

# West Limerick Folk Songs: The Less Known Ditties

Sing them upon the sunny hills,  
When days are long and bright.  
And the blue gleam of smiling  
rills.

Is loveliest to the sight;  
Sing them along the misty moor,  
Where ancient hunters roved,  
And swell them through the  
torrent's roar,  
The songs our fathers loved."

The above lines come to mind as I take a glance back through the years gone by and begin to reread some of those grand old songs—those songs our grandparents and ancestors cherished, and those ditties they used to sing in such graceful and joyful style.

## THE LESS KNOWN SONGS.

When referring to the grand songs of our past, I don't really mean such airs as "The West's A-sleep" or "The Rising Of The Moon," and as a matter of fact I don't mean ones like "Hantry Bay" or "The Stone Outside Dan Murphy's Door" either. These are fine songs, no doubt; songs that our Irish people are virtually proud of; but still they are not even half as popular nowadays as they were in the days that used to be. However, they are still patronised by a good many people throughout the country, and it can be safely said that there is not a single one of those songs that is not awakened and sung again on some occasion or other at the present day. Still, they deserve to be sung oftener than that.

But there are other songs that are practically never heard in this age. They are in existence afloat, but only half-alive, as it were, and they lying covered with the dust of time in some part of the old kitchen; in the cranny near the fire-side maybe, or on the shelf of an old book-case. Well, these are the songs I am concerned with on this occasion.

## THE SONGS THAT WERE BEST LOVED.

These were the songs that held such sway and won warm affection with both old and young. In times when conditions and facilities of entertainment in this country were anything but flourishing. There were no luxurious dance halls in those days, no cinemas or no orchestras. Certainly, there was little encouragement attached to the methods of entertainment and amusement that prevailed before the advent of those modern facilities. Yet it can be safely said that the younger generation of that time enjoyed themselves much better.

They just congregated at the cross roads or in some convenient house, and indulged in a feast of dancing and singing that would be the talk of the parish and surroundings for days afterwards.

The old folk-songs are very different from the ones I first mentioned above. Then, perhaps, one might be inclined to ask what is meant by that. Well, they need only compare these less known ballads with the ones that are much more popular, and they will soon find the answer. Many of their composers never saw the inside of a school, and therefore they did not write them in the style their educated contemporaries were capable of. But song writing came more natural to the less enlightened men, while their verses are so simple and so witty that they are able to capture the admiration of the greatest scholars in the land. Those men who could fill the hearts of others with pride and joy, and on other occasions their eyes with tears, were blessed with a wonderful gift surely, even though education was denied many of them.

## THE SIMPLE THINGS THAT MATTER.

It is the simple things that strike the heart and mind the hardest, and these are the things, too, that live longest in memory. That is one reason why those folk songs were so cherished, and are still fondly remembered by those who know their value and to whom they mean so much.

The younger generations of today don't realise one bit the great enjoyment their kith and kin obtained from singing and hearing the simple ditties (both humorous and sentimental) that simple peasant men composed about local characters and happenings, and sometimes farm animals. Numerous ballads have been compiled

partments have sunk real property in British paper. We send Britain workers in exchange for idle rich, who run grass ranches, the most wasteful form of production, and with few employed.

## "NASTY NOSTRUMS."

MacMillan, in more difficult days, is, like Cripps, "just drooping charms over a disease that needs the knife"—and doing it on the greatest misery principle. The sinks, even though more slowly than the German mark. The keenest financiers in Britain know that, but just let MacMillan go ahead. Of course, MacMillan will try to avoid devaluation, if he can. So did Cripps on the very eve of the plunge. He had no choice. English international trade was in the balance. Free pounds and official pounds were in value miles apart in say, Zurich, and foreign speculators were at Britain's expense making millions. But what will be the reactions of British Labour to these nasty nostrums?

Will the other members of the Sterling Area, on whom England has been sponging for dollars, and whose interests in these charges have been ignored, go dollar-ward? Already significant signs go to show that they are not, like Ireland, complacently going down with bankrupt Britain. Will the foreign forces, with their Irish satellites, that have a stranglehold on our finances and economics, continue to bar that reasonable self-sufficiency which can still prove our economic salvation?

## LOST OPPORTUNITIES.

Opportunities for an independent currency came here in 1922, in 1933, in 1939 and in 1947. Our men missed the tide. "Our ladies' watchmen of the public weal" shamed sleep. Only Professor Busteed, and the present writer publicly protested and pointed out the inevitable effect in prices, wages, strikes. Our Minister, with his long-term trade agreements, fatal with falling currencies, complacently took his 1/- notes for the as agreed on. Not so the Argentines: What would be our attitude to a new devaluation? Fewer sheep now remain for the wolf, but will the watch dogs again prove dumb? Neither party can mend the pride position, while they let England juggle with the coins.

## STAGGERING STATISTICS.

Inflation, or what the dramatist Massinger calls "a new way to pay off debts," is really default to the extent to which the currency is diluted. The printing machine thus takes the place of the parish pump in the adulteration of milk. It gives legal sanction to what is just as morally indefensible as issuing base money. In the 16 years, 1939-1955, it deprives us of about 230 million pre-war equivalent to 800 million in present currency. This equals the value of all the cattle Ireland exported in the 30 years ended 1954, and means for the average family here, £1,200. This is no mere estimate or guesswork. The figures were equated carefully year by year to August, 1955, values and then to those of 1955 on the import price index. These may seem staggering statistics but they are reliable.

(By T. O'C.)

about pigs, dogs, goats, cows, mares, donkeys, geese and drakes. As what might occur on some occasion or other, if a person were passing by a humble dwelling, and heard an old man crooning by the fireside. Well, if it so happened that they approached that old man and asked him what he was singing, they would soon know it was a song they never before heard, and perhaps one to be found in no book or paper.

Even though it might have been fifty years ago—aye, sixty years maybe—since the old man first got acquainted with that song, still it now remains all the brighter within him; even though the mists of age and time may have overshadowed his memory somewhat.

That is another reason why our present generation should try to have a little more respect and appreciation for those simple but fascinating old folk songs, their grandparents and forefathers loved so well.

## SONGS ON OTHER SUBJECTS.

Besides the songs on the aforementioned subjects, there are other ballads about such themes as love. Songs of this kind vary considerably, and include stories about lovers who remained true, others who proved false, and then other versions about elopements.

A vast number of love songs have sprung from all parts of Ireland surely, but even greater still is the total connected with those other characters that have always been so numerous in this island—our emigrants. If the songs of lovers and those of the exiles were pitted against each other, there would not be very much between them, numerically speaking, anyway.

## THE SONGS OF WEST LIMERICK.

Every county in Ireland has its quota of folk songs (ditties on every subject connected with everyday Irish life) and, indeed, our own county of Limerick is not far down the list. The songs to be found scattered around East Limerick are equally numerous as those of the western territory. Well, as most of the songs of the former region were given in this paper some years ago, and as they are better known I think it would be more fitting on this occasion to take a glance at the songs of the west.

A song—that is rather popular in many areas of West Limerick is

"The Asheaton Rake." It is a long, lively ditty (I suppose it could be termed something in the nature of a love song) and deals with the antics of a wild and wayward type of young fellow, who lived solely for pleasure of all sorts. This song is known amongst some exiles in America, despite the fact that a good many people from around West Limerick have never heard of it.

Many of our folk songs were composed by tramps and spalpeens and we in West Limerick have a good example of such compositions in "The Workhouse of Ra'kale." It deals with the time when the Board of Guardians were in existence. It appears that tramps were not welcome in the Workhouses then, and the stories were told of the Guardians' efforts to keep them out are very numerous.

Then the tramps were striving to get in, and the tales told of their efforts are also very amusing. I wish I could give you the song here, but I am afraid space forbids me from doing so. Anyway, whoever compiled the song (be he a tramp or whatever he was) he was certainly no "snowman," as they say.

## SONGS ABOUT PASTIMES.

In every county in Ireland, songs are also numerous about such pastimes as: hurling, football and other sporting events. From time to time (and even at the present day) some fine songs have been written in praise of certain matches, and sometimes a team or individual player. However, examples of such songs are comparatively few in West Limerick.

The only ones we seem to have are two in praise of the Foynes—"Smith O'Briens," written by two locals: Paddy O'Connell of the village, and Jim Nolan of Mount Pleasant.

The one O'Connell wrote concludes as follows:

"So we'll drink a toast to their memory then,  
Wherever they may be,  
At home among their native hills, or beyond the foaming sea;

Though, alas! some too have passed along where angels pure abide,  
And now look down on the Gaelic fields,

and their own dear green and white."

Nolan's song is equally creditable, as can be judged from the opening stanza:

"Well drink to-night with glasses bright a toast to dear old Foynes,  
And we won't forget her worthy sons, the gallant "Smith O'Briens."

The championship of Limerick they now may call their own.

They proved their might in a stand-up fight,  
Beneath the Treaty Stone."

Another good ditty has also been written about the Mount Pleasant hurlers.

Ghost stories by the dozen are to be found in all parts of Ireland, but I have never yet heard or come across any poems or songs about ghosts, or phantoms, or such. Some poems are to be found about various members of the "Shee Folk" in the Irish language, but the only examples to be found in English literature are a few songs about leprechauns and banshees. The only song to be found about ghosts in West Limerick, anyway, is one belonging to the Barrigone locality.

Many songs of shipwrecks and sea-faring men are to be found in plenty in all coastal areas. As Limerick is termed an inland town, there are probably no songs of this kind connected with it, although quite a number of wrecks have occurred on the Shannon from time to time.

## REBELLY SONGS.

Rebelly songs seem to be rather scanty in County Limerick, but the few we have are perhaps among the best of their kind to be found anywhere. Our best one, which is simply entitled "Ballyroe," deals with the tragic death of West Limerick's gallant young Brigade Commandant, Sean Finn, who met his fatal doom on the banks of the dark rolling Owvaun, on that unforgettable March evening in 1921. This is undoubtedly a ballad written in the real style of the rebelly song; its author being a fine song writer, John Hayes of Mohernagh, Ballynahill.

Another rebelly song that West Limerick boasts so proudly is: "Colbert, the Man from Athra." This is also typical of the rebelly style, as can be seen from the following lines:

"Fling your rifles aloft and give three ringing cheers,  
For young Colbert, the man from Athra."

## LOVE SONGS.

As already mentioned, love songs of all themes are to be found in abundance in every county, and indeed, Limerick has its own galaxy of them. Strangely enough, love songs in West Limerick are not as

numerous as those at the other end of the county. However, whatever few the Western side has to display, are of an excellent standard and are among the best to be found in the entire country.

From the Castletown Coney-Ballyagran district comes a really fine specimen of such, in "The Lily of Rossmore." Three of our best love songs seem to belong to the south-western corner, that colourful landscape, watered by the lovely silvery Feale that flows by the towering heights of Mullaghmore and Fair. The grand trio of love-songs—"At the Foot of Reesagh Hill," "My Sweet Little Girl from Barnagh," and "My Maid of Inchibane," all belong to this area of such fine traditions.

Father Casey, of Abbeyfeale, the great Land League priest and patriot, was almost inseparably linked with this vicinity, and it is only fitting we should be left a few fine songs in his memory.

And speaking of these songs in tribute to this illustrious pastor, I cannot help being reminded of that lively ditty in praise of Father O'Flynn, which was rather strangely but truly written by A.P. Graves, who was a son of the Protestant Bishop of Limerick.

## SONGS OF THE EXILES.

Exile songs are also to be found in rich abundance around County Limerick and from the spacious parish of Athenry comes one of our best in "The Valleys of New Ulster." The man mentioned in this song was not its composer as many people think. It was written by a man named Downey, from whose pen also came a satire entitled "Snuff and Cut Muggin." Its title is a bit quaint, but the song itself just describes the character and antics of a stingy and morose old farmer, nick-named "Snuff and Cut Muggin," who lived a few miles to the east of Athenry.

There is a great tradition of all kinds of songs (together with music, dancing and even story-telling) in that stretch of hills and glens along the Kerry border, from the Shannon to the Feale, and this corner is particularly rich in ballads of the satirical type.

From this locality came Michael Druery, a poet of the real natural type, who was certainly one of the best writers of folk-songs to be found anywhere. Druery was the son of a small farmer, himself being a wandering labourer, and was held in high esteem by all who knew him. His songs were of the real sentimental quality, being simple, humorous and witty, and evidently enough they captivated the admiration of everybody, no matter to what society they belonged.

Druery compiled a large number of songs, but only a mere few of them seem to have appeared in print. His two best known ones are: "The Yorkshire Pig" and "Foley's Jack Ass." According to the former ballad, when the Yorkshire pig were first introduced into the land, they caused much comment, particularly along the Limerick-Kerry border. Everybody for miles around were talking and marveling about them (even the priests and schoolmasters) while the people nearly went mad celebrating. Even the girls began to wear new fashions—ones that were unknown so far in the Limerick-Kerry border.

However, our friend, Mick Druery did not seem to approve of this nonsense and so chided them in his satire when he wrote: "An but they'll regret their conduct yet with their high-heeled shoes and sprigs."

They're too grand for to talk, as home they must walk for to fatten those Yorkshire pigs."

But despite all their attention to these new pigs, the people soon realised their folly, when the store-keepers were pressing them to pay their bills. In conclusion to his satire on the Yorkshire pigs, Druery says:

"Aroon, aroon, o blithie garsoon,  
Brush the tears from your weary eye,  
For the men of the meal in Abbeyfeale are building their castles high;

Down with all the tyrants, and success to the man who digs May we all live to see ould Ireland free and to hell with the Yorkshire pigs."

Mick Druery also wrote a brief satire about Knockanure and its people; a matter that was never taken seriously, however. On one occasion he was hired by a very stingy individual. Dinner-time came along, with Druery and three other workers seated at table, when a large junk of a boat was placed before them. Anyway, the meat mustn't have been very edible, because when Druery tasted it, he was heard to exclaim in a loud firm voice: "O God above look down on us, and take pity upon us four, Give us meat that we can eat, and take away this boat."

Other songs of the same nature, in praise of this old historic town, are "Glenn Corraigh" and "Dear Old Glan."

The other side of the Limerick-Kerry border is equally rich in song, and here we meet Mick Taylor, a postman, the fame of whose compositions has spread far and wide. He has given us one of the finest rebelly songs of all: "Tian Valley of Knockanure," and also that lively ballad, "The Irish Rover." And speaking of Mick Taylor, I cannot help being reminded of another postman, young Leo Carthy from Broadway, Co. Wexford, who is one of our greatest song-writers of today. Some fine compositions have come from his fluent pen, while his song, "The Rossaree Lifeboat Crew," written in December, 1954, has become world-famous.

Well, there is a feast of all kinds of songs on the western side of the Limerick-Kerry boundary. From this sphere comes another roiling rebelly ballad, "Dugh Volunteers," and a very sentimental love song entitled "My Maid of Sweet Coolard."

All these are fine songs, surely, songs of such a simple nature, but yet so sentimental and fascinating that they would warm the hearts of anybody. The only pity is that they are allowed fall into disuse, and that most people know so little about them. And by the way, I have only recalled a mere few of them here. Yes, those grand old folk-songs of West Limerick are in existence afloat but they need to be reawakened. God grant the day when we may hear them sung again.