



Saoithe: Paddy Daly, Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh, Niamh Parsons, Ann Riordan

The Sweet Nightingale

New Series, no 13, May 2020

The Silence of Covid 19

For singers and musicians, the Lockdown imposed by Covid 19 means no sessions. Howth Singing Circle is in abeyance until precautions are eased and it is safe to reassemble to enjoy each other's company and songs. There are, of course, many Zoom sessions being held and you can both tune in and enjoy some singing or you can seek to participate yourself. We are aware of Zoom sessions being promoted by Bray, An Góilín, The Night Before Larry Got Stretched and The Sunflower, Belfast, and would recommend them to you. There is also a Cancelled Singing Sessions FB page. Many musicians are also hosting events online – either as live sessions or recordings. Those who earn their living from performance are, like many others in different walks of life, suddenly bereft of income. You can help by contributing by purchasing artists' material that is available through Bandcamp and other hosting platforms, direct from a favourite artist's web or Facebook page where recordings can be sourced, or by showing your appreciation of online sessions like those held each Friday by our old friends Paul and Shona Anderson.



*An early edition of The Sweet Nightingale – how many can you identify?
Answers at the end of this newsletter*

We have been putting some recordings up on the Howth Singing Circle Facebook pages inviting you to enjoy artists like Niamh Parsons and Graham Dunne or Tony Fitzpatrick and to support their

recordings. Of course, many hundreds of thousands are taking financial hits but for the vast majority of musicians, their income, even in good economic times, is precarious and erratic.

If there is anything else you feel you would like Howth Singing Circle to do, please let us know.

Until we can resume our normal activities, we salute our health care and other front-line workers for everything they are doing on all our behalfs. Stay safe everyone.

Fás Bliain is Fiche

It is beginning to look as if we may not be able to resume this season's programme for some time to come. In September, we are due to commence our twentieth season. We intend to start the year with a 'Back to the Beginning' session led by Siobhán Moore and Dave Moran who organised the first singing session to commemorate Brendan 'Bull' Moore in the Red Herring (the old Evora and now a gym) which then led to the start of our Circle.

We would like to hear from you regarding how we should acknowledge our anniversary. We would also like to hear from you or see any photographs you have from our activities over the years. So, think about the following and let us have your views –

- what are your favourite Howth Singing Circle memories?
- do any particular songs or singers stand out in your mind and why?
- do you have any amusing stories or anecdotes about the Howth Singing Circle that you would like to share?
- have you got any photographs that you would like to share?
- would you like to see the Howth Singing Circle celebrate twenty years in any particular way?

Please, let us know what you think.

Howth Burns Nicht 2020

Howth Burns Nicht 2020 proved another action-packed weekend of song, poetry, music, dance and fun. The excited mood of the sell-out crowd was set by the display of flags and Burns's portrait tastefully decorating the hall thanks to the hard work of visitors John Bentham (Loughborough) and Dave McCracken (Tarsset, Northumbria). The Burns flag was donated to us by Luke Cheevers. Daire Ó Baoill and Gerry O'Connor ran a fast-paced programme of songs, poetry, music, dancing, piping and great fun. Regular visitor Janet Weatherston (Dalkeith) began the night with 'The Sodger Laddie' and Helen Lahert delivered Ewan MacColl's moving Spanish Civil War anthem 'Jamie Foyers'. Gerry O'Connor and Éamonn Hunt then performed a harmonic version of 'Dumbarton's Drums'.

Ba é an chéad chuid eile den chlár ná amhráin agus dánta i nGaeilge. Léigh Úna Kane dán John O'Donoghue 'Beannacht' agus léigh Eileen Clancy dán Sheáin Uí Ríordáin 'Oíche Nollag na mBan' ('The Night of Women's Christmas'). D'imir Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh sraith foinn Albanacha ar an harmonica, an lucht féachana ag canadh agus ag bualadh. Ansin labhair Brenda Ní Ríordáin leagan álainn de 'An Raibh Tú ar an gCarraig?'

Our 'Resident Band' – John Kelly (fiddle), Larry Egan (box) and Mick Mullen (guitar) – then took the stage and played some stunning sets of tunes. The numbers up dancing showed how much they were appreciated, although they do not always get the credit they deserve for the high class playing they bring to the night. Our first guest was George Duff from Edinburgh, a new voice to the audience but

one they immediately responded to. He began with Burns' 'Aye Waukin O' and held the crowd in his palm. The Tannahill Weavers – Roy Gullane (vocals, guitar), Phil Smillie (strings, whistles, bodhrán), Malcolm Bushby (fiddle) and Fraser Fifield (Highland pipes and whistles) – then played their first set. Their lively, up-tempo style engaged the audience who gave them a great reception.



*Top: a full blown Fraser Fifield and Úna Kane reading beautifully
Below: George Duff in fullm flow and a packed house with the Tannahill Weavers –
all pictures from Colm Keating's excellent photographic record of the night*



Pipe Major Noel Kelly led the St Lawrence Howth Pipe Band in ahead of the haggis carried by Club regulars Myles and Isla Fitzgerald. Morag Dunbar did her rousing 'Address Tae the Haggis' as ainly she can and 'The Selkirk Grace' was given by the kilted David McCall. After a very short break, Noel played a lament, 'Tommy Tully's Air', aye poignant and moving moment.

The mood was immediately lifted by the Howth Singing Circle Shanty Singers who delivered 'Billy O'Shea' led by Tom Finn, 'The Greenland Whale Fishery' led by Tony Fitzpatrick, and the lively 'Star Wars Shanty'. There were over twenty singers and this new development on the night was listed as many folks' highlight in the feedback we received.

