

**A City Out of Old Songs:**  
**The influence of ballads, hymns and children's songs on**  
**an Irish writer and broadcaster**

**Catherine Ann Cullen**

Context Statement for PhD by Public Works

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## **Public Works Presented as Part 1 of this PhD:**

### **Poetry Collections:**

*A Bone in My Throat* (Doghouse, Tralee, 2007), excluding the first section, Taboo, which comprises 25 sonnets and two short 'bookending' poems. This section was written for my M. Phil in Creative Writing at Trinity College Dublin, and is therefore precluded from being considered for this PhD by Public Works.

*Strange Familiar* (Doghouse, Tralee, 2013)

### **Children's Books:**

*The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* (Little, Brown, Boston, 2001)

*Thirsty Baby* (Little, Brown, Boston, 2003)

### **Short Stories for Children:**

"Sea Change" (*Fiction Fifteen*, RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 2004)\*

"Golden Feathers" (in *Stories for Jamie* ed. John Scally, Blackwater Press, Dublin, 2002)

### **Three sample radio essays:**

"May Morning Songs" (*Sunday Miscellany*, RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 2015)\*

"One Hand Clapping" (*Sunday Miscellany*, RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 2003)\*

"Happy Birthday, Mr Cohen" (*Sunday Miscellany*, RTÉ Radio 1, Dublin, 2004)\*

\*These four items, which were written for and broadcast on radio, are included both in printed form and in audio form in the Public Works accompanying this Context Statement

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To my mother, Mary Cullen née Roche, for being a patron of her daughter's arts, as always, and for unearthing a folder of my father's music.

To my brother John and his wife Fiona, for dinner, bed and breakfast in St Alban's whenever I came to Middlesex University.

To my uncle Gerry Cullen, for his wonderful singing, and for passing on family stories and songs.

To my daughter Stella, for enduring many days when I was busy. I hope you have time for me now.

And to my beloved brown-eyed handsome man, Harry Browne, for sustaining me, for his help with the thesis and for shouldering my share of parenting, especially over the summer, despite his own PhD deadline. 'I know where I'm going, And I know who's coming with me.'

## **Preface: Come, Gather Round**

This PhD by Public Works consists of two parts:

Part I comprises my four published books (two poetry collections and two children's books), a short story for children published in an anthology, and a selection of writings for radio, including a commissioned short story for children and three radio essays. These last four broadcast items serve as a small sample of my work in radio over 25 years.

Part II (of which this is the preface) provides a 30,000-word exegesis, placing the works in the context of their aural influences in the form of ballads, songs, hymns and children's songs in both English and Irish. This Context Statement shows how my works have made an original artistic contribution, and itself adds to the body of literary knowledge by interrogating how the 'songscape' of childhood and early adulthood have been assimilated into one writer's work across many genres and forms.

The Context Statement takes its title (*A City Out of Old Songs*) from my poem "In Memory of Frank Harte"<sup>1</sup>. Harte, a Dublin singer and song-collector, and an architect by profession, is the single most important influence on my work outside of family. A neighbour and a memorable figure of my childhood, he was also a mentor to me in adulthood, supplying me with material about the Dublin street singer Zozimus, for example, for a training documentary I made as a fledgling producer in RTÉ Radio. He knew I was interested in the songs he sang and wrote about, and we had fascinating conversations that occasionally led to items in the radio programmes on which I worked. The small paperback book of Dublin songs he edited<sup>2</sup> is one of my most beloved volumes, and is usually to be found in my pocket or handbag, as its cracked spine and grubby pages attest.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, *A Bone in My Throat* (Tralee: Doghouse, 2007), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Harte, ed., *Songs of Dublin*, 2nd ed. (Cork: Ossian, 1993).

This short preface takes its name from “The Ballad of Síle na Gig”<sup>3</sup>, my irreverent poem in the voice of the fertility figures found on old church walls all over Ireland. The traditional ballad opening is just one instance of the way I have always incorporated aural influences into my writing. “Song of Eve”, the first poem of my first poetry collection, *A Bone in My Throat*, finds Eve in Eden experiencing the apple as a heard phenomenon, calling to her in a voice she is compelled to follow.

This preface defines the word ‘ballad’, and briefly explains exclusions from the Context Statement, the use of Irish language elements within the Statement, and the indexing system used for named ballads. Chapter 1 will provide more background to the Context Statement and summarise the aural influences on the works considered.

### **Ballad: a definition**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines **Ballad** as ‘A poem or song narrating a story in short stanzas. Traditional ballads are typically of unknown authorship, having been passed on orally from one generation to the next.’ I have used many such ‘traditional’ ballads in this exegesis, but I have also used more modern songs written in the ballad style by known authors from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

### **Exclusions from the Public Works**

The first part of my first poetry collection<sup>4</sup>, a series of 25 sonnets based on the forbidden in myths and stories under the title *Taboo*, is excluded from consideration for the purposes of this PhD as it was part of the portfolio produced for my M. Phil. in Creative Writing at Trinity College Dublin in 2001. Consequently, I have not done an in-depth study of those poems here. However, I have occasionally mentioned the series, or used a phrase from or about it, in a way that does not duplicate anything written for my M. Phil. thesis.

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, *Strange Familiar* (Tralee: Doghouse, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Cullen, *A Bone in My Throat*.

My two published poetry collections contain a total of about 100 poems between them. It would be impossible in the short length of this Context Statement to interrogate all or indeed many of these poems to any satisfactory level, while also looking at my children's books and a selection of writings for radio. I have chosen instead to pay close attention to a smaller selection of poems in each collection, thus allowing me to give a much fuller analysis of their ballad influences. This sample of poems exemplifies the influence of aurality across the two collections.

### **The original PhD proposal and how it changed**

The original proposal for my PhD by Public Works envisaged an examination of a selection of my published and broadcast works in the context of two influences, oral folklore and ballads. These were bracketed with the term 'aurality'.

I had done some initial research on both folklore and ballads, and decided to start with the ballad strand. I began by critically examining my first children's book<sup>5</sup>, and found such a rich seam to be mined there that, after 3,000 words, I realised that it would be a challenge to stick to the suggested limit of 30,000 words for the Context Statement if I were to follow the original brief. I decided that the Context Statement would benefit from being confined to ballad influences alone.

I believe the change has benefitted my work in two ways: sharpening the focus has given me a clearer path through my work, and concentrating on ballad influences has given me a more unusual theme. Folklore has been a clear and documented inspiration for many writers, but ballads have been evoked as an influence more rarely, and afforded me the opportunity for more original research.

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* (Cambridge, MA: Little, Brown, 2001).



## Referencing the ballads

I have used two main standards for indexing ballads, the Child and Roud systems. There are several other referencing systems, such as the Laws index derived from G. Malcolm Laws, Jr, an American collector in the 1950s and 60s. However, my experience with traditional singers, for example in the Góilín singing club in Dublin, suggests that they favour Child and Roud, and often give these numbers as part of their short introductions to singing the songs.

Francis Child collected 305 unique ballads from England and Scotland between 1882 and 1898. Child differentiated variants of the same song by placing a letter after the number i.e. 302A, 302B etc. I have in all cases given just the number itself, as the versions of the songs I know do not always coincide exactly with any of the Child versions<sup>6</sup>.

The Roud system is a work-in-progress that combines two recent indexes compiled by folklorist, librarian and author Steve Roud, the *Folk Song Index* and the *Broadside Index*. The *Folk Song Index* aims to provide details of English-language traditional songs which have been recorded across all media: in books, journals, newspapers and manuscripts, as well as in published or unpublished sound recordings, videos, and websites. The *Broadside Index* references songs published in the form of broadsides, chapbooks, and cheap songbooks from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to 1920<sup>7</sup>.

To avoid confusion between song references and the normal author-date-page references, I have put Child and Roud numbers in square brackets in the text. For example, the song “The Two Sisters” is referenced [Child 10, Roud 8] and “The Croppy Boy” is referenced [Roud 1030].

Appendix 1 provides an index of all the songs mentioned in this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> The Child index can be found online here:  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/child/>

<sup>7</sup> The Roud system can be found online at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library here:  
<http://www.vwml.org/search/search-roud-indexes>.

