuscripts of theirs are not being merely read aloud by members of the company: they are being sung. This was essentially a sung tradition. These manuscripts never contain the musical notation of the songs, but frequently a tune is named to which the author composed his verses. And thanks largely to John O’Daly or George Petrie or P. W. Joyce, the music of these tunes has been preserved for us, so that we can restore the verses to the notation and sing or hear the song as the poet intended it. And what a different experience this is from merely running our eye over the mute lines on a page, or even from reading them aloud. We still cannot reproduce all the other factors, musical and non-musical, that go to make up the ‘communicative event’: the personal style, variations and artistry of the individual performer, the tone of his voice, his use of gestures or facial expressions, his rapport with his audience and their own reaction to the song, the spirit, atmosphere and even physical setting of the occasion. Nevertheless we can hope to understand the traditional style of the singing, and to come much closer to savouring the spirit and the artistry of the poets.

In 1849 John O’Daly published his Poets and Poetry of Munster. Among the many tunes happily preserved for us in that little volume are some five or six of those used by the Maigue poets, including the music of Seán Ó Tuama’s characteristic drinking song, Is duine mé dhiolas leann lá. The verses themselves in this song convey a lively insight into Seán’s exuberant personality, with his love of good company, of music and song and wit, of ancient lore and lays, all helped along by the pleasures of drinking. But we catch the spirit and the humour of it all ever so much more vividly when we hear it as he intended it to be sung to the jaunty rhythm of an old tune, Seanbhean chrios an drانdnín. As this song probably epitomises the atmosphere of Seán Ó Maoldomhnaigh’s company in Castle Street, I should like to reproduce in full my restoration of the words to the music to which they were, no doubt, composed (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1
Seán Ó Tuama’s Drinking Song

Moderate time

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\text{Is dui-ne me dhíolas leann lá, Is chul-rea as bhuí-on chum rang-cáis; Mu-ra mbeidh dui-ne r mo chuí-deach-ta dhíol-fás}
\]

\[\text{Not always; and a reader who did not know the tune intended by the author would feel quite free to sing the verses to his own choice of tune (sometimes of a musical metre not matching the verse metre!) which could thus come to be associated with these verses by his hearers. This would seem to be the origin of the multiplicity of tunes for the same words in the tradition as it has come down to us.}
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\[\text{Notation from J. O’Daly, op. cit. (1849), 64. Ó Tuama’s verses typically echo a word from the title of the older song, viz. dranán, as well as echoing its rhyming scheme.}
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Musicologists make a distinction between a tune that expresses the meaning of the words and a tune that merely carries them. In the Irish tradition, as it frequently happens that the same tune is used over and over for various texts, it would seem that what was of first importance was the fact of song rather than a particular musical expression. It would seem that the tradition had a feeling for what was expressed in our own time by the ethnomusicologist David McAllester:

I am particularly interested in what music does to people. I would say that one of the most important of the universals, or near-universals, in music is that music transforms experience. Music is always out of the ordinary and by its presence creates the atmosphere of the special. Experience is transformed from the humdrum, the everyday, into something else. Music may heighten excitement or it may soothe tensions, but in either case it takes one away into another state of being.\(^\text{14}\)

I believe that Seán Ó Tuama would have realised this instinctively when he composed his *Uaill-chumha na Féinne*, lamenting the plight of the Gaeil, to the tune associated with *An Cnota Bán*, "The White Cockade". In addition, however, the tune in this case, as so often, enhances and intensifies the expression of the verses (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2**

Seán Ó Tuama cct. *Uaill-chumha na Féinne*\(^{15}\)

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The quatrain *Im' aice cois Máigh* was composed by Seán Ó Tuama for a beautiful young woman who kept a tavern near his own in Croom. It seems an unremarkable example of the commonplace occasional quatrain, a form which we do not associate with song. John O'Daly makes us reconsider our ideas on both points by giving us the music which clearly guided the poet in its composition, and together with which it becomes the enchanting little piece of artistry that he envisaged (Fig. 3).

**Fig. 3**

Seán Ó Tuama cct. *Im' aice cois Mháighe*\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\)Notation from J. O'Daly, *op. cit.* (1849), p. 50.

\(^{16}\)Notation from P. Breathnach, *Ceol d'Ear Síneuir* (1934), p. 141 (*An raibh tú ar an gCarraig?*), a close vocal variant of O'Daly's tune (1849, 72) which seems an instrumental version.
Notice that even the metrical effect of the verse is much enhanced when the long
assonances (Mháighe, mháinla, bhéasach, bhínn, mnáibh, álainn, spéiritiil, i etc.) are
significantly protracted in the melody, and the contrasting short accented vowels (deise,
ise) have their tension heightened to great effect on their stressed staccato notes.

I do not think that we give the poets enough credit for their choice of music. The same
practice was followed in Gaelic Scotland, that is composing their songs to old tunes, and
some sixty years ago Marjory Kennedy Fraser commented perceptively on it:

Melodies, once they are forged, are durable and mostly outlast by generations, if not by centuries, the
words to which they may have been originally sung. And yet a melody alone is not a song! However,
fine a melody may be, the born poet, if he have as much understanding of the emotional possibilities
of a tune as he has of the lyrical and hypnotic potentialities of words, can make of a melody, welded
with his own infectiously inspired words, a great song!17

Was not this what the Mangaire Súgach did—Aindrias Mac Craith—when he composed
his farewell to the Maigue? How happily he chose the old plaintive tune known as Uch
uchón (vocables which he incorporated into his refrain), and created a song echoing the
tradition and its associations, while at the same time expressing his own personal plight.
And it met an immediate response from an appreciative public: Seán Ó Maolodomhaigh
and his friends in Castle Street were following the popular vogue in copying it and singing
it when its composer still had twenty years of life ahead of him. We can sing it to the
authentic music which Eugene O’Curry supplied to George Petrie to be included in his
great collection, Ancient Music of Ireland (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4

Aindrias Mac Craith cct. Slán le Máigh18

17Kenneth Macleod, The Road to the Isles, Edinburgh 1927, p. 15; italics added.
18Notation from George Petrie, Ancient Music of Ireland, 1855, p. 165.
We have explicit assurance from Petrie that this was "the air to which it was written", an assurance which no doubt derived from the authority of O'Curry himself, on whom Petrie relied entirely in such matters while preparing his book. Many people, unfortunately, are more familiar now with another tune for this song, beginning:

Fig. 4a

A fine tune, but having no authentic connection with the Mangaire's song. The person responsible for this 'editorial wedding' of verse and music was Alfred Moffat, editor of The Minstrelsy of Ireland (London 1897). There he put Edward Walsh's translation of Slán le Máigh to this tune which Petrie had published under the title "O Nancy, Nancy don't you remember". Petrie had written it down nearly fifty years before from a servant girl who sang a street ballad to it, of which this title was the first line. He was of the opinion that the tune had "as much of an English as of an Irish character". It seems that Moffat merely wished to rescue the tune from disuse for lack of words. He succeeded. When P. Goodman published his little books of songs in English and Irish for use in schools, The Irish Minstrel, early this century, he followed Moffat in giving this tune for Slán le Móigh, but using the Mangaire's original Irish verses. In this way it seems that it was disseminated in the schools and the authentic tune neglected.

So far we have been listening in on a living tradition: contemporary songs with strong echoes of the past. The same was true of the aislingi or political visions which continued to be in such popular demand. Once again the first thing that we notice is that they were songs, not poems for reading. I should like to paraphrase the musicologist Alain Danielou and apply his phrases to the aislingi: These songs were emotionally conceived—the music

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19Grace J. Calder, George Petrie and The Ancient Music of Ireland, 1968, p. 21 etc. Modern language scholars frequently put the cart before the horse, imagining that with Irish songs the verse came first and was later 'set' to music.
20E. Walsh, Irish Popular Songs, 1847.
22P. Goodman, The Irish Minstrel, part II, pp. 42-3. The editor was an 'Inspector of musical instruction' with the Board of National Education, and his series of booklets was "sanctioned by the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland".

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integral to the emotion—and were intended not to be read analytically but to be experienced and lived. That is brought home to us immediately when we listen to the beautiful melody to which the Bruff stonemason Brian Ó Flatharta composed his aislín, Binn-lisín aerach an Bhrogha. Again we are indebted to John O’Daly for the music (Fig. 5).

**Fig. 5**  
Brian Ó Flatharta cct. Binn-Lisín aerach an Bhrogha

The second thing to be understood about the aislíní is that they were in dead earnest and were sung accordingly. It has been said that “the aislín was a literary form, not a message for the people”. This is a misunderstanding. The vitality of the message impressed itself on the youthful mind of Pádraig Dinneen growing up in Kerry during the last century where the performance of some of Eoghan Rua Ó Suilleabháin’s songs was still a regular feature of the social gatherings in the Céilí-house. Later he recalled that “One of his aislíní sung with fervour never failed to rouse enthusiasm.” He went on to describe how, at the end of one of them, such was the emotion that “the whole company, as by sudden impulse, would kneel and join in the poet’s prayer.”

Alan Titley, in last night’s stimulating lecture on Cuírt an Mhédín Ó Che, told us that in his great poem Merriman was tilting, among many other things, at the aislín, which had become stereotyped and stale. Stereotyped it had undoubtedly become, long since, but only as a literary form: the message was as live as in the days of Aogán Ó Rathile, even if now symbolic rather than literal. Writing of the ‘bardic sessions’ conducted by Seán Ó Tuama and others, John O’Daly, who lived very close to their time, declared that they “exercised a healthful influence in the country, and aided powerfully towards reviving the national spirit, bowed and almost

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24 J. O'Daly, op. cit. (1849), p. 202. His note implies that the tune already had an older song of the same title.
broken, as it was, beneath the yoke of penal enactments...." Later Fr. Dinneen, drawing on his own experience in Kerry, wrote in similar vein specifically of Eoghan Rua's aisling songs, saying that they have had a profound influence on the social and political outlook of the people. They found their way into the dwellings of rich and poor, in valleys and uplands, bearing with them the balm of melody for wounded souls and the comforts of a seer's prevision of deliverance for the degraded and oppressed.27

The valleys and uplands of Co. Limerick were among the places where Eoghan Rua's aisling songs found their way. It is thanks to P. W. Joyce that we have the music for one of them, I Sacs saibh na séad: he wrote it down from Joe Martin of Kilfinane, "a rambling working man with a great knowledge of Irish airs and songs, and much natural musical taste"28 (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabáin cct. I Sacs saibh na Séad29

Moderato

I Sacs saibh na séad i gcéin ón dhá-chas Fá bhar-ra na geaobh

col's có na stiur-bháro 'S me ag maicn-nadh ar séag na bhfle-tha 's na

laoch I bhfe-a-ran-naibh Chéin do tún-nadh Le da-nair i spoir-ling

chon-cails Dé go mbhathair cuid tráan me i bhfi-on-tar Ag fea-radh mo

dhéar go lacht-ábh ar le lóan Gan ait-teas gan réim gan sú-chas.

The Maigue poets made their own aisling songs. Seán Ó Tuama was, as usual, being at once traditional and creative in taking an old tune known as Móirín Ni Choileáin, one of the poetic names for Ireland, and making it the vehicle for a new aisling. Once more we are indebted to John O'Daly for the music (Fig. 7).

28 J. O'Daly, op. cit. (1849), p. 9. O'Daly was born in 1800.
28 P. W. Joyce, Old Irish Folk Music and Songs (1909), 88.
29 Notation from G. Petrie's Complete Collection of Irish Music (ed. Stanford), No. 1141, tune supplied by P. W. Joyce.
It would seem that Aindrias Mac Craith was trying to introduce some innovation into the old literary formula, as well as giving it an attractive local flavour, when he composed his *aisling*, *Is fada mé i gcumha gan tnúth le téarnamh*. Instead of the goddess Éire appearing to him as the traditional *spéirbhean*, he has his message delivered to him by Donn, the ancient god who played such a dominant role in the minds of the people of Co. Limerick (even down to this century), from his abode on the summit of Knockfeerina. The tune Aindrias chose as his musical vehicle was one used scores of times by the poets of that period and afterwards right down to our own time, namely *An craobhthín aoibhinn dlainn óg*. It may be said that apparently the security of tradition was valued more than originality: nevertheless it must be acknowledged that the words and music together make a fine stirring song (Fig. 8).

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Footnotes:
30 Notation from J. O’Daly, op. cit. (1849), 36.
31 Notation from P. Breathnach, *Ceol ar Sinsear*, p. 54.
It was with amused satisfaction this morning that I heard the strains of Carolan's Pléaráca na Ruarcaigh come over the public address system here in the hotel as part of the breakfast-time background music. Among the wide variety of items in Seán Ó Maolcolmhnaigh's book, Egerton 150, are the words of two songs by Carolan: this one, Pléaráca na Ruarcaigh, and “Carolan's Receipt”. It is no surprise to find Carolan’s compositions in Limerick or Clare. He was a regular visitor to Doonass House, the home of his great patron Charles Massey, Church of Ireland Dean of Limerick. And it was in Massey's house that Carolan's portrait, now in the National Portrait Gallery, was painted.

Before we take leave of Seán Ó Maolcolmhnaigh and his friends I should like to refer to one other item in his manuscript: an important copy of the deathbed composition of Aogán Ó Rathile, Cabhair ní ghoirfeadh. Did their singing extend to that also? The absence of a tune-reference in the manuscript is not a negative indication. And there is no reason to assume that Ó Rathile's compositions were an exception to the tradition and merely recited. On the contrary, Father Dinneen, it is said, used often repeat, "when I enter heaven, the first spirit I shall call for is Aodhgan Ó Rahilly. My love for him, which I acquired from my mother's crooning of his lays, is intense."\(^\text{32}\)

And what of Cúirt an Mheidín Oiche? Were its thousand lines merely recited or were they 'crooned' or chanted or 'intoned'? We have no direct evidence. But given the nature of the tradition, strongly inclined towards some kind of musical rendering of verse, it would be unjustified to assume without evidence that Merriman merely recited the work as we would today. Strangely, we rarely hear reference to the pertinent fact that Merriman, like

\(^{32}\)Séamus Fenton, Kerry Tradition, Tralee 1940, p. 14. Italics added. O'Daly, op. cit. (1849), published the text of Ó Rathile's Inghion Uí Ghearrailt with tune-reference to Tonn re Calaithe: unfortunately O'Daly had "no recollection of ever having met this air" (p. 92). The later folk tradition attested by Pádraig Ó Crucain, "Bhí aná-chedol ag Aogán Ó Rathillle..." (quoted infra fn. 33) is corroborated by a writer who was well acquainted with Aogán's grandson, Patrick O'Rahilly, and who said that "he inherited a considerable portion of his grandfather's taste for both poetry and music" (P. S. Dinneen, Dínta Aodhagín Uí Rathaille, London 1911, p. xxxi).
so many of the poets, was himself a musician: O’Daly tells us that Brian was “an excellent performer on the violin.”

We have been trying to listen in to a gathering of Seán Ó Maoldomhnaigh and his friends, to savour the semi-learned tradition of the time. The reading of prose tales from the manuscripts went hand in hand with the singing of the songs. So too did the reciting or reading of literary Fiannaíochta (Ossianic) tales, as well as the chanting of laoithe Fiannaíochta (Ossianic lays). The surviving manuscripts show that the people of this area had an intense interest in the Fiannaíochta. Not counting those from Co. Clare, we have no fewer than twenty-five Fiannaíochta manuscripts from Co. Limerick alone from the hundred years following the death of Seán Ó Tuama, i.e. 1775-1875. And of course this will represent only a fraction of the total. Some will be familiar with Eugene O’Curry’s description of the laoithe being sung by his own father in Doonaha, Co. Clare, and by a friend of the father’s, Anthony O’Brien, “the best singer of Oisin’s poems that his contemporaries ever heard”. This Anthony O’Brien was a Limerick-man, so that O’Curry’s vivid description of his singing opens another little window for us on Limerick’s heritage of Irish song:

He had a rich and powerful voice, and often, on a calm summer day, he used to go with a party into a boat on the Lower Shannon, at my native place, where the river is eight miles wide, and having rowed to the middle of the river, they used to lie on their oars, there to uncork their whiskey jar and make themselves happy, on which occasions Anthony O’Brien was always prepared to sing his choicest pieces, among which were no greater favourites than Oisin’s poems. So powerful was the singer’s voice that it often reached the shores at either side of the boat in Clare and Kerry, and often called the labouring men and women from the neighbouring fields at both sides down to the water’s edge to enjoy the strains of such music.

To my great satisfaction I succeeded, some years ago, in tracing the music to which O’Curry’s father sang the laoithe. Its chant-like tune (Fig. 9) was probably not very different from that sung by his friend Anthony O’Brien.

Fig. 9

Laoil Chnoc an Áir

\[ \text{Laoil Chnoc an Áir} \]

\[ \text{Chnoc an Áir an onco so thiar Go lá an bhráth bochta d'a chlairm} \]

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34Not confining them to the songs which happen to be included in the surviving manuscripts from their hands.


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A Phádraig na mbachall mban Nó gan fath a tugadh an t-sína.

That is a clear example of music which merely carries the verse, rather than expressing its meaning, but which nevertheless has a transforming function in the whole event. Last summer I had the privilege, in the Isle of South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, of hearing Miss Penny Morrison chant Ossianic lays: she is the last person living who can do so Ḗ dhíchás.

So far we have been concerned with the semi-learned tradition, associated with manuscripts. What of the unlearned folk tradition, of people who could perhaps neither read nor write? Is it possible for us to hear the Irish songs which such people sang in and about Limerick? We are very fortunate in having a great number of such songs, even from Limerick city itself. When George Petrie published his Ancient Music of Ireland in 1855 he included a scholarly record of his source for each of the songs. Over and over he acknowledged his debt to “a poor blind woman from Limerick city, now resident in Dublin”, whose name was Mary Madden. Eugene O’Curry also heard her singing. So far I have not succeeded in finding any more information on her.39 Another person from whom Petrie obtained songs was Tadhg MacMahon from Co. Clare, also blind by that time and living in Dublin. We are not told what part of Co. Clare he had lived in: only that he had been a ploughman. A third informant of Petrie’s from this part of the country was Patrick W. Joyce from Glenosheen, Co. Limerick. Later Joyce himself published many songs from his native county, especially in the two books Ancient Irish Music (1873), consisting entirely of Limerick songs, and Old Irish Folk Music and Songs (1909).

When we study the songs which have come to us from these people the first thing we will notice is how frequently the same song and the same version was known to all three of them, or to two out of three, suggesting, as I have said earlier, that this general area of Thomond had a largely common heritage of Irish song. Secondly, as we learn to sing the songs one after another—which, of course, is the very best way of savouring them—we can hardly fail to be impressed by their beauty.

Some of you will know the elegant love song, An Cuimhin leat an oiche úd? Joyce got this from Michael Dinneen of Coolfree near Kilfinane in Co. Limerick, and Petrie notated it from Tadhg MacMahon (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10

An cuimhin leat an oíche úd?40

40Notation from Joyce, op. cit. (1873), 23. Verse from Petrie (1855), 142, written down for him (no doubt from Tadhg MacMahon) by E. O’Curry.

39There is no record of her in St. Mary’s Home for the Blind, Merrion, Dublin.
As always in the Irish tradition, love songs figure very prominently in the repertoire. Another graceful one, *Péarla an chúil chráobhaigh*, is another example of the many Kerry songs that had found their way to Limerick. Petrie says, quoting O'Curry, that the verses were composed about 1750 by Richard Mór Cantillon of Rath Fraoich, between Causeway and Ballyheigue, for "the beautiful Bridget O'Halloran". The melody he obtained from Joyce, "who had learnt it from the singing of his father, at Glenasheen...and its correctness had been verified by a notation of the air which I made myself from the singing of the poor blind woman, Mary Madden" (Fig. 11).

**Fig. 11**

*Péarla an chúil chráobhaigh*  

Both Mary Madden and Tadhg MacMahon sang for Petrie the *pastourelle, Ar lorg na ngamhan do chuireas-sa mo leanbh* (Fig. 12).

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41Petrie in his manuscript noted that "This air is also called *Pearla buidhe air* by Mr. Joyce"—Stanford, Petrie Collection, III, 1401.
There is a danger that the elegance of songs such as these may mislead us into thinking of the song culture as something for formal performance only. The reality was that people were continually singing; that song was a part of daily life for everyone to an extent that we have altogether lost. We have a hint of that in what John B. Trotter noted on his way through Limerick in 1817:

Wandering in the extensive meadows on the Shannon-side, as you go to Askeaton, .... we have frequently heard the loud song of labourers returning from work. They sung Irish airs, in the Irish language, with surprising beauty and effect.\textsuperscript{43}

It is not exaggerating to say that there was scarcely an aspect of human life, literally from the cradle to the grave, into which song did not enter intimately. Examples of that phenomenon are the work songs and the keen.

Very valuable evidence on keening has survived to us from Co. Limerick and Co. Clare, which can only be touched upon here.\textsuperscript{44} Limerick City also had its keening, as is clear

\textsuperscript{42}Petrie, \textit{Ancient Music of Ireland}, vol. 2, 1882, pp. 14-15. D. O’Sullivan, \textit{Songs of the Irish}, is in error in stating (p. 193) that the version of this tune published there (p. 164) is that from Mary Madden; rather is it the “second set of the air” given to Petrie by Hardiman and printed in \textit{op. cit.} vol. 2, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{43}J. B. Trotter, \textit{Walks through Ireland}, London 1819, p. 408.

\textsuperscript{44}See B. Ó Madagáin, “Irish Vocal Music of Lament and Syllabic Verse”, \textit{The Celtic Consciousness} (ed. R. O’Driscoll), Toronto 1981, pp. 311-331.
from Fitzgerald and M'Gregor's statement about its decline by the time of their writing in 1826: "the unseemly custom of drinking and carousing at the wakes of deceased friends is still practised, though the hulluloo, or Irish-cry [i.e. keen] is now rarely heard in the streets at funerals." We have keening music from both Co. Limerick and Co. Clare. The Clare example was given to Petrie by Frank Keane, without words. But when we examine it we see that it consists of music for the two parts of a round of keening, namely the dirge or verse part, sung by the lone keener (after he or she had first called upon the deceased perhaps by name or title of affection), followed by the *goil* or 'cry' which was the refrain sung by the whole company as an 'amen' to the verse: no words except vocables such as 'hulluloo' or 'och, ochone'. I have looked through _Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire_ for lines which would fit the dirge part of this music so that I could illustrate it, and I have found that in one of the pieces sung by Art's father, in which he curses Sheriff Morris for causing his son's death, the lines are so suitable to the music that one wonders whether the tune used by the keener was something similar (Fig. 13, dirge and goil).

![Keening music from Co. Clare](image)

I should like to draw attention to a very significant point about the goil or cry which the whole company sang together. It could be said that there were no words to it, only vocables such as 'och ochone'. What we have here then is an expression of emotion in almost purely musical terms, using the voice as instrument. We are familiar with such in the case of instrumental music (e.g. harp laments or piping laments without words), but

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46Tune from Petrie, _op. cit._ (1855), p. 187, some freedom taken with the time (as was traditional); words of dirge from S. Ó Tuama, _Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire_ (1961), p. 37. Vocables underlaid to music of *goil* by present writer, following pattern of that from P. W. Joyce (Fig. 14 infra).
the goi is the only example that I know of in Irish music where the voice was used in this way. We referred earlier on to tunes which merely carry the words; the reverse is the case here, vocables being used to carry the music. Many examples of goi music have survived to us, but the only example with the vocables underlaid to the music is that preserved for us by P. W. Joyce as he had learned it in his youth (in Co. Limerick) "by repeatedly hearing it" (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14 Keening ‘cry’ from Co. Limerick⁴⁷

Work songs were another category in which the music was of prime importance, especially the musical rhythm. Again vocables were a feature of these songs, and it was the vocables which determined or at least emphasised the rhythm. A good example is the smith’s song "Ding dong didilium" which Joyce notated from Mary Hacket of Ardpatick in 1853 and gave to Petrie who published it; O'Curry supplied Petrie with the version of the words which, he says, "I have most commonly heard sung to it, and of which my recollection has been recently revived and aided from hearing it sung by the poor blind Limerick woman, Mary Madden".⁴⁸

Fig. 15 The smith’s song⁴⁸

⁴⁷P. W. Joyce, Ancient Irish Music (1873), p. 60.
⁴⁸Notation and words (amended) from Petrie, op. cit. (1855), 170-174. Modern edition D. O'Sullivan, Songs of the Irish, 39. Petrie stated that the song was not an actual worksong used by the smith. O'Daly, Poets and Poetry, Second Series (1860), p. xv, fn. 1, refuted this view.
Plough whistles and songs, to soothe the horses, were common down to the time of the Famine. Joyce recalls a scene familiar to him during his boyhood in Glenosheen:

While ploughmen were at their work, they whistled a peculiarly wild, slow, and sad strain, which had as powerful an effect in soothing the horses at their work as the milking-songs had on the cows. Plough-whistles also were quite common down to 1847: and often when a mere boy, did I listen enraptured to the exquisite whistling of Phil Gleeson on a calm spring day behind his plough.\footnote{P. W. Joyce, \textit{Social History of Ancient Ireland} (1903), vol. I, p. 591.}

Joyce did not publish the notation of any of these whistles, but Petrie's book contains a number, including a fascinating one from Tadhg MacMahon, the former ploughman. It seems that the ploughmen sometimes put words to the whistle-tunes, probably \textit{ex tempore}, and that is what we have in this unique example from Tadhg MacMahon. Indeed, it is a regular little drama of simple fun, staged by the music. The three-man ploughing team are getting hungry: with a refrain of the special vocables used with horses (hóbo etc.) the 'tailsman' calls from time to time on his companion to halt the plough and see if their dinner is coming. Each time the 'third man' makes a facetious reply explaining the delay: "It is a-reaping..." "It is a-threshing", etc., until finally, after many rounds, "it is coming" (Fig. 16).

\textbf{Fig. 16}

\textbf{Ploughing tune}\footnote{Petrie, \textit{op. cit.} (1855), 30.}
Work songs of a very different kind were the dialogue songs sung by the girls or women when they gathered together to do such things as carding wool or spinning or knitting. They had fun teasing each other about boyfriends etc. in these largely *ex tempore* dialogue songs. Frank Keane from Co. Clare left us an interesting account of them:

This melodramatic amusement is very popular among the female peasantry. . . . These dialogues are sung in parts by the women while spinning, knitting, sewing, etc., to some curious old Irish airs. The women assemble by appointment in certain houses to discharge the 'comhar' or mutual co-operation which they have agreed upon; but in all cases the work is cheerfully accompanied by a musical dialogue, one commencing the dialogue, another replying, usually with the intervention of a chorus to afford time to prepare an *ex tempore* verse in succession. And thus the dialogue is prolonged by two successive singers—praising or dispraising the young men whose names are introduced, until they have all sung their parts to their own amusement, as well as to the gratification or otherwise of the young men and the rest of their audience.\(^{51}\)

It would seem to be from Co. Limerick that we learn of a most interesting feature of the entertainment on these occasions, namely the reading aloud of Irish manuscripts. Standish Hayes O'Grady tells us that manuscripts "used to be read aloud in farmers' houses on occasions when numbers were collected at some employment, such as wool-carding in the evenings".\(^{52}\) O'Grady was born at Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, in 1832, and, although belonging to a Protestant aristocratic family, Robert Herbert tells us that his "love of the Irish language conquered all other influences and he spent his youth wandering the Limerick countryside collecting folktales and customs".\(^{53}\) This is corroborated by Robin Flower who says that O'Grady "spent his boyhood in a country of Irish-speakers, and, before he went to Rugby, was deeply versed in the language and traditions of the countryside."\(^{54}\) Another feature of the entertainment at 'spinning-parties' was the use of instrumental music.\(^{55}\) Joyce was probably thinking of the dialogue songs, amongst others, when he wrote simply that "the young girls accompanied their spinning with songs..."\(^{56}\)

I should like to illustrate the category with an example which Petrie obtained from Tadhg MacMahon and from O'Curry, *Máileó léro*, "A Spinning-wheel Tune" (Fig. 17).

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51D. O'Sullivan, *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society*, 21 (1924), 37 f., where he also edited Keane's collection of eight such songs from his manuscript in the R.I.A., 12 Q 13.


56Petrie, *op. cit.* (1855), pp. 82-86. I have given a little of the text to illustrate the banter.

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Joyce preserved for us the music of one dialogue-song, *Ululú mo mháillín*. Whether or not it was used at spinning parties is not clear, but it is a very pleasing example of the kind of *ex tempore* funmaking in a song which was so characteristic of the whole tradition. It tells of the bag stolen from the lead singer who then, in response to sung questions from the audience, enumerates its mock-precious contents, with endless scope for audience participation and impromptu topical fun (Fig. 18).

**Fig. 18**

**Dialogue song**

```
Ululú mo mháillín mo mháillín a goideadh uaim
Ululú mo mháillín mo mháillín a goideadh uaim
Ululú mo mháillín mo mháillín a goideadh uaim
Ululú mo mháillín mo mháillín a goideadh uaim!
```

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Cad do bhí id mháillín, do mháillín a goideadh uaim?
Cad do bhí id mháillín, do mháillín a goideadh uaim?
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Bhí min is plúr is prátaí se mháillín a goideadh uaim
Is misleáin bhlas-ta bhroictha se mháillín a goideadh uaim.
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**Note:**

Milking songs, Joyce stated, were common down to about the middle of last century, in other words until the Famine. The Famine was the great silencer of work songs, as indeed of song in general. In a letter which he wrote in the third of the Famine years, 1848, John O'Donovan wrote:

Never was Ireland in such a state as at present; a kind of universal horror reigns among the people; you would not hear a song, a laugh or a whistle from any one, which shows that the spirit of this once gay and mercurial people is completely broken down.  

Indeed, Petrie's publication seven years later of the work we have drawn upon so often, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, was a direct response to the silence that had fallen on song generally throughout the country.

Echoes of the old work songs survived to some little extent after the Irish language had been lost. I know of two examples from Co. Limerick. Fr. Patrick Carroll recalled haymaking in his boyhood in Co. Limerick in the eighteen eighties:

I used to feel a kind of wild gaiety... as I formed one of the long lines of men that turned over the hay rows... And they all kept in musical step as they chanted, 'Wet side up, dry side down'. And I shouted as loud as any of them.  

The other example is from our own time and from the very edge of the city. My sister recalls that in the nineteen-thirties the good woman who used to supply us with milk, Mrs. Lawlor, milking her herd in their field beside the Canal at Park Lock, used to lilt while milking (Fig. 19).

**Fig. 19**

**Milking lilt (fragment)**

\[\text{Allegretto}\]

\[\text{Bá}	ext{-}\text{n}	ext{-}\text{i}	ext{ }	ext{ba}	ext{ }	ext{bá}	ext{-}\text{n}	ext{-}\text{i}	ext{ }	ext{ba}	ext{ }	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{...}	ext{
at a nearby stream, telling how one year ago on that day she had been snatched by the Shee from her horse (probably indicating, as O'Curry surmised, the reality of her being killed in a fall from the horse) and giving instruction for her husband who would have his last chance next day to come and rescue her by means of the ritual and the charms which she indicates. Otherwise she will remain in the lios forever. It should be noticed that Mary Madden's tune is very chantlike, and probably very old (Fig. 20).

Joyce recorded a beautiful lullaby in Glenosheen from Mrs. Cudmore and John Dinan: *Do chairstimse, fein mo leanbh a chuidh*. Again, as part of the common Limerick-Clare heritage, Eugene O'Curry was familiar with it (Fig. 21).

63Petrie, *op. cit.* (1855), pp. 73-77.
Fig. 21

Do chuirfinnse féin mo leanbh a chodladh

Allegro moderato

Do chuirfinnse féin mo leanabh a chodladh 's ní mar do chuirfeadh mna na mbo-dach Pá shaí-sin bhui ná i mbrat-lín bhó-raigh acht i gcellsabháin bíir is an ghaoth dhá bheogadh

Seó hín só huil leó leó Seó hín só is tú mo leanabh

Seó hín só huil leó leó Seó hín só 's is tú mo leanabh.

Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin's famous lullaby for the baby he was left holding is a singularly clever piece of literary composition. But if it was to have any effect as a lullaby it had to be sung: the baby would not be impressed by a poetry-reading! Fortunately for us Joyce notated its music from Davy Condon in Ballyorgan, Co. Limerick (Fig. 22).

Fig. 22

Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin's lullaby

Gentle movement

Do gheobhair gan dea-r(a)-mad taisce gach soild

Do bhf'g do shin-sear ríoga roimhat In Írinn ithghlais

Bhrain is Eoghaín Ba mhníle le mian dá riar do shórt.

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65Music P. W. Joyce, Ancient Irish Music (1873), no. 76; words R. Ó Foghludha, Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin (1937), no. 23, lines 25 seq.
Seó hó a thóil ná goil go fáil Seó hó a thóil ná goil aon 

doir Seó hó a lèan bháchu-máinn 's a stóir 

'Tá ag sí-leadh do shúil 's do chom gan lén.

For the past month I have been steeping myself in this music of Thomond, and the more I have done so the more have I been impressed by its beauty. This musical excellence was, without any doubt, appreciated by the people of the time, but it is very rarely that we have any direct expression from them of that appreciation. I should like to conclude therefore with a song from our area for which we are fortunate to have a popular judgement on the tune itself: An Buachaill Caol Dubh. It was an old tune associated with a love song for the "Dark Slender Boy", but Seán Ó Séanacháin composed new verses to it on the conceit that the buachaill caol dubh was a bottle of porter. Seán aerach Ó Seanacháin was from Tulla, Co. Clare, but he spent part of his life in Glin, Co. Limerick, under the patronage of the Knight, Thomas FitzGerald. Petrie recorded the popular estimation of the tune of his song:

It is in Munster—to which it properly belongs—that it is best known and most esteemed, being, as my friend Mr. Curry tells me, there ranked as one of the finest tunes they possess, if not the very finest one.65

What good taste they had!

Fig. 23

An Buachaill Caol Dubh66

66Pádraig Ó Cearbhaill has suggested to me that he is to be identified with the Seán Bán Aerach Ó Flannagain of whom he has written in "Amhráin agus lucht ceaptha amhrán Chontae Luimnigh". Reveille (An Ghaírm Scoil, Mainistir na Féile), Summer 1970, pp. 141-152.
68Petrie, op. cit. (1855), p. 21; variant of tune Seán Óg Ó Tuama, An Chóisir Choill. III. p. 4.

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csol dubh Is cuir-reann caol-chrobh is-teach im' láimh.

Is goarr 'na dhóidh sin go mbí ag éa-sgoisn Gan puinn den' chéill

's mé os cliom an chláir Ag díol na réi-leath do bhíonn am'

chéa-sach Seacht ní gan lám-e 's an fuacht am' chrá.