Sheinn Máire Ní Bhaoill 'Pilleadh chun Oileáin', amhrán a scríobh a hathair Pádraig, agus thug Daire Ó Baoill léiriú álainn ar 'Griogal Cridhe'. Ba bhuaicphointí na hoíche iad an dá léiriú seo. Niamh Parsons and Graham Dunne completed this section with their jazzy, much-loved version of Burns's 'The Slave's Lament'. John Kelly, Larry Egan and Mick Mullen returned, their sets sharp, tight and irresistible. George Duff guested with them and sang 'A Man's a Man'. The raffle – as one person said, 'the fastest I have ever seen' – saw over twenty prizes handed out including very attractive hampers, CDs, calendars, books, whisky and all manner of goodies. The Tannahill Weavers rounded off the night before a finale of George singing 'Sae Will We Yet' with the Tannies, John Kelly and others providing orchestral accompaniment; The Tannahill Weavers led 'Will Ye Go Lassie Go' before 'The Parting Glass' signalled the end of another enjoyable Howth Burns Nicht.

Sunday's Fare Thee Weel Session was gently managed by Niamh Parsons and Northumberland visitor Dave McCracken. George Duff sang 'The Rigs o Rye', his Dufferised version of 'The Grey Funnel Line' and a stout-hearted condemnation of scabbery with 'The Blackleg Miner', his own colliery days informing the song's sentiments. He completed his sets with 'The Baron's Heir' and, appropriately for the Hamish Henderson centenary just past, 'Freedom Cam Aa Ye!' George proved to be a much-appreciated guest, both audiences liking for him reflected in the impressive sales of his CD *The Collier Laddie*. There were many great songs and performances that included Corinne Male (Ibstock), 'The St Pancras Rent Strike'; Antoinette Daly, 'Maggie Pickens'; Seán Ó hÉarchain, 'Hame o Mine'; Helen Lahert, 'Ballyshannon Lane'; Eugene McElowney, 'When the Breaker Goes Back on Full-Time'; Jane Considine who read Dermot Bolger's 'The Frost is All Over'; Fergus Carey, 'I'm Leaving the Fishing'; Ciarán Ó Maoiléoin, 'Baith Sides o the Tweed'; and Eddie Phillips, 'Away From the Roll of the Sea'. Fiana Ní Chonáill, Irish harp, and Anthony, guitar, provided a bonus by starting the second half with some lovely tunes.

Of course, weekends like Burns Nicht do not just happen. Our thanks to your Committee but also to all those others whose collective efforts made the weekend so enjoyable: our guests – The Tannahill Weavers, George Duff and the John Kelly Band; Richard Tobin, Allison O'Rourke and Abbey Tavern staff; Chris Boland on sound; Ricky Higgins, Higgins Family Butchers, Sutton Cross, for the haggis; Christy Hammond, CRM Design & Print for the superb ticket and brochure; Colm Keating for his wonderful photographs; Morag Dunbar, David McCall, Myles & Isla Fitzgerald for attending the haggis; John Bentham & Dave McCracken for decorating and, with some assistance, undecorating the hall; Noel Kelly & the St Lawrence Howth Pipe Band; our Fir an Tí Daire Ó Baoill & Gerry O'Connor with Niamh Parsons & Dave McCracken on the Sunday; Ann Riordan and Helen Lahert for managing the door and the seating; all who helped run the raffle and to those who donated prizes – Brian & Mary Doyle, George Duff, Úna Kane, Jack McGinley (Umiskin Press), and Finola Young.



Tom Finn leads the crew in 'Billy O'Shea' – note that, at the Organisers' request, we all had to 'drink tea' rather than 'get drunk'

Green Schools Shanties

On Wednesday and Thursday, 29-30 January, Howth Singing Circle singers presented some sea shanties to the Green Schools National Marine Environment Conference in the Marine Hotel, Dún Laghoaire arranged by Chloe Devlin and Caoimhe O'Brien Moran from An Taisce Environmental Education Unit. Each day over 300 National School students from Waterford to Donegal, Mayo to Dublin spent their morning learning about the threats to their environment and what role they and their schools could play in averting disaster.

Plastic free schools and beach cleaning were among the subjects discussed, supported by wonderful project work that was displayed around the hall. Television naturalist Nick Baker was among the

speakers who engaged the students in discussing the world they would grow up into. It was uplifting to witness their informed enthusiasm.

After their lunch, the motley HSC crew had the job of holding their attention as they digested their meal and their thoughts turned to the – in some cases – long bus ride home. Fergus Carey led a verse and response of ‘Blow the Man Down’ as an example of what a shanty was before Tom Finn roused the hall with ‘Billy O’Shea’, the singers providing great drive and purpose. Many students, when given the roving microphone, were only too keen to answer the call.

Tony Fitzpatrick then played an introduction to the ‘Greenland Whale Fishery’ on concertina, the room falling into a hushed, appreciative silence before eagerly taking up the chorus and clapping along in rhythm with the song. The ‘Star Wars Shanty’ proved very popular with verses taken by Helen Lahert, Eddie Phillips and Jack Plunkett, the variety of voices – and especially Helen’s – amusing and enthralling the students in equal measure. A PowerPoint production threw up images of seafarers hauling sails and sheets, tall ships and whalers, as well as the basic words that the students could sing.

For those who gave their time and talents over the two days, the Howth Singing Circle is extremely grateful. Those participating were Fergus Carey, Eileen Clancy, Paddy & Antoinette Daly, Brian & Mary Doyle, Tom Finn, Tony Fitzpatrick, Walter Kennedy, Helen Lahert, Máire Ní Bhaoill, Martina Nic Cearnaigh, Paul O’Mahony, and Jack & Angela Plunkett.

It was a most enjoyable experience for everyone and we thank the Green Schools Project for the opportunity to perform. Caoimhe O’Brien Moran wrote to say, ‘Thank-you all so much for coming, it was a real highlight of the conference and you brought great energy to the post-lunch slump! The shanties came up a lot in our feedback forms as their favourite part of the day’. Caoimhe also provided the two photographs above.

Caoimhe O'Brien Moran, An Taisce's Environmental Education Unit Green-Schools Officer Green-Schools Officer forwarded a video that they had made of the Dún Laoghaire events with a brief reference to the Howth Singing Circle shanty singers that you can access here

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Mt9aIEilxo&feature=youtu.be

A Soul to the Universe

Helen Lahert reflects on singing throughout her life

My mother loved to listen to my sister and I sing. As children we’d be called upon, into the seldom-used sitting room, to sing for visitors, unwilling, bribed by her cream and fruit flan. My mother was a cousin of the Clancy Brothers and when they became famous in the Sixties she was very proud. She joked that she hadn’t been awake when the gift of music and song was handed out.

I saved for a guitar over two years of knitting Aran jumpers under the desk at the back of the class in school, trying to avoid the clicking noises that would alert the teacher. I taught myself five chords from a book, fiddling with my finger picking. I still play by ear. I never had any formal or informal lessons. I was into Dylan and Baez, no Clancy Brothers for me, though privately I loved the raucous choruses of ‘Fine Girl You Are’ and the sweet airs of songs like ‘The Shoals of Herring’. I painstakingly wrote words from LPs into notebooks, playing songs over and over to catch a particularly difficult word or phrase. Some of these I never worked out and they remained as question marks in my songbooks until Google made life simpler many years later. In this way I grew my repertoire with songs from Joni Mitchell, Christy Moore, The Dubliners and Planxty.

I married Philip O'Connor who comes from a large Dublin family of singers and while his heroes, when I met him, were Jimmy Hendrix, Rory Gallagher and Led Zeppelin, Dublin ballads were also hardwired into his DNA. There's a photograph of the two of us singing 'McAlpine's Fusiliers' at our wedding. When our children were young they played fiddle and guitar and sang 'Monto', 'The Button Pusher', 'Dirty Old Town' and other Dubliners' tunes and surprised me in recent years with their memory of these songs learned in childhood.

When we moved from Coolock to Bayside we began to frequent Howth pubs and became particularly attached to the Lighthouse Bar on Church Street and its sessions on a Friday evening and Sunday afternoon. When the Lighthouse closed, just after we moved to Howth, we were devastated. But living in and becoming involved in Howth activities I quickly learned that Howth has a tradition of music and singing, deep in the old families like the Moores and the Rickards. Many, like uilleann piper Leo Rickard came from fishing families who had worked the trawlers out of Howth for generations and also had a deep interest in Irish music. Leo's brother Dave was a member of the St. Lawrence Howth Pipe Band and his brother Kevin is a fine concertina player. With local musicians Snowy and Paul McLoughlin, Collie Moore and Tina McLaughlin, Leo played in a band called Clann Eadair, which Phil Lynnot fronted on the Late Late Show, singing their 'Tribute to Sandy Denny'. When Phil died, Leo piped a final lament at his graveside in St Fintan's Cemetery in Sutton and I can't imagine that there could have been a better way to leave this mortal coil than with the strains of Leo's piping floating in the air. Recently Damien Dempsey told me that his first time to sing in public as a teenager was in the Lighthouse Bar.



A Parting Glass with Tony Fitzpatrick, Kay Nolan, Dave McKane, Helen Lahert, Marina Nic Cearnaigh, Philip O'Connor

By chance I discovered the Howth Singing Circle in the Anglers' Club on the West pier and initially couldn't believe that such events existed, people taking it in turns to sing unaccompanied while others quietly listened. The session had been set up in memory of Brendan 'Bull' Moore who died before his time in 2000. His friends gathered in The Red Herring (previously the Evora Bar and now the gym on Church Street) for a night of songs to remember him. It was from this night that the monthly singing club began in the back room of the Pier House in 2000.

This year Howth Singing Circle celebrates twenty years in existence and we'll remember Bull Moore in whose memory it was founded. An obituary in the Irish Times in November 2000, described Bull as 'a

much-revered figure among the community of Howth, cherished for his decency, his loyalty and his big heart. He loved the sea and he loved to sing about it'. The journalist wrote: 'I first encountered him in the Lighthouse pub many years ago, at one of those cosy traditional music sessions that make Howth unique among the villages of Dublin. Bull had a vast repertoire of songs about seafaring and the joys and hardships of the sailor's life. He had only to sit down at a music session for the event to catch fire'.

As always, Howth Singing Circle's main programme of events for the year starts with the annual Burns Nicht in the Abbey Tavern in January, when the audience stands, while Noel Kelly, Pipe Major of the award winning Howth St Lawrence Pipe Band, leads the band to pipe in the Haggis, carried on a silver platter in true Scottish style and Howth welcomes some of the best of Scottish traditional musicians and singers.

I went to the Howth Singing Circle three times, happily listening to people like Willie O'Connor singing 'Goodbye Old Ship of Mine', before Larry O'Toole, who knew me from Coolock days, called on me to sing. Now, nearly fifteen years later, singing unaccompanied is part of my life and I'm linked with a network of singers who are retrieving and learning songs that might otherwise have been lost and writing new ones. These songs range from lullabies to stories of evictions, deportations and emigration, songs of fishing and disasters, rebel songs of valour and songs of love and loss. In returning to singing I've been able to re-learn the songs of my childhood, which were buried but still recoverable from my brain, and I've learned new songs from wonderful teachers like Fionnuala Maxwell from Drumsna in Leitrim who is working with children there to retrieve and learn the old songs of their county.

Howth is a rare and unique place where the traditions of music and song survive and thrive and so it is a place that, as Plato wrote, 'gives a soul to the universe'. Travelling the country, I'm reminded that many towns and villages, which have more of a reputation as music destinations and standard bearers of the tradition, have nothing like the range of music and song that we have here. We're spoilt with a choice of places to listen, sing and play. We are blessed with a beautiful place to live, where we can wander miles of open pathways, through acres of protected forest, meadows, heathlands and cliffs, but we are doubly blessed that this place carries on a tradition of music and song that goes back deep to the core of the fishing communities of old and continues to provide an open, safe space for young emerging talent to practice their craft.

Máire Ní Choilm - Amhránaí Iontach

Cúis áthais agus bróid do Chiorcal Ceoil Bheann Éadair, Máire Ní Choilm a bheith linn mar aoi speisialta ag an Oíche Gaelach ar an 6ú Feabhra. Ceoltóir sean-nós den scoith atá i Máire agus a lán comórtais agus gradaim faighte aici le blianta anuas, Corn Uí Riada ina measc. Tá stór agus réimse suntasach amhráin ina seilbh a roinn Máire go fial flaithiúil leis an lucht éisteachta ar an oíche. Bhain iomlán a bhí i lathair sult as a cuid ceoil agus a comhlúadar agus guímid gach rath agus ádh uirthi ins na blianta amach romhainn.

On 6 February 2020, Ciorcal Ceoil Bheann Éadair held its annual Oíche Gaelach session in the Abbey Tavern. The Oíche Gaelach is an eagerly anticipated date in HSC's calendar for many and this year's session was well-attended with Daire Ó Baoill (Fear an Tí) and Ann Riordan (Bean an Tí) ably hosting a memorable night of songs, stories and recitations. Aoi Speisialta on the night was none other than the acclaimed sean-nós singer, Máire Ní Choilm from Mín an Iolair, Doirí Beaga, Dún na nGall. Máire has won many sean-nós singing competitions with the most recent being the prestigious Corn Uí Riada at Oireachtas na Samhna in 2019.

Máire's style of singing was very much influenced by singers from Gweedore and Tory island and during her visit to Howth, she treated us to a beautiful repertoire of ballads and songs ranging from haunting laments such as 'An Chéad Mháirt d'Fhómhar' to the more upbeat and lively verses of 'Amhrán na Scadán' – amhrán náisiúnta ag muintir Thoraí!



Máire Ní Choilm with our host for the night Daire Ó Baoill and Ann Riordan and Máire winning Corn Uí Riada

Throughout the night there was a fantastic selection of songs from the floor – many of which included catchy choruses which had the whole room singing in unison. We sampled songs in every dialect of Gaeilge and Máire commended the efforts of all who performed. In true character, Máire intimately engaged with the audience in both Gaeilge and English throughout the night and between songs. This added to the wonderful atmosphere in the room which made the night particularly memorable. Ag súil go mór leis an chéad oíche eile.

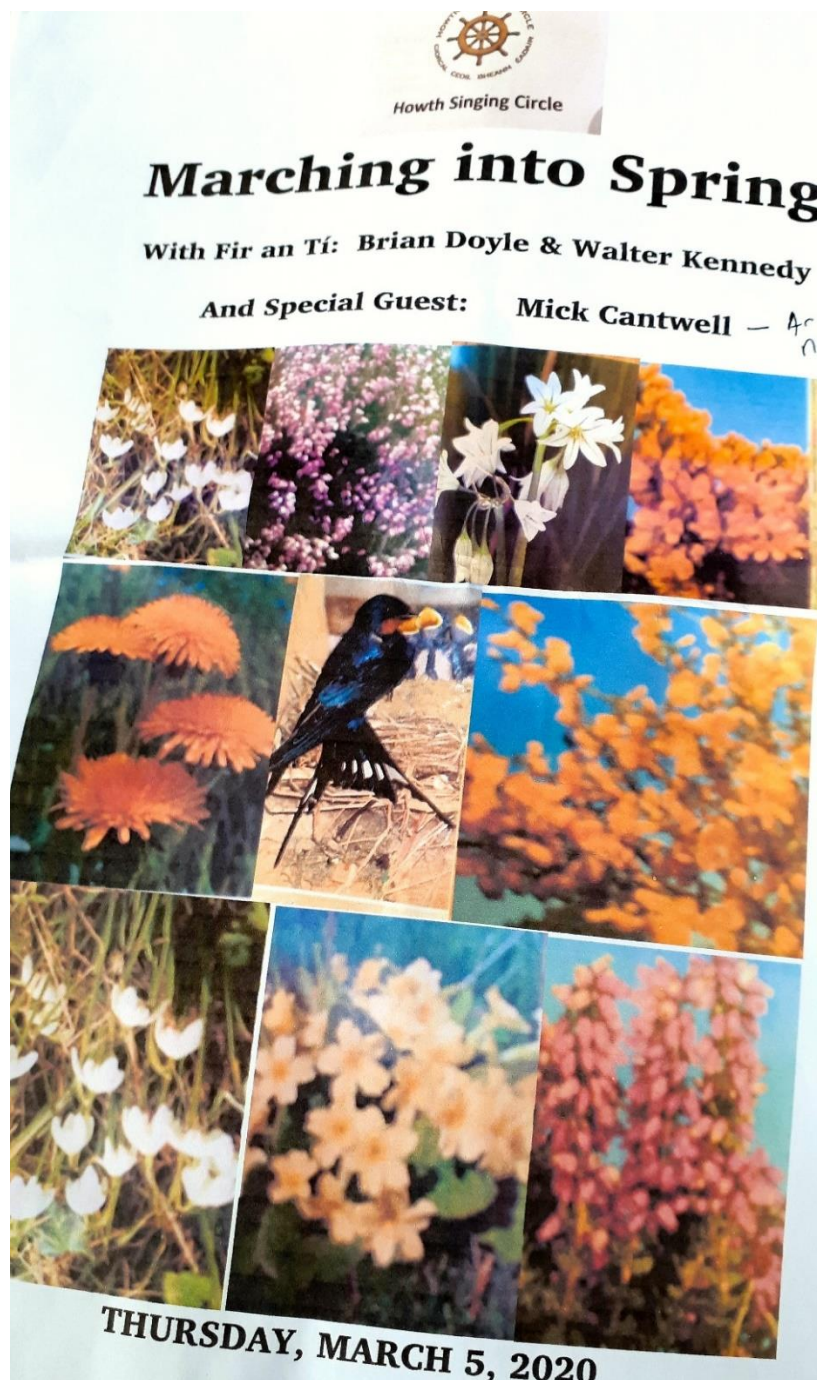
Daire Ó Baoill

Marching Into Spring

In March, in what turned out to be our last hurrah session before lockdown, we were just enough aware of Corona Virus to desist from holding hands singing 'The Parting Glass' at the end of the session, but we were a bit skittish about it and we still didn't have any concept about the world lockdown that would follow.

It was a small intimate session ably hosted by Brian Doyle and Walter Kennedy, but that just added to the atmosphere and fun. The weather was miserable enough to put off the fainthearted but those who came had no regrets. The special guest was Mick Cantwell, who regaled us with songs like 'Whiskey on a Sunday' and sweet melodeon tunes like 'The Marino Waltz' and 'Mo Ghile Mear'.

The song sheet was a blaze of spring colour and the content reminded everyone that 'Marching into Spring' included the nesting of birds and the bursting of flower-buds but also marching to independence and freedom. We had thirty-two songs during the night, many people taking to the great song-sheet for inspiration.



Larry O'Toole sang 'Down by the Glenside'; Fergus Carey gave us 'Gráinne Mhaol' and Seán Ó Cinné'de 'The Gaol of Cluain Meala'. We welcomed Mary Murphy back after a long illness and she gave us a beautiful rendition of 'My Home at the Foot of Slieve Bloom'. Tom Finn sang Wordsworth's well-loved 'Daffodils' having added the tune himself; Eddie Phillips gathered 'Tulips from Amsterdam'; Laurence Bond cheered us with 'In the Town of Ballybay'; and Antoinette Daly roamed 'The Green Glens of Antrim'. Úna Kane marched along with 'The Minstrel Boy'; Máiride Woods wandered by 'The Lakes of Pontchartrain' agus chan Liam Ó Droma sheinn mé an t-amhrán céanna i nGaeilge. Walter Kennedy plucked 'When Yellow's on the Broom' and Brian Doyle conducted 'McNamara's Band'. We even had a rousing chorus of 'A Nation Once Again', but, and this requires a pause, we also had the privilege of listening to a melodious rendition of 'Katie Daly' from Paddy Daly himself.

Helen Lahert

The Given Note/ Port na bPúcaí - 'Myths, Musings and Musicians'

At a relaxed singing session in the Abbey Tavern after dinner, which followed the final Singathon for the Hospice that afternoon, Ann Riordan recited 'The Given Note' a poem by the late Séamus Heaney. The poem itself is based on his understanding of the traditional tune 'Port na bPúcaí', also known as 'The Tune of the Fairies', 'Lament of the Inis' or the 'Pooka's Tune'. Ann's fine reading of the poem set me to rights on the background to the poem/tune, with what I had to hand in recordings and documentary form, and any other gleanings.

Séamus Heaney reads the poem on the wonderful recording he did not so long ago with Liam Óg O'Flynn, with the title *The Poet and the Piper* (Claddagh Records- CCT21CD). Heaney recites it in his own, deep-throated, inimitable style and is followed by Liam Óg playing the tune. The poem was originally published in *Door into the Dark*, (Faber, London, 1972).

Origin of the Tune

The stories, or should I say interpretations, of what happened when the tune came about and was composed, are many and various.

The man who composed it was living on the Great Blasket Island and the main thread of the story is that he went to the sister island Innisvickillane (Inis Mhic Aoibhleáin). He had sheep there and because a storm came up, he had to spend the night in a shelter used for the sheep, and then came back with the tune to the main Island. He maintained he had heard the wailing of hump-backed whales during the night and turned it into a tune – 'For he had gone alone into the Island / And brought back the whole thing'.

On the CD *Beauty an Oileain - Music and Song of the Blasket Islands* (Claddagh Records, CC56Cd), produced with transcriptions by Ríonach Uí Ógáin's produced and Ríonach Uí Ógáin and musical notes by the fiddle player Máire Ní Chaoimh, islander Seán Cheaist Ó Catháin says

'There were people from the Great Blasket who were living in Inis Mhic Uibhleain eighty years ago, herdsmen looking after stock for a landlord who lived in Dingle. One winter's night they were in bed asleep and the old woman heard the sound first, of birds she thought, and woke the old man beside her .. and listened to the sound for a long time .. and remembered it .. and it has been on the Blasket ever since, 'The Fairies Lament'.'

Uí Ógáin recorded that it was said that it was first heard by members of the Ó Dálaigh or Ó Guithín families. But there are oral accounts in which it is said the music was first heard in the form of a song. Seán Cheaist said

'A woman called Neans Ní Dhálaigh was on Inis with others and they left in two boats. Herself and another man stayed and as she sat on a stone she heard the song, then twice, and the third time with a voice; then the voice disappeared. The man heard it again and was fearful, she asked had he heard it and both agreed. Others were there but did not hear any voice, the group returned and Neans was singing it on the boat going home. The others were afraid when they heard it; the song of the Fairies is still heard on the Great Blasket.'

Ciarán Mac Mathúna collected some of the words from Tomás O Dálaigh:

'I am a fairy woman who has come across the sea
And I was taken away during the night to spend some time abroad,
And I am in this kingdom by the grace of a fairy woman,
And I will be on this earth until the cock crows'

According to oral tradition it is magical or fairy music which was heard by the people of the Inis in the nineteenth century. The tune was not known outside the Blaskets till the 1930s.

By-the-by, the 'given note' as understood is looked down on, frowned upon in the strictest sense of pure traditional sound. For example, an accordion player will play a given note as his instrument provides it, whereas a flute or tin whistle player has to 'make' the notes, as they use a wind instrument, and a fiddler has to create the sound through his fingers and the use of the bow combined. Some years ago there was a round table discussion on this subject during an afternoon in the Willie Clancy week in Miltown Malbay. It was roundly agreed that the above instruments were the 'true' pieces of Irish Traditional music, along with the Uilleann pipes. But Séamus Heaney in a very subtle way was probably very aware of this, and used the title of the poem to convey that the man had been 'given' the piece, by the fairies or whatever other source, indeed 'sound', he heard that night rather than being the composer himself.



Colm Keating catches a very happy Mick Fowler on Burns Night

Musicians and Versions of the Tune

I first heard Tony MacMahon playing the tune and, frankly, was mesmerised by it. Having listened to literally hundreds of tunes and recordings of Traditional Irish music, I had never heard anything quite like this. It had a strange quality to it, impossible to categorise yet clearly a traditionally structured piece. Hearing again Liam Óg O'Flynn playing the tune, is marked by the sadness of his premature parting from us. But let us just enjoy his beautiful, warm piping style on the above recording.

The most fascinating version to hand, though, is by the Blasket Islander Seán Cheaist Ó Catháin. Firstly, as against the previous two musicians, he is playing the instrument it was composed on – the fiddle. Secondly, as I said he comes from the Island and so one senses this is the dúchas, the folklore, the 'genuine article' of the piece, the whole of it passed on through generations to this man. The finishing note is the most stunning moment of all these recordings, as he draws out the bow and lets it slowly fade quietly into the distance.

Legacy

The Blasket Islands and their legacy of literature, folklore and music handed down for centuries, and finally recorded in the twentieth century is to me but an indication, a glimpse of a cultured noble past, the remnants of a sadly all-but-disappeared civilisation. The word civilisation springs to mind the

comment of Sir Kenneth Clarke in the opening episode of ‘Civilisation’, the ground-breaking BBC series on western art and literature. In this sequence he refers to Ireland and in particular to a neighbouring island of the Blaskets, namely Sceilg Mhicíl thus, ‘Western civilisation survived (the barbarians) by clinging on to places like Skellig Michael ...’. I have always been conscious of how noble our past was, and of course wouldn't it have been grand if we had never seen a Dane, a Norman, a Saxon ship coming over the horizon to conquer us! But, that's history.

Thanks, Ann, for sparking this journey of memory.

Mick Fowler

Blasket Islands literature includes. Tomás Ó Crohan, *An tOileánach/The Islandman*; Muiris Ó Súilleabháin, *Fiche Bliain ag Fás/Twenty Years A-Growing*; Peig Sayers, *Peig, A Scéal Féin/My Story*; and the RTÉ recording, produced by Cathal Porteir, *Blasket Island Reflections*, and the works of George Thomson and Robin Flower- who collected folklore the Blaskets.

Séamus Heaney – ‘The Given Note’

Having read Mick Fowler's fascinating memories stirred by Ann Riordan's reading of Heaney's poem ‘The Given Note’, here it is.

On the most westerly Blasket
In a dry-stone hut
He got this air out of the night.
Strange noises were heard
By others who followed, bits of a tune
Coming in on loud weather
Though nothing like melody.
He blamed their fingers and ear
As unpractised, their fiddling easy
For he had gone alone into the island
And brought back the whole thing.
The house throbbed like his full violin.
So whether he calls it spirit music
Or not, I don't care. He took it
Out of wind off mid-Atlantic.
Still he maintains, from nowhere.

It comes off the bow gravely,
Rephrases itself into the air.



Ann Riordan with Laurence Bond

Nic Jones, Penguin Eggs & Memories of Carbery's

Carbery's in Drogheda has been a huge influence on my hearing and learning of songs. I regularly travelled up on Sunday mornings where musicians and singers included Seán Corcoran and Desi Wilkinson (flute); Liz & Jim McArdle; Tom Sullivan (or O'Sullivan on accordion) and Wally Murphy; Gerry Cullen, Fran McPhail and the late Brian Leahy whose close harmonies were a special treat; and many more. For those of us who were regularly crammed into Carbery's, the day forty years or so ago that Nic Jones turned up will live with us forever. Pubs in those days closed between two and four on a Sunday. At about ten to two and with no room for any extra sardines in the tin – with the unspoken rule that it was now only tunes to end the session – Caitlín Bean Uí Cairbre, the bar's redoubtable owner, squeezed through the two, inner swing doors and insisted that space be made for a tall, dark chap that nobody knew. Worse, she forced someone to surrender their guitar so this newcomer could sing a song. It was her pub and so, despite the annoyance, folk complied. Precious time was being lost as this stranger managed to work himself into a seat and then tuned up. A general unease swept around the place, the collective fears realised when he started and was not very good. Before his last

note died, the session picked up more frantically than ever and as he awkwardly extracted himself from the sacred musicians' corner there as a general muttering of 'who's yer feckin man?'

It was to get worse – or so we thought – when at about ten past two, Caitlín fetched him again, this time with his own instrument. She insisted that he was shoehorned into the corner, regulars having to stand to make enough room for him. This time he made no delay and wow! The voice, the guitar playing, the brilliance of song choice and arrangement: all were superb. It was the first time I – and I think everybody in the pub – had ever heard of Nic Jones who the late Finbar Boyle had brought along. The rest of that afternoon has, appropriately, become folklore. Needless to say, the pub never shut, doors were closed but the session went on, the standard climbing as the resident musicians responded to the artistry being displayed by a man who was already 'our guest'. Everyone sensed that they were experiencing something unique, something destined to be a lifetime's memory. My eldest two kids – Caoimhe and Fiachra, then five, six or seven – and indeed everyone else's children – and there were a gansaí load of youngsters – seemed to cotton on to the rarity of the occasion. They became less demanding, peered in at the adult throng in spellbound awe of the guy in the corner.



Nic Jones and the brilliant Penguin Eggs; Gerry Cullen entrances an audience in Carbery's today

This was not long before Jones was involved in a serious road accident in February 1982 when he was struck by a lorry pulling out of Whittlesea Brickworks on the road between Peterborough – where I lived as a child – and March in Cambridgeshire where he then lived. The accident left him seriously injured and effectively ended his career. In August 2010, he gloriously reappeared at Sidmouth Folk Week, a veritable triumph over massive adversities. In 2012, he performed solo gigs and on 22 September was awarded the English Folk Dance & Song Society Gold Badge as a special concert in London's Cecil Sharp House. On 30 January 2013, he was named BBC Folk Singer of the Year.

The LP – as it was then, now a CD and download – that crystallised Jones's talent and whose contents he effectively played that afternoon in Carbery's, was the iconic *Penguin Eggs*. The song that captured many was 'Penguin Eggs', a song most often heard in Dublin sung by Frank Nugent, mountaineer and adventurer who actually sang it the hut on South Georgia the song was written about. On Shetland in the summer of 2016, near Sandness, we stopped for a cup of tea and homemade bun in a local Community Hall one afternoon. I was earwiggling two men at the next table without being able to comprehend their accent and dialect. The elder of the two men asked, 'Whaur are ye frae?' He offered his hand as I said 'Ireland' and I felt a life of toil and experience. It turns out that he crofted and fished, sailed deep sea and was a whaler. The younger man was from Out Skerries and was crofter, fisherman, mariner, deep sea diver, shipwright and oil painter. He had also served on whaling ships, a past that neither man was proud of. Their berths had taken them to South Georgia, Leith Harbour and the little hut. He had never heard the song and I asked would he like to hear it? As I sang, I could feel the intensity and, as it finished and the eyes opened, both men were tearful and the elder man gave me

a strong, lingering handshake. I wrote down Jones's name and found a recording on my phone which I forwarded to him so he could hear the song well sung.

Jones had great impact on me but such was his majesty that I rarely attempt to sing any of the material he recorded. It is well to ken your limitations! If I had a favourite, it would be 'Courting is a Pleasure' which you can access here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrsYZwfx9dA> Listening to it as I write, it reinforces my decision to keep a respectful vocal distance and leave it to the master. It also brings echoes of wonderful tunes, songs and friendships from Carbery's and memories of Caitlín, who encouraged me to sing.

Francy Devine

Jones discography includes solo albums - *Ballads & Songs* (1970), *Nic Jones* (1971), *The Noah's Ark Trap* (1977), *From the Devil to a Stranger* (1978), and *Penguin Eggs* (1980); and re-mastered live albums - *In Search of Nic Jones* (1998), *Unearthed* (2001), and *Game Set Match* (2006) .

A Lifting of Spirits

**a review of Francy Devine with Steve Byrne & Friends, *An Ownerless Corner of Earth*
available at <https://francydevine.bandcamp.com/album/an-ownerless-corner-of-earth>**

An Ownerless Corner of the Earth is the second offering from Howth-based singer Francy Devine. His first was the much praised *My Father Told Me* released in 2014. This latest set might be seen by some as somewhat ambitious, with two CDs containing twenty-six tracks. While the project might indeed have been an ambitious one, for the listener it represents an act of generosity. Others might have kept half the tracks in the can for a third quality release. But not this singer. In one go he has given us a wonderful tapestry of song and verse.

Francis Devine is remarkable in so many ways. He is not only a fine singer but also a songwriter, a published poet, an author, an immensely knowledgeable observer of the natural world (take a look at his Facebook page), an educator, campaigner for the rights of his fellow humans, and a labour activist both in terms of organising and knowledge. All of these qualities should be acknowledged because they infuse the tracks with meaning on this wonderful collection.

In the superb booklet that accompanies the CDs, of which more later, Devine says that there is no obvious theme. But I think there is, and it would be a deep sense of humanity throughout. From Jim Connell's 'socialist bones' of the opening track (the first of three pieces, the others being 'My Nellie' and 'The Miners' Song', by the composer of 'The Red Flag'), whose first line gives the album its title; to the uplifting and rousing 'Sae Will We Yet' which ends the collection with words by the nineteenth century weaver Walter Watson. In these difficult times which we all share, the playing on that track alone is guaranteed to lift the spirits.

But the collection is more than a gathering of memorable songs and poems, though they are certainly that. They are a journey through the rich heritage of our islands and the voices of its peoples; and, one might also suggest, a glimpse into the world of the performer himself. He is a man who knows our islands well through birth, upbringing, education, place and exploration. Someone also with a love of football and especially Finn Harps. This is reflected in the collection by Peter Goulding's poem, which Francy has set to music. Called 'The Ballad of Brendan Bradley', it tells of the legendary goal scorer from Donegal's Premier Division. This typifies much of what he so often sings and writes about, the lesser known and sometimes overlooked people who in their different ways made a difference to the lives of others, including our own.

The collection is also richly packaged. From the beautifully designed casing, fronted by Steve Rennie's ghost-like photographic image of a Mountain Hare, to the booklet of notes and sources. The lyrics of each song can be found on the Bandcamp website at <https://francydevine.bandcamp.com/album/an-ownerless-corner-of-earth>. They are worth looking up. The booklet itself is a treasure trove, a virtual tutorial that reflects the educator in the singer and draws the reader into wanting to know more. It brings to life wordsmiths and communities from the far reaches of the islands. What they reveal are tales of love, struggle and sometimes anger. As the singer says in his notes, they also evoke memories.



Colm Keating captured some of the talented musicians at the launch of An Ownerless Corner of Earth: Daoiri Farrell who performed the launch with Dave McCracken (Northumberland), Mark Dunlop (Balymoney/Fife) and Steve Byrne looking on; bagpiper Noel Kelly with the night's Fear an Tí Laurence Bond behind; Liam O'Connor, Steve Byrne and Graham Dunne

Each track is sensitively performed, supported and enhanced by a group of friends who add sympathetic instrumentation and subtle vocal accompaniment. Give a particular listen to the fine ensemble renderings on a stirring 'The Labour League' and 'The Miners' Song'. While too many to list in this review, though mention should be made of Graham Dunne's delicate guitar support on several tracks, it would be remiss not highlight the presence of the singer's two longstanding collaborators: master fiddler Paul Anderson and multi-instrumentalist and arranger Steve Byrne. And it was once again the latter who produced and helped in the arrangements of the collection.

In a collection of such range and beauty there is sadly insufficient space in this review to assess each performance. I leave the listener with some pleasurable work to do. I will give focus instead on some of the tracks where the singer has made a particular input to their composition or arrangement. Listen for instance to Francy's reading of his own poem 'Gazing at Lochnagar' in which he invokes the beautiful Scottish air, 'Niel Gow's Lament for the Death of His Second Wife'. 'Through shut eyes', the poet says, 'I saw everything', at which point Paul Anderson's fiddle enters quietly to play the lament and carry us away. Then there is Liam O'Connor's viola and fiddle which give such meaning to Francy's poem of memory and friendship, 'When Abdul Moneim Khalifa Met Darach Ó Catháin'. Lastly,

Aoife and John Kelly add a subtle but emotional edge on concertina and fiddle to the reading of ‘Scattery Island’, a poem of remembrances, both personal and political.

The control and sensitivity that Francy Devine brings to his own voice are exemplified in the largely unaccompanied songs of rare quality, including the aforementioned ‘Brendan Bradley’. But at the beginning of the collection is the Ulster hunting song where the hare reappears, ‘On Yonder Hill.’ While it is about a further hill that Francy gives another powerful lone voice performance recalling Daniel O’Connell’s massed meetings demanding Catholic Emancipation, the largest of which was ‘The Tara Monster Meeting’. Included as well is the evocative ‘Where Oh Where Is Our James Connolly?’ which I witnessed Francy singing in 2018 in front of the Connolly Memorial Statue, opposite Liberty Hall in Dublin, when he was accompanied, as here, by Noel Kelly on the Highland Pipes. Is there a more heartfelt and moving remembrance of Connolly than here?



Colm Keating catches the essence of the CD – the comradeship between Francy Devine and Steve Byrne, while Mícheál Mac Donncha shows Shona Donaldson and Paul Anderson in full flight with Caoimhe Hogarty, Daoiri Farrell and Catriona looking on

There is a special treat in the duet with Dave McCracken, accompanied by Andrew Watchorn on Northumbrian pipes, on the late Terry Conway’s moving composition of parting and friendship, ‘Fare Thee Weel Regality’. The group adds a new dimension to a song widely performed by the Northumbrian sister duo, The Unthanks, and others. While on the tender ‘The Banks of Inverurie’ there is another subtle duet, this time with Shona Donaldson.

But it is to Francy Devine’s own compositional skills that I will finish. In the collection they can be found early on with his tender song of love and loss, ‘Dark and Slender Boy’, whose death causes his love to leave Ireland where ‘From Derry quay she sailed away ... to seek my life’s sad fortune’ while ‘no man more shall know me.’ Yet for me perhaps there is one song that draws the collection together. It is Francy’s own composition ‘Magaidh Ruaidh’, to which he added music drawing on Kathleen MacInnes’s beautiful Gaelic rendering, ‘Ceud Failt Air Gach Gleann’, which must also be heard. Francy’s song is perfectly augmented by Steve Byrne on guitar and harmonium and movingly by Fin Moore on pipes. It is a song of loss and evocation, the memories the singer talks of in his notes. It might easily be sung across our islands whenever people have left home for what they hope will be a better life. Its sentiments are universal whether for the migrant or refugee. It sums up that sense of humanity which I spoke about at the beginning.

But there is so much more in the collection which must surely be widely listened to. There is another homage to the influential Ewan MacColl in ‘The Shellback’, Eddie Butcher’s unique ‘Alexander’, fresh insights into standards such as ‘The Lowlands o Holland’ and ‘Tramps and Hawkers’; and others besides. In these times of some isolation, and not a little fear, the whole collection can be guaranteed to help lift the spirits of the listener.

Mike Mecham (London)

The Good Old Days

Many fondly look back to the 'good old days' when the Howth Singing Circle began in the Pier House, now O'Connell's. Sessions were packed, lively and great fun, although most forget the pall of smoke that gripped the back of your throat and stank your clothes! A friend once came out from Dublin 'to see what this new singing session was all about'. When asked what he had made of it, he replied, 'I came home with everyone else's fleas'. It was a complement to the packed, welcoming company. Paddy Daly recorded many of the nights on his camera and here are a few of his pictorial memories. Sadly, some of those featured have passed away while others no longer come to the club. It underlines what a great turnover there has been in the twenty years since we started. It would be lovely to see those who no longer come to visit us again as we celebrate.



Here are some great stalwarts of the club, left, Jack & Nan Barron who always brought sunshine; and Anne Buckley & Andrew Clarke, behind them Eugene McEldowney, Antoinette Daly, Vera & Dave Rickard and Charlie Costello



Left, Niamh Parsons with behind her Jerry O'Reilly, Declan Fay, Graham Dunne and Doreen Gallagher; Right, Vera Rickard brings in a cake for Nan & Jack Barron with Liam Ó Droma, Alison O'Donnell, Tom Crean, Doreen Gallagher and front right Janet McCormack looking on

Buíochas Mór

As ever, *The Sweet Nightingale*, as with all HSC activities, does not just appear and we are grateful to the following: Richard Tobin, Allison O'Rourke and staff of the Abbey Tavern; Mick Fowler; Christy Hammond of CRM Design & Print for various print jobs; Colm Keating, photographs; Mícheál Mac Donncha, photographs; Mike Mecham; Finola Young for many supports; and your Committee – Laurence Bond, Paddy Daly, Brian Doyle, Helen Lahert, Daire Ó Baoill, Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh, Gerry O'Connor, Niamh Parsons and Ann Riordan.



*Above: the ever smiling Stiofán Ó hAoláin with plenty of reason to smile; the late and sorely missed Joan Harmon, a beautiful singer and beautiful woman; the dedoubtable Paddy D, Saoi
Below: Tony McGaley in the Botanical Gardens; Robert Kelly's skilfully crafted wheel; and where it all started for Lankum, Lynched as they were then, at the Howth Singing Circle Dinner Dance!*



Photos on Front Page

Those we can identify in the left-hand picture are,
 top row, l-r, Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh and Colly Moore presenting Song Sheets to Nicholas Carolan, Irish Traditional Music Archive, Andrew Clarke, unknown, Luke Cheevers
 Second row, l-r, Jerry O'Reilly, unknown, Tom Crean, Pat Lynch, Clíodhna Ní Shúilleabháin
 Third row, l-r, Máirín & Jimmy Kelly; Niamh Parsons, unknown, unknown
 Fourth row, l-r, Gus Ahearn; Nan & Jack Barron, Diarmuid Ó Cathasaigh; Ann Riordan
 Fifth row, l-r, Francy Devine, Thomas Westen, Seán Óg McKenna & Eugene McElDowney; Cian & Séamus Ó Súilleabháin
 Bottom row, l-r, Máirtín Dempsey, Siobhán Moore, Jimmy Smith, Dave Rickard & Tina McLoughlin

And the other picture,
 Gus & Betty Ahearn, two unknown, Siobhán Moore, Janet McCormack, two unknown, Vera Rickard

**A long, long road now winds before me
 And fate may take me where it will
 Through deep valleys and over mountains
 I'll not forget, I'll remember you still**

**So here's to you and our time together
 I'll share with you now a parting glass
 And bid adieu with a smile and laughter
 Our time apart will be short and pass**