## **Irish language songs and rhymes**

I refer to a small number of Irish language songs from my childhood in the Context Statement, and in each case I provide a rough translation (my own, unless otherwise stated). I also occasionally use words in Irish, again with a translation.

## **Personal notebooks used in the Context Statement**

As I embarked on this study, my mother made a serendipitous find. She presented me with a folder with a handwritten label that said, 'Music and stuff'. The folder contained a dark-blue science notebook I remembered from childhood. Its worn but legible pages are filled with ballads copied by hand. They include dozens of Child ballads, but also some songs in Irish. As a child, I thought it belonged to my father, who had many similar notebooks, but examining it as an adult I could see that the writing was slightly different. It was in the hand of my father's brother Gerry, a more assiduous and meticulous recorder of songs than my Dad. I include some pages of the notebook in this Context Statement.

Another notebook I have kept for many years is one of my own from the age of ten, in which I wrote about a dozen republican ballads I composed myself, many to familiar airs of songs or skipping rhymes. I have included one of these pages in Chapter 4.

## **Ballad influences on other contemporary writers**

Once I began to write this statement, I saw songs everywhere in Irish poetry collections. Theo Dorgan's *Nine Bright Shiners* (Dedalus 2014) takes its name from a counting song, although the ballad Dorgan quotes in his epigraph, "Green Grow the Rushes, O!" [Roud 133], is not the version I know from the singing of the Seeger

family<sup>8</sup>. The latest collection from Macdara Woods<sup>9</sup> has several ballads, including one set to the air of “St James Infirmary” [Roud 2] and another to “The Limerick Rake” [Roud 3018]. Donegal poet Moya Cannon writes about the song heritage of Irish emigrants in her collected poems<sup>10</sup>, while a collection by Galway poet Pete Mullineaux<sup>11</sup> takes its name and theme from the word for informal gatherings of musicians playing traditional tunes. (I had used the same title for an unpublished book of poems about music written by my students at Gaelcholáiste Reachrann in Donaghmede, Dublin, during a writing residency I held there in 2009.) Another Galway poet, Gerard Hanberry, has published a study of the stories behind Irish ballads<sup>12</sup>.

For reasons of space, I have not attempted in this Context Statement to give an overview of how music and ballads have influenced the canon of contemporary Irish writers. Two excellent books on this topic have been published in recent years, Seán Crosson’s *The Given Note: Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry* (2008) which examines ‘poets’ efforts to connect with an older tradition, and... to create a community in the present’<sup>13</sup>, and Harry White’s *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination* (2008), which characterises modern Irish writing as ‘a persistent search for music in language’<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Peggy Seeger, Mike Seeger, and Barbara Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Christmas*, LP Record (Scholastic, 1957), track 17, "The Twelve Apostles". Dorgan’s version has one intriguing variation on a garbled line in the Seeger song. The song uses Christian motifs for each number – twelve for the twelve apostles, ten for the ten commandments and, in the Seeger version, ‘eight for the gabbling rangers’. Dorgan’s version has ‘eight for the April Rainers’. In her notes to the album, Ruth Crawford Seeger speculates that the ‘gabbling rangers’ is a corruption of ‘Gabriel’s Angels’, and ‘April Rainers’ could be a similar corruption.

<sup>9</sup> Macdara Woods, *Music From the Big Tent* (Dublin: Dedalus, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Moya Cannon, *Carrying the Songs* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Pete Mullineaux, *Session* (Cliffs of Moher, Clare: Salmon, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Gerard Hanberry, *On Raglan Road: Great Irish Love Songs and the Women Who Inspired Them* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Seán Crosson, *The Given Note: Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Harry White, *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34.

For this Context Statement to make an original artistic contribution, it must focus on my own writing and in particular on my personal experience of, knowledge of and research into the songs that have enriched me and inspired my work.

## Chapter 1: The Singing Without Ceasing: the songscape of a Dublin childhood

This chapter takes its title from “Family Crest”<sup>15</sup>, a tongue-in-cheek poem that uses as its central motif the coat of arms of my family. This crest features a mermaid combing her hair and, in the poem, I imagine the siren luring men to their deaths, and reflect on how ‘singing without ceasing’ has been a feature of my own life. (I discuss the poem in Chapter 4). This chapter locates both myself and my work among the elements of the aural landscape of my childhood, which informed my emerging identity as my generation’s repository for the family’s songs, stories and *piseoga* (superstitions) as well as my passions in literature, children’s literature, music and folklore.

The chapter briefly outlines my motivation for this PhD and teases out the strands of folk music that created the soundscape of my childhood. It also examines the influence on my poetry, children’s books and broadcasting of the work of song-collectors and sources such as Frank Harte and my uncle Gerry Cullen, who popularised a respect for what another singer/researcher has called ‘the men and women who lived here the day before yesterday ... who held fast to their individual and collective voice through song’<sup>16</sup>.

### Motivation

This PhD emerges from a range of coinciding circumstances, both personal and in the wider cultural and intellectual environment: my growing awareness of, and research into, my own immersion in folksong in childhood; an increasing interest in Ireland<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cullen, *A Bone in My Throat*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, *A Hidden Ulster: People, Songs and Traditions of Oriel* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>17</sup> For example, between 2013 and 2015, an Arts Council-funded project by researcher Michael Fortune brought Irish singers together in a series of events including at the National Library of Ireland, to speak about and sing their favourite versions of ballads collected by Child.

in local versions of the ballads annotated by American collector Francis Child<sup>18</sup> (1825-1896) from manuscripts and sources in England and Scotland in the 1800s; the return to primacy in Ireland and elsewhere of performance poetry, which places the art back in the oral, performed and often sung tradition where its origins in largely pre-literate societies lie; and most importantly, my desire to systematise my knowledge of ballads and folksong and to critically evaluate my past practice and writings to the benefit of future work.

### **The Singing House**

I was blessed to be the first grandchild of my father's mother, Kitty Cullen née Hand. Dad was the eldest of her sixteen children, two of whom died shortly after they were born. She was a warm and gentle woman who had left school by the time she was 12 and was conscious of her lack of learning. If we asked her anything to do with schoolwork, she would say, "Sure, I only met the scholars coming home," or, "I only got to first book."

She loved walking the country lanes around Drogheda, and my memories of walking with her are of picking blackberries and wild flowers, each of us holding a branch above our heads to keep off the flies. I liked her names for plants, 'poor man's bread' (young hawthorn leaves), 'piss-the-bed' (dandelions) and 'sour-belly' (wood sorrel).

In her small house, she fed not only her own fourteen children, but many others who called or stayed. Although the house was full of music as I was growing up, mainly my uncles and their friends with guitars, I rarely heard her sing anything except one of *Moore's Melodies* as she worked in the kitchen, perhaps "Oft in the Stilly Night" [Roud V931], or a dandling song, "Dilín Ó Damhas":

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<sup>18</sup> Child did not include Ireland in his seminal work on ballad versions, published in five volumes from 1882 to 1898, but many of the songs he collected had been sung in Ireland, with their own local variations, before and during his time.

Caithfimid suas is suas  
Caithfimid suas an pháiste  
Caithfimid suas is suas  
Is tiocfaidh sí 'nuas amárach

(We'll toss her up and up  
We'll toss up the baby  
We'll toss her up and up  
And she'll come down tomorrow)

I'd heard my maternal grandmother singing a similar song in English –

We'll throw her up, up, up,  
We'll throw her up so high,  
We'll throw her up, up, up,  
And she'll come down by and by,  
We'll throw her up, up, up,  
Until she'll reach the sky.  
She didn't dance at all,  
She didn't dance today.  
She didn't dance at all,  
Today nor yesterday.

It was not so much a dandling as a bouncing song, a song for throwing the giggling child in the air as high as one dared or the child tolerated, before catching them again.

There were other, wordless tunes that were used to dandle small children on the knee, but were also associated with Irish dancing – when we didn't have a musician to hand, it was common to both my paternal and maternal grandparents and their siblings to make the music themselves with the nonsense words 'tralala, tralala' or 'rowtilty, dowdilty, dowdility dow'. The latter tune I later identified as "The Frost is All Over". My uncle Gerry speculates that the tunes were passed on orally as our grandparents would not have had any other source for learning them.

The only other song I remember my grandmother singing regularly was on those country walks when we would see lambs in a field, and she would stop and sing a song I have tried to trace for years. There are two verses, of which this is the first. I have never heard it sung except by the Cullens:

In the meadow green, I saw a lamb  
And he lay beside his ma,  
When I said to the lamb, what is your name?  
He only answered, 'baa!'  
So skip, skip, my lambkin, skip, skip, away,  
For you have nothing to do today  
But to frolic in the fields, while the birdies in the trees  
Sing a sweet little song to you.

Although my memories of my grandmother's songs are few, I remember her welcoming presence as one that encouraged a flowering of music in her home. That home – a small terraced house that was always full of people – is at the centre of my passion for songs.

### **Seven Sources of Song**

Many elements combined to create the rich songscape of my childhood, but seven critical influences are outlined here:

- 1.** Songs from my mother's home in County Kerry, where Irish is still spoken in some areas. Her town, Tralee, was mainly Anglophone, but its English was liberally sprinkled with Irish words and idioms, and my mother herself attended an Irish-language boarding school and spoke and sang fluently in Irish. My grandmother died when I was eight years old, but up until then and occasionally afterwards I spent summers in Kerry, between Tralee and the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) area around Dingle, where my mother's sister lived. Her husband and some of her children were accomplished traditional musicians, playing the box accordion among other instruments, and speaking fluent Irish. This contrasted with our time in my grandmother's home in Tralee, where she and her sisters spoke and sang in English. Their chosen songs were a combination of *Moore's Melodies* such as "Believe Me, if all Those Endearing Young Charms"; popular songs such as "Let Me Call You Sweetheart", and Irish emigrant ballads such as "The Wild Colonial Boy" [Roud 677] or "The Boston Burglar" [Roud 261], and at every session, someone sang "The Rose of Tralee" [Roud 1978]. The romantic phrases in some of these songs piqued my



early interest in poetry – the ending of “Believe Me...” – ‘and around the dear ruin, each wish of my heart would entwine itself verdantly still’ – I found especially beautiful, while I took satisfaction in the fact that the Colonial Boy, a Robin Hood figure who ‘was born and bred... in Castlemaine’, about ten miles from Tralee, was ‘a credit to his parents’, despite his disreputable ways. Often in the evenings, my great-aunt Maria would start several songs in her quavering voice, forget the words and break off with a ‘wait a while now, lads...’ In the end, she would begin a search for what she called ‘The Song Book’, which to my mind was an important family treasure. My father especially enjoyed and encouraged this comic ritual.

**2.** Songs from my father, who grew up in Drogheda, Co Louth, within the more thoroughly anglicised ‘Pale’ in the east of Ireland. He had learned Irish at school, was passionate about the language, and encouraged my mother to sing in the tongue she had come to hold in scant regard. He was also an accomplished (amateur) singer and guitarist, who copied the old and new ballads he learned into a series of notebooks – a tradition I have continued for decades. His repertoire ranged from songs in Irish to folksongs and American country blues. For most of his life he worked with chemicals in the laboratory of the Electricity Supply Board, and he developed severe contact dermatitis which curtailed his pastimes of processing his own photographs and playing the guitar. By the time I was about 12, he was no longer able to play for hours for his own enjoyment, and confined his sessions to our ‘under the tree’ Christmas carol singing (where he would hand his guitar to me when his hands got too sore) and the occasional extended Cullen family sing-song, when he would invariably sing “On Raglan Road”, Patrick Kavanagh’s lovely poem set to the Irish tune “Fáinne Geal an Lae”, literally ‘The Bright Ring of the Day’ but often translated into English as “The Dawning of the Day” [Roud 370]. Kavanagh’s poem includes the line ‘let grief be a fallen leaf at the dawning of the day’, a line so synonymous with my father that it was the quotation we chose to put on his gravestone. At the end of “On Raglan Road”, my father always sang the opening verse of the original Irish song. The mouth music of its internal rhymes was pleasing to my ear for years before I understood its meaning, and the song was my introduction to the phrase ‘an

chúilfhionn', literally 'the fair-backed one', which would become central to a story for children I would write decades later<sup>19</sup>:

Cé gheobhainn le m'ais ach an chúilfhionn deas,  
 Le fáinne geal an lae.  
 (Who found I there but the fair-haired maid  
 At the bright ring of the day?)

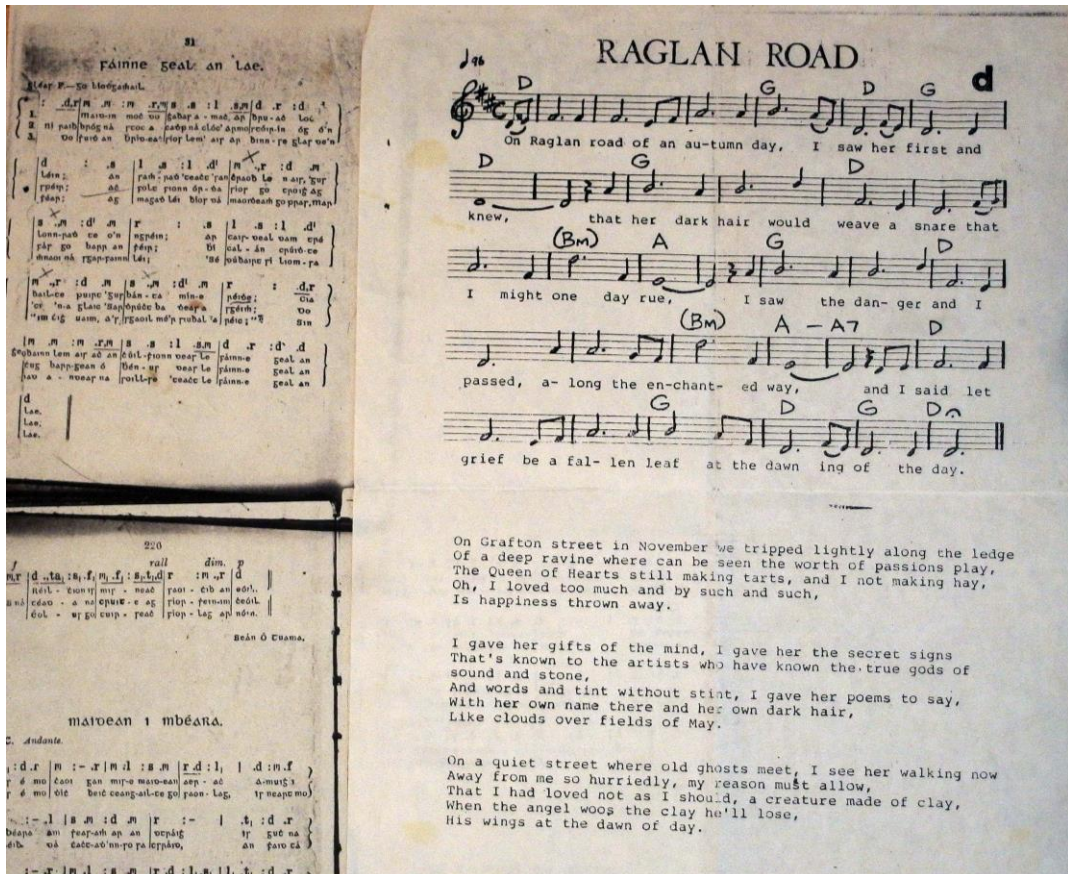


Figure 1: My father's music for "(On) Raglan Road" (right) and "Fáinne Geal an Lae" (top left)

**3.** Songs collected and sung in Drogheda, which was becoming a centre of ballad-sourcing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, mainly of English-language songs. Thanks to collector and singer Seán Corcoran and to my father's brother Gerry Cullen, who was also to become a respected arranger and singer, many rare local songs are back in the repertoire of traditional singers. Gerry Cullen is a member of The Voice Squad,

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, "Sea Change", *Fiction Fifteen* (Dublin, Ireland: RTÉ Radio 1, 2003).

a ballad-singing trio whose style is inspired by the Northern Irish tradition of unaccompanied solo singing and by English groups who sang in harmony, such as The Copper Family from East Sussex and the Watersons from Hull in Yorkshire<sup>20</sup>. Irish author Colm Tóibín has said of the group:

They approach each song... not as a way of displaying the singer's personality but as a way of exploring and evoking and finding the actual song's inner core, the song's most hidden truth... For anyone working as an artist – whether musician or writer or painter – they offer a nourishing example because of their sheer attention to detail and their sonorous mastery of form<sup>21</sup>.

Gerry's respect for songs, which was shared by many of his siblings, has been a persistent influence on my interest in ballads and indeed in my writing. During the regular singing sessions at my father's childhood home, children were always encouraged to perform their party pieces alongside the adults. We visited the house almost every Sunday of my childhood, and there was a palpable interest in any new song, especially any folk song, that we brought. For years, one of my songs was "The Handsome Butcher", a Hungarian folk song I learned at school at the age of seven. Years later, I discovered that it had been collected and translated by the English folklorist A.L. Lloyd. It was one of many songs that my siblings and I were coaxed to sing each week in Drogheda. All our relatives knew the words, although they usually allowed us to sing them on our own, perhaps joining in the chorus. Special respect was afforded to Gerry's songs, those which were part of local tradition and occasionally those he had written himself. Though shy of performing his own work outside of the family circle, he has penned hundreds of songs, some of them for family weddings and other occasions. He also writes poetry, and when I was eight years old, I was deeply impressed when he had a poem published on the front page of the Irish Press (see Chapter 5). He was also a funny, energetic and kind uncle. As a young teenager, I once admired a zither that was leaning against the wall of his tiny

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<sup>20</sup> Rick Anderson, 'The Voice Squad (album Review)', *Tara Music*, 2014, <http://www.taramusic.com/biogs/vsquadtest.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Gerry Cullen, Fran McPhail, and Phil Callery, *Concerning of Three Young Men*, CD (Dublin, Ireland: Tara, 2014).

bedroom in Drogheda. He insisted on giving it to me and it is one of my treasures, a slim black harp-like instrument, painted with a gypsy rose, that featured in a radio essay I wrote about music and dreams<sup>22</sup>.

4. A few songs from my paternal grandfather's childhood home on a tiny and impoverished hill-farm in Tyrone in Northern Ireland, where the fire in the hearth (it was said) had not gone out in three hundred years. My grandfather, Joe Cullen, had a nonsense song for soothing children to sleep – 'Eee-Aw-Bo' – which worked its charm on his grandchildren and has continued into several generations. 'I was singing Eee-Aw-Bo for an hour' was often heard from an exhausted parent. It was only years later I discovered the source of the song, one that not even my uncle Gerry had identified. It was a late 19<sup>th</sup> century music hall song called 'Little Annie Rooney' [Roud 4822], whose chorus went:

She's my sweetheart, I'm her beau,  
She's my Annie, I'm her Joe,  
Soon we'll marry, never to part,  
For little Annie Rooney is my sweetheart.

Because my grandfather's name was Joe, I suspect he enjoyed singing the song, and can only speculate that some lisping Cullen child many years ago, who did not know the words, imitated the vowel sounds of the first two lines and turned it into a nonsense, 'lulling' song which went into the family repertoire as

Eee-aw, eee-aw, eee-aw-bo,  
Eee-aw (insert first name of child), eee-aw-i-bo,  
Soon we'll marry, never to part,  
For little (insert full name of child) is my sweetheart.

Joe had a version of "The Old Woman from Wexford" [Roud 183], a comic ballad about a woman who gets a recipe from her doctor 'to make her old man blind'. The husband tricks her into believing the recipe has worked and tells her that he would drown himself 'if he could find the stream'. She obligingly offers to push him in – but he steps aside and she plunges in instead. It was years before I realised that Joe had

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<sup>22</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, "One Hand Clapping", *Sunday Miscellany* (Dublin, Ireland: RTÉ Radio 1, n.d.).

a unique variant of the song – when the wife calls for help, the husband ‘took out his kibblin’ stick/And he kibbled her further in.’

There are countless versions of this ballad – over fifty are referenced in one collection alone<sup>23</sup>. In some, the husband uses ‘a barge pole’, in some ‘a (big) long pole’, and in some ‘a churnstaff’ to push his wife, but in none of them have I found my grandfather’s ‘kibblin’ stick’. It appears as ‘kibbling, *n.* Also *kibblin, kibling*: A thick, rough stick, a cudgel’, in *The Dictionary of the Scots Language*<sup>24</sup>, and the three examples given of the word’s usage are from the 1820s. Northern Ireland and Scotland share many dialect words, and perhaps ‘kibbling’ was once among them. It is one of the ‘lost words’ preserved only in song that I was to write about, for example, in my poem, “In Memory of Frank Harte” (see Chapter 3), and in the case of ‘kibbling’, perhaps that lost word was preserved in our family alone. I hold out hope, however, that I will one evening find myself at a singing where someone will sing the song with my grandfather’s word.

Joe also sang ‘The Mountains of Pomeroy’ [Roud V 29244], a song based in the hills near his tiny homestead in the townland of Turnabarson. The song was one of several written by George Sigerson (1836-1925) a physician and a leading light in the Irish Literary Revival, and its combination of an outlaw hiding in the mountains, and the doomed young woman who goes to meet him through a terrible storm, was thrilling to my childhood mind:

But the mist came down and the tempest roared,  
And did all around destroy;  
And a pale, drowned bride met Renardine,  
On the mountains of Pomeroy.

That mountain tryst, and the ‘pale drowned bride’, were strong influences on one of my first attempts at ballad-writing at the age of 12, an unintentionally comic song called ‘Corinna’ about ‘a lame mountain goatherd’ and ‘a maiden so pretty and

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<sup>23</sup> Gale Huntington and Lani Herrmann, eds., *Sam Henry’s Songs of the People* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 516–17.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Dictionary of the Scots Language’, 2004, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>.

sweet', which ended with 'Johann' falling in the snow and dying outside his lover's cabin.

The way the songs of my paternal grandparents were passed to me is an example of the Irish term for oral folklore, *béaloidias*, literally 'mouth knowledge'. Songs that I have never seen written down, and variations on songs that I have heard or read, have found their way into my consciousness orally and aurally, and I am determined to pass them on to my daughter and the wider family.

I also learned from Joe's singing, and from that of my maternal grandmother, that local songs had an important resonance. People from Tyrone sang Tyrone songs, people from Kerry sang Kerry songs, and as a child from Dublin, I should sing Dublin songs.

5. Local songs and street games from my own city of Dublin, especially those sung by collector Frank Harte who was for some time a neighbour. I learned beloved songs from him and his daughter, Sinéad, and continued to follow Harte's journey throughout his life. Sinéad was a classmate in my early years of school, and the first song I heard her sing, "Henry, My Son", a Dublin version of the classic "Lord Randall" [Child 12, Roud 10], has continued to influence my writing, including a song I wrote this year for *Eastrogen Rising: A Rebel Cabaret*. The colloquial tone of "Henry, My Son", with its 'make my bed, I've a pain in my head', contrasts with the more formal and old-fashioned words of the original,

..... mother, make my bed soon,  
For I'm wearied with hunting, and fain would lie down.

The song's imitation of the Dublin accent is another characteristic I have adopted in my own song-writing. When Henry is asked 'what will you leave your father?' his reply is 'a blue su-et', drawing out the syllable of 'suit' into two, in the Dublin style. In the same way, I injected an extra syllable into my song, "The Rebel Sisterhood"<sup>25</sup>,

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<sup>25</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, *The Other Now: New and Selected Poems* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2016).

using the extended word ‘undergarmament’ to rhyme with ‘armament’ for comic effect.

“Henry, My Son” was among the songs that caused me to have a kind of epiphany at the age of five or six. My father had written half a dozen versions of the related “Lord Randall” into his notebooks, and a songbook we had from the 1965 Newport Folk Festival had another ballad that caught my eye, called “Snow White Shirt” [Child 13, Roud 200]. I read these song books as if they were story books, and indeed many of the ballads did tell stories. “Snow White Shirt” began, ‘How came the spots on your snow white shirt? Oh son, come tell to me.’ In this song, the young man is the murderer rather than the victim, but his mother draws him out with a series of questions in the same way that the mother does in “Lord Randall”. My mother’s family had a humorous song that mimicked this question and answer format, “Where have you been, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?” [Roud 326] – and while I was thinking about these songs, I heard Bob Dylan’s apocalyptic song, “It’s a Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall”<sup>26</sup>, which begins, ‘Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son? Oh, where have you been, my darling young one?’

I remember feeling highly excited about the connections between these songs. It seemed to me that, like people, songs had histories and relationships. Some strongly resembled their parents, and some had only a line here or there that revealed their heritage. This sense of excitement at hearing a variation on a familiar song has never left me, and the way in which the elements of those different songs, old and more modern, rare and popular, were bound in my mind by one strong thread, is probably the reason I remain untroubled by whether or not a song is a ‘genuine’ ballad or folksong, or a modern reworking of one, a preoccupation that is identified by two of the foremost ballad scholars today:

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<sup>26</sup> Bob Dylan, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, LP Record (New York: Columbia, 1963), Track 6.



Figure 2: "Snow White Shirt" from *The Newport Folk Festival Songbook* (1965)

One can almost hear the sigh of relief when a folk song scholar finds a second or third reference to a particular song being sung in a 'traditional' manner or context, so that it can be stamped 'genuine'.<sup>27</sup>

Along with the Dublin songs that filled my head were the skipping, ball-bouncing and street rhymes which were still the stuff of daily play when I was a child. Games that centred on songs that told stories, such as "The Farmer Wants a Wife" [Roud 6306] or "We're the Gypsies Riding" [Roud 730], became an unconscious guide for me when I came to write verse-stories for children. I explore this influence in some detail in Chapter 2.

6. Hymns from my Catholic childhood which coincided with Vatican II and a shift from Latin Mass and sung Benediction to English- and Irish-language masses and hymns. The archaic words and the religious fervour of the hymns and chants

<sup>27</sup> David Atkinson and Steve Roud, eds., *Street Ballads in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and North America: The Interface Between Print and Oral Traditions* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 16.



fascinated me. Their influences on my work are two-fold. Principally, they prompted me to pitch some elements of my poetry against their conservative content, in poems such as ‘The Ballad of Síle na Gig’<sup>28</sup> or ‘Queen of the May’<sup>29</sup>, but they also inspired me to look at unusual words, and occasionally to create my own, as I did in *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*.

7. Songs from the folk revival in America and across Europe which coincided with my early childhood. Events such as the Newport Folk Festival (founded in 1959) brought Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Tom Paxton, the Clancy brothers and many others interested in song traditions to homes all over Ireland, through song books, records and television appearances. This revival in turn inspired Irish musicians such as my uncle Gerry to look more closely at the traditional repertoire of their own areas. I still have two books from the festivals, passed on by my father, which are full of love for and history of the songs, along with their lyrics and music.

The combination of songs from four counties of Ireland, and those from the wider world, along with my direct experience of the growth of song-collecting, piqued my childhood interest in the way folksongs make present the past and ‘cut straight to the heart of life’<sup>30</sup>.

### **The Murmur of Voices**

I worked for seven years as a radio producer for the Irish national public broadcaster, RTÉ Radio 1, and for four years before that as a radio researcher, and ‘talk radio’ is still a constant backdrop to my world. When I can’t sleep, I turn the radio on low and find the barely-audible voices soothing. As a small child, I loved listening to my parents and their friends singing at night after I’d gone to bed. When their voices dropped to speak, I would often get out of bed and lie on the floor to hear them

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<sup>28</sup> Cullen, *Strange Familiar*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Woods, “A World of Thirteen Acres: Folklore as Source and Inspiration”, in *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, ed. Anne Markey and Anne O’Connor (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 217.

better, and occasionally I tottered downstairs and sat outside the kitchen door listening until I fell asleep. Unsuspecting guests were likely to trip over my three-year-old form when they opened the door to go home. That comfort of distant voices murmuring or singing was something I used in my story “Sea Change”, when after his father’s funeral, Conor is sent to sleep:

When I went to bed that night the house was still full of people, drinking and playing music and singing... The same picture came before my eyes all the time... Dad had untied the boat and was starting to drift away... I drifted with him in my mind, with the music coming up through the bedroom floor, and Mad Myles’s words echoing in my head: for everything the sea takes away, it brings something back. <sup>31</sup>

While researching this Context Statement, it became clear to me that I was alone among my siblings in experiencing and pressing my ears to much of the family music. Although there is less than a decade between my youngest sibling and myself, those years saw the crucial loss of our paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother, and a consequent weakening of tangible traditions. At some level, as the oldest child, the oldest grandchild on my father’s side and the oldest granddaughter on my mother’s, I had always been conscious of my responsibility to be an ethnographer of my own folk and their ‘mouth knowledge’, interpreting and preserving the songs and folklore of my family and environment, but I had not fully realised the extent to which I was carrying out this work in my writing across many genres.

In fact, all of the elements outlined above synthesised into a songscape which was to shape, at first unconsciously and later more consciously, almost everything that I would write. Such use of ballads is related to the use of folklore by other living Irish writers – as Éilís Ni Dhuibhne says, ‘their rich images and symbols enhance and deepen the texture of my stories of contemporary life’ <sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Cullen, “Sea Change”.

<sup>32</sup> Éilís Ni Dhuibhne, “‘Some Hardcore Storytelling’: Uses of Folklore by Contemporary Irish Writers”, in *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 215.

The particular elements of early childhood auralty interrogated in this Context Statement fostered an interest in those ballads which were 'founded on what is permanent and universal in the heart of man'<sup>33</sup>, and which continue to inform and to permeate my work.

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<sup>33</sup> Francis Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1 (Minnesota: Loomis House Press, 2001), xxvii.

## **Chapter 2: A Tune That Could Calm Any Storm: the influence of ballads on my two children's books**

Works considered in this chapter are *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* <sup>34</sup> and *Thirsty Baby* <sup>35</sup>

This chapter takes its title from my first children's book, *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, where one of the magic buttons on the child protagonist's coat 'plays a tune that could calm any storm'. In the works for children considered here, I have often been inspired by ballads that are dark and even deadly in theme and tone, and subverted them into more optimistic stories.

The chapter details the influence of folksongs on *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, which won a gold award for poetry and folklore from the US National Parents Association, and draws inspiration from ballads such as "The Clever Lass" [Child 1, Roud 161], where the character solves a series of problems or riddles.

This chapter also evaluates the use of ballads, especially 'cumulative memory songs' such as "I Know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly" [Roud 9375] and "The Rattlin' Bog" [Roud 129], and songs with 'frame repetition' such as "Spin, Spin My Dear Daughter" [Roud 1570], in my second children's book, *Thirsty Baby* <sup>36</sup>. It also unearths the 'rhythmic' inspiration for this verse-story, in both an English-language song and an Irish-language poem.

### **The influence of ballads on *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat***

There were two motivations for my first children's book; I was fully cognisant of only one of them as I wrote. My first niece and god-daughter, Olivia, was turning three. Born and raised in New York, she was already singing Irish songs such as "Molly Malone" [Roud 16932] with its street-hawker's cry, 'cockles and mussels, alive, alive-

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<sup>34</sup> Cullen, *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*.

<sup>35</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, *Thirsty Baby* (Cambridge, MA: Little, Brown, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

o!' and the more stage-Irish "My Irish Molly-O" [Roud 16109], whose chorus has a tricky penultimate line, word-heavy and sung at breakneck speed:

Change your name, go on be game! Begorrah, wouldn't I do the same?  
My Irish Molly-o.

I wanted to write something that Olivia might commit to memory, something more substantial than the throw-away, often spontaneous rhymes I had invented to amuse her up until then. I didn't need to think about the form the story would take: the obvious vehicle for the tale was the one most familiar to me from childhood, the narrative ballad.

What were the elements of the ballad that I wanted to harness? One was the classic opening, which involves the narrator going out and coming upon a story. I have written about this kind of opening in a radio essay on May ballads:

If you go a-walking one morning in May, or rove out on a bright May morning, what would you expect to see? I'm only asking because there are so many songs that start with the narrator walking or roving out in this merry month.<sup>37</sup>

But the phenomenon is not confined to the month of May. As A.L. Lloyd argues in his seminal work on English folk songs,

most English songs... pose a situation ('As I walked out...') and provide a setting ('down by the riverside') for an encounter ('twas there I met a bold fisherman come floating on the tide').<sup>38</sup>

My narrative ballad was to follow this formula, posing a situation and providing its young protagonist with a series of settings and encounters, from a giant sweltering in the heat to a group of sailors wracked by a storm. The child would go out 'to see what I'd see', drawing on the clapping rhyme, "A sailor went to sea, sea, sea/To see what he could see, see, see" [Roud 18338], and the children's song, "The Bear went

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<sup>37</sup> *May Morning Songs*, Radio Essay (Dublin, Ireland: RTÉ Radio 1, 2015), <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/sunday-miscellany/programmes/2015/0503/698446-sunday-miscellany-sunday-3-may-2015/?clipid=1870466#1870466>.

<sup>38</sup> A.L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 135.

over the Mountain” [Roud 3727] ‘to see what he could see’. Unlike the narrative voice in most ballads, my child narrator would be a participant in the story, making a series of interventions which would change the story itself.

The metrical form of the story was also based, albeit unconsciously, on many verse-narratives that I had enjoyed as a child – on a series of the anapestic tetrameters beloved of Dr Seuss, for example from his first book *And to Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street*, where he characteristically omits the first beat of the first line, as I do in my verse-story. Illustrating the unstressed syllables with a ‘x’ and the stressed with an ‘l’, the form looks like this:

x l x x l x x l x x l  
And that is a story that no one can beat  
x x l x x l x x l x x l  
And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street.

Clement Clarke Moore (1779-1863) does the same in *A Visit From Saint Nicholas*, another classic of my childhood which I committed to memory:

x l x x l x x l x x l  
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care  
x l x x l x x l x x l  
In hopes that Saint Nicholas soon would be there

My story follows this pattern exactly, with four anapaestic metrical feet per line, each foot having two unstressed followed by one stressed syllable, the first unstressed syllable often omitted in some or all of the lines:

x l x x l x x l x x l  
The coat that I wear from the Fall to the Spring  
x x l x x l x x l x x l  
Is my chunkiest, funkiest, favourite thing

Another element of the traditional ballad I wanted to use was the built-in mnemonic of a predictable structure. The structure I chose was one used in many songs of my childhood – the days of the week. Works that feature this seven-day structure range from the succinct life of “Solomon Grundy” [Roud 19299],

Born on a Monday,  
Christened on Tuesday,  
Married on Wednesday...

and the fortune-telling rhyme, “Monday’s Child is Fair of Face” [Roud 19526], to the English folksong “Dashing Away with the Smoothing Iron” [Roud 869], and the raucous “Seven Drunken Nights”, an Irish version of a popular ballad [Child 274, Roud 114], in which a gullible husband comes home each night to find evidence of his wife’s infidelity, but is assured that he is mistaken. An English version of the song is mentioned by Lloyd as “Five Nights Drunk”<sup>39</sup>, and indeed the politer versions of the Irish ballad<sup>40</sup> usually end on the fifth, Friday night when the husband sees ‘a head upon the bed where my old head should be’, and his wife assures him the head is ‘a lovely cabbage that my mother gave to me’.

This mnemonic structure employs what the ballad-scholar Francis B. Gummere<sup>41</sup> identified as *incremental repetition*, where a phrase recurs but is changed as the song progresses. My childhood favourite, “Henry, My Son” [Child 12, Roud 10], uses this device at the start of each verse as the mother asks her failing son a series of questions, ‘Where have you been all day, Henry, my son?’, ‘What did you have to eat, Henry, my son?’ and then, in turn, ‘What will you leave your (mother/father/children/sweetheart), Henry, my son?’

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<sup>39</sup> A.L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 157.

<sup>40</sup> Versions that include Saturday and Sunday night are obscene – the Irish group, The Dubliners, reached number seven in the British charts with one such recording in 1967, but the song was banned by the BBC.

<sup>41</sup> Francis B. Gummere, *The Popular Ballad* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 117.

**HENRY, MY SON**

Where have you been all day, Hen - e - ry my son?  
 Where have you been all day, my be-lov - ed one? A -  
 way on the meadow, a - way on the meadow, - Make my  
 bed I've a pain in my head And I want - to lie - down.

And what did you have to eat, Henry, my son?  
 What did you have to eat, my beloved one?  
 Poison beans, poison beans.

*Chorus*

And what will you leave your mother, Henry, my son?  
 What will you leave your mother, my beloved one?  
 A wooling vest, a wooling vest.

*Chorus*

And what will you leave your brother, Henry, my son?  
 What will you leave your brother, my beloved one?  
 A blue suit, a blue suit.

*Chorus*

And what will you leave your father, Henry, my son?  
 What will you leave your father, my beloved one?  
 A watch and chain, a watch and chain.

*Chorus*

And what will you leave your children, Henry, my son?  
 What will you leave your children, my beloved one?  
 The sun and moon, the sun and moon.

*Chorus*

And what will you leave your sweetheart, Henry, my son?  
 What will you leave your sweetheart, my beloved one?  
 A rope to hang her, a rope to hang her.

*Chorus.*

This song originates from a big classical ballad called Lord Randal. It is probably the only European ballad which became so strongly traditional in Ireland as to be translated into the Irish language and is still sung as An Tiarna Randall. The Dublin man could not accept the beautiful, sad, slow, classical version, but produced instead this inelegant version which is unique, as being the only variant in which poisoned beans and not eels and eels broth kill the unfortunate youth. The basic story is otherwise unchanged after nearly four hundred years.

Figure 3: "Henry, My Son", from *Songs of Dublin* by Frank Harte (1993)

In the same way, the openings of the six central verses of *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* reference the days of the week: 'I went out on Monday/Tuesday etc to see what I'd see/And I saw....' and the second quatrain of these six verses begins with another incremental repetition, 'So I bit off my button,' followed by six different phrases, 'the one that said warm/cold'; 'the one like a star/stone'; 'that played a sweet tune', and 'my dolly herself'. I had contrived two intersecting mnemonics – of the days of the week, and of the six buttons, which are listed in the first verse, recur once each in the ensuing six verses, and appear as a list once more in verse eight, and I hoped these would make the story memorable for Olivia and other readers.

These ballad devices, however, had to be adapted to my story in several ways. For example, the traditional opening couldn't be set at the opening of my ballad – I needed to introduce the character of the coat and its magic buttons in the first verse, before I could set my narrator out a-roving 'to see what I'd see.' Furthermore, I had to detach my cast of traditional characters from their usual contexts in order to bring them together in a neutral space. In doing so, I was reflecting what Máirín Nic



Eoin argues about the need for modern writers to uproot the traditional motifs that they use:

‘the literary use of traditional material involves... a radical displacement from the social and cultural context in which the material was originally conceived and traditionally employed.’<sup>42</sup>

In *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, despite a comforting, familiar structure based on the days of the week and the seasons (‘the fall to the spring’), the ‘radical displacement’ of the folksong and story motifs from their ‘social and cultural context’ locate the child narrator out of time, in a strange world where all the seasons exist simultaneously. On the first three days of the week, the weather is by turns too hot, freezing with snow and violently stormy, and over the course of the six days, the child meets a cast of characters who would not normally belong together.

### **Saving the Story – the hidden motivation for the book**

At the beginning of this chapter, I said that I was fully conscious of only one of the two motivations for writing this book – to create a narrative ballad for my niece. Like most unconscious motivations, the second one is more interesting. The book was written in the death throes of an unhappy relationship, and I was at some level aware that the story was an attempt to create a controlled world where the key to all problems was at hand. Nic Eoin writes of the

subversion of tradition involved when the poet harnesses traditional motifs and narratives as vehicles for the expression of intense personal states<sup>43</sup>.

It is only in retrospect that I recognise that *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* could be read as, and indeed represents, an expression of intense personal unhappiness, and the desire to make perfect the broken. The moment of revelation

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<sup>42</sup> Máirín Nic Eoin, “Athbheatha Na hAmhrán (The Second Life of Song): Traditional Song in Modern Gaeltacht Prose Writing”, in *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, ed. Anne Markey and Anne O’Connor (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2014), 152.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 151–2.

about this motivation came when I participated in a children's literature seminar at Trinity College Dublin, which focused for a time on my book. I found myself in the position described by McLoughlin, whereby

The poet may proceed by the same interpretive mechanism as the reader in order to tease out the various possible meanings in the text.<sup>44</sup>

One of the students suggested that the book was about 'saving the story.' Her observation made me interrogate more closely the song I was weaving 'beneath the skin' of the story.

Margaret Atwood proposes that

... not just some, but all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality, by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead.<sup>45</sup>

What I began to realise in that moment at Trinity, and understood more fully the more I studied my own text, was that what I wanted 'to bring back... from the dead' or from the brink of death in *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* was indeed the idea of story itself, and the magic that is central to story. The device I used to effect the resurrection was the traditional method of passing on stories, the narrative ballad. The elements of story I planned to save were six archetypal characters from the ballads and stories of my childhood: a giant, a swan, a group of sailors, a wizard, some rabbits and an elf. In the poem, all of these characters are threatened: the giant by being too close to the sun (like Icarus in another archetypal tale); the swan by being frozen nearly to death, like the swan Children of Lir in a beloved Irish legend; the sailors by a storm, as in countless ballads and stories; the wizard by the death of his magic; the rabbits by a hungry snake, and the elf by a lack of love. All of the characters are redeemed by the magical buttons on the child narrator's coat, for

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<sup>44</sup> Nigel McLoughlin, "Writing Poetry", in *A Companion to Creative Writing*, ed. Graeme Harper, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 47.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156.

each button possesses a unique quality tailor-made for one specific problem. The child as narrator is therefore the preserver of stories, the one who can rescue the stalled story and allow it to continue. He or she achieves this by solving a series of problems, another ballad motif featured in songs such as “The Clever Lass” [Child 1, Roud 161], ‘solving difficult but practicable problems, or matching and evading impossibilities’<sup>46</sup>. In such ballads, the questions are explicit:

What is broader than the way,  
And what is deeper than the sea?

In my book, however, the repeated question is implicit: how can you solve this problem, and save the story and the magic, using the materials to hand, ie the buttons on the coat?

### **The characters in the story and their origins in song**

The folk and fairy tales and ballads referenced in the story, through the six endangered characters or groups of characters, are multitudinous, but the ones uppermost in my own mind as I wrote the story were almost all central to childhood songs:

**1.** The giant: the hero-giant Fionn MacCumhail (often anglicised as Finn McCool), the leader of the mythical band of warriors, the Fianna. Like other Irish heroes, Fionn came alive to me in ballads learned in my early days of school. One Irish-language song, “Trup, trup, a Chapailín” (Trip, trip, little horse), describes a happy jaunt around Dublin’s Hill of Howth:

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<sup>46</sup> Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1:1.

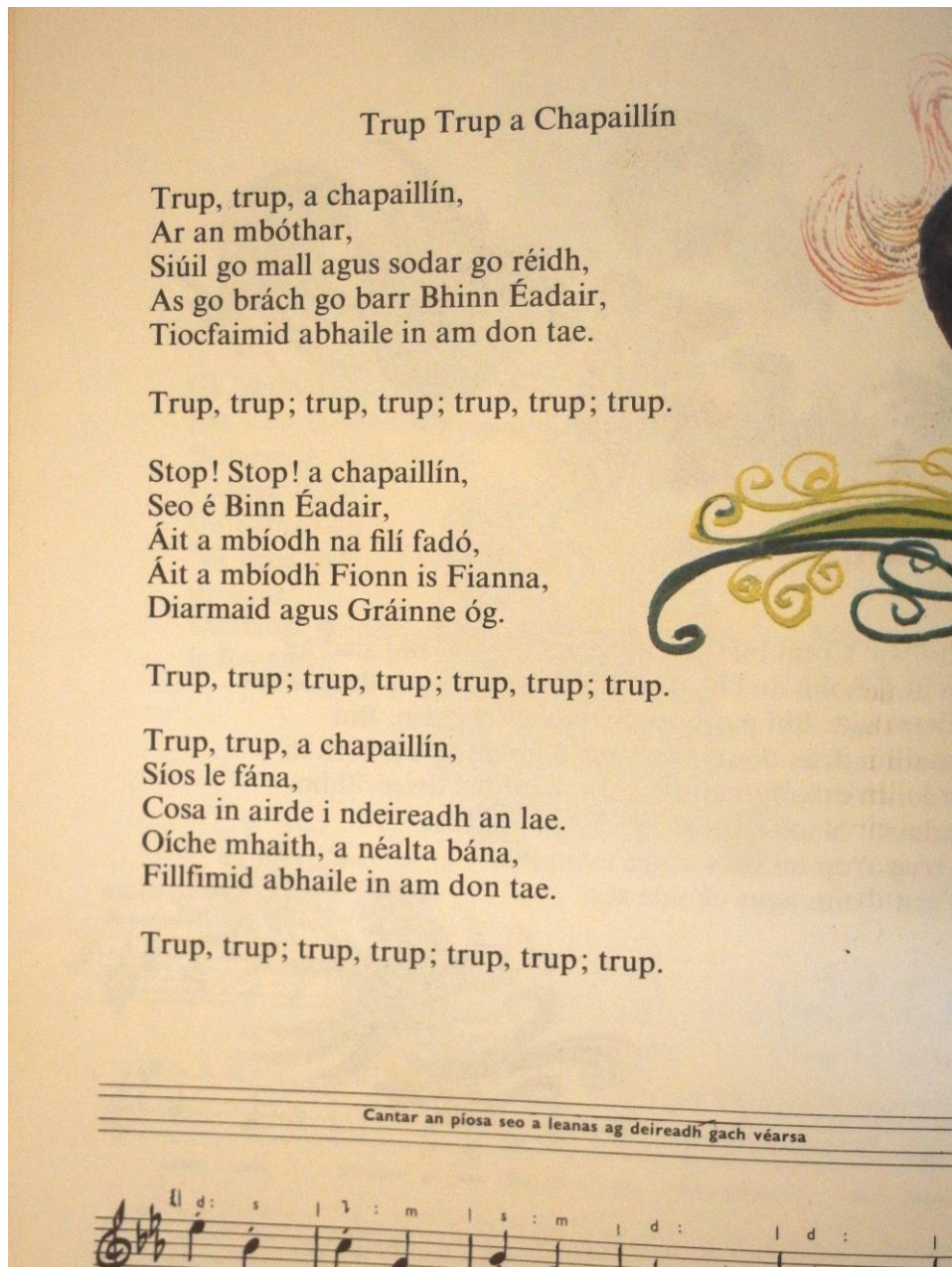


Figure 4: “Trup, trup, a Chapailín” from the book, *An Bealach Rúnda* (1969)

Áit a mbíodh na filí fadó,  
Áit a mbíodh Fionn is Fianna,  
Diarmaid agus Gráinne óg.<sup>47</sup>

(The place where the poets were long ago,  
The place where Fionn and (the) Fianna,  
Diarmuid and young Gráinne were.)

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<sup>47</sup> Brian Ó Baoill and Proinsias Ó Ceallaigh, *An Bealach Rúnda: Scéal Do Leanaí/Amhráin Ghníomhaíochta* (Baile Átha Cliath (Dublin): Oifig an tSoláthair, 1969), 14–15.

The song was part of a book in which action songs were interwoven into the story of a family's day, and came with a record we sang along to in school - such aural experiences gave a tangible immediacy to the mythological characters who, it seemed, were just around the bend of a local hill as we trotted up in our imaginations. In *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, despite his size, the giant is not threatening: he is young and he explains that his height is a challenge.

2. The swan: the Children of Lir, three boys and a girl who are transformed by their evil stepmother, and spend nine hundred years in the shape of swans, including three hundred on the freezing Sea of Moyle. Their story has inspired artists across many genres, including Thomas Moore (1779-1852), whose work, "The Song of Fionnuala", was a standard sung by my mother's relatives in Tralee, County Kerry. It begins with the poet entreating the stormy waters to be 'Silent, o Moyle,' so that the sad song of the enchanted swan can be heard:

While murmuring mournfully, Lir's lonely daughter  
Tells to the night-star her tale of woes.<sup>48</sup>

I have revisited this legend, writing a series of five poems from the point of view of five of its characters in my first poetry collection<sup>49</sup>. I discuss these Children of Lir poems in Chapter 4. Another inspiration for the swan in my book is the Irish ballad "Molly Bawn" [Roud 166], where a young hunter shoots his sweetheart as she shelters 'under a tree' like the swan in my story. He is tried for murder, but the girl's ghost tells the court that she had put her apron over her head and the young man mistook her for a swan. The song is believed to be a relic of the ancient myth where Cephalus kills his wife Procris, mistaking her for a deer when he is out hunting<sup>50</sup>. In *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, however, the swan does not suffer the fate of the Children of Lir (who eventually die when they return to human form) or of tragic Molly Bawn, but takes to the air 'in fine flying form.'

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Moore, *Irish Melodies* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1854), 22.

<sup>49</sup> Cullen, *A Bone in My Throat*, 72-77.

<sup>50</sup> Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 155.

**3. The sailors:** The sea is a persistent element of the folksongs I remember from childhood, both as a benign, rocking presence in lullabies - 'on wings of the wind o'er the dark rolling deep, angels are coming to watch o'er thy sleep' from the "Connemara Cradle Song" [Roud V40948], and as the last end of countless sailors and their ships who sink 'in the lowlands low' ["The Golden Vanity", Child 286, Roud 122], or 'to the bottom of the sea.' ["The Mermaid", Child 289]. Particularly strong in my mind was "The Holy Ground" [Roud 929], a Cork sea-shanty which was the party-piece of a local priest, in which the endangered sailors have to endure only half a verse of woe before they are safe:

Oh now the storm is raging and we are far from shore;  
The poor old ship she's sinking fast, the riggings they are tore.  
The night is dark and dreary, we can scarcely see the moon,  
But still I live in hope to see the Holy Ground once more.  
It's now the storm is over and we are safe on shore  
We'll drink a toast to the Holy Ground and the girls that we adore...

The sailors in *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* also endure only two lines of misery as the storm rages, until the magical tune calms the waters and they can float away.

**4. The wizard:** the archetypal old man/guide/helper of story. A more sinister old man is the personification of Death in an eerie ballad I once heard my uncle Gerry sing, "Death and the Lady" (Roud 1031):



on earth. There is no mention of a heavenly reward. In *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, the old man is a disempowered wizard, and when the narrator revives his wand with a star, the wizard uses it to praise the coat by writing ‘in the heavens.’

5. The rabbits: rhymes and songs about the creatures included a knitting rhyme that started, ‘In through the bunny hole, once round the tree’ [personal communication], and an Irish language song that began:

Damhsa na gcoiníní i ngarraí na heorna,  
An coinín ab óige acu, briseadh a chos,  
An coinín ba sine acu, rinne sé uachta  
Is thit sé ar a thóin i dtoimín an bhroibh.

(The dance of the bunnies in the barley field  
The youngest of them broke his foot  
The oldest rabbit made his will  
And fell on his bum in a patch of rushes.)

The rabbits of Irish stories are usually lively and playful. In the book, I place them in momentary danger of being eaten by a snake, until a stone is rolled in front of their burrow and they are safe once more.

6. The elf: Capricious leprechauns and fairies featured in many songs and folktales I learned as a child. One song I knew both in Irish and in English translation had as a repeating line: ‘And I laughed to think he was caught at last – but the fairy was laughing too’ [“The Leprechaun”, Roud V34703]. Fairy lovers were more frightening: the *leannán sídhe* was a beautiful fairy woman who inspired her lover in his art, but he wasted away after a brief life under her spell. In a song my father performed with a relish for its poetic words, “My Lagan Love” [Roud 1418], the narrator claims that

Like a lovesick *leannán sídhe*,  
She has my heart in thrall.  
Nor life I own, nor liberty,  
For love is lord of all.



In the manuscript for her book about songs, traditional singer Niamh Parsons gives this succinct information about the ballad:

The words were written by Joseph Campbell (1879-1944), and the air supplied by Herbert Hughes (1882-1937), a classically educated musician, who was an avid collector of Irish airs. He supplied the music for two other famous songs by poets of the time, 'She moved through the Fair' (Padraig Colum) and 'The Salley Gardens' (W. B. Yeats). I sing all three but 'My Lagan Love' is my favourite.<sup>51</sup>

In *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, the elf is looking for 'a smallish somebody' to love, not a human whose life a fairy lover would put in danger, and the non-human doll, who comes to life when she meets the elf, provides a perfect and unthreatened partner.

Early drafts of the book show that I considered other characters for the story. These included 'an old king and his fiddlers three.' On reflection, I thought this too specific a reference to one particular rhyme. I was more interested in the anonymity of a ballad, on allowing readers to 'put their own slant' on the story – to imbue it with their own swans, elves and giants, in the way that I had done. I wanted to give free rein to the imagination of my child readers. I even contrived never to identify the gender of the child narrator, and was delighted when this 'androgyny' was echoed by the illustrator, so that both boys and girls could imagine themselves in the role of the protagonist. Our efforts were confounded by the publishers, who in their early press releases and subsequently on the jacket flap of the book wrote 'a girl goes out each day to see what she'll see...'

The sun itself was one of the buttons in early drafts, echoing many stories where the sun is personified (fighting with the wind in Aesop's "The North Wind and the Sun", or as a helper in one of my favourite childhood stories, the Grimm brothers' "The Lady and the Lion"), but I decided to employ a 'warm' button instead, so the only 'personification' was the sixth button, the doll.

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<sup>51</sup> Niamh Parsons, 'The Song of Heart's Desire' (First draft, supplied by the author, Dublin, Summer 2016), 75.

*The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* won a gold award for poetry and folklore from the US National Parents Association, and has been recommended in handbooks for educators to teach children everything from the days of the week<sup>52</sup> to dramatic play<sup>53</sup>, the value of sharing<sup>54</sup> and the joy of reading<sup>55</sup>. It was the inspiration for a community festival called *If I Had a Magic Button*<sup>56</sup> in the under-resourced area of Parkville, CT in 2013. The use of the book that gives me most satisfaction as a writer, however, came in 2014, when it was performed by a group of schoolchildren in the ‘verse choirs’ section of the Kern County Oral Language Festival<sup>57</sup> in California, completing a circle from ballad to story and back.

### **The influence of ballads on *Thirsty Baby***

By the time I wrote my second children’s book, *Thirsty Baby* (Little, Brown, 2003), I had nieces aged eight and five and nephews aged four and two, who were all keen on songs and verse-stories. I had a very specific genre in mind for this book, one I had loved as a child myself – the ‘cumulative memory song’, sometimes more simply referred to as the ‘list song’. These are songs where items are added to a list as the song goes on, or the main item in each verse gets bigger and bigger – or smaller and smaller. I particularly loved the chain of reasoning in the Irish song, “The Rattlin’

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<sup>52</sup> Janis Ansell and Pam Spencer Holley, *What Do Children and Young Adults Read Next? A Reader’s Guide to Fiction for Children and Young Adults, Volume 5* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2002), 490.

<sup>53</sup> Barbara Backer, *The Weekly Curriculum: 52 Complete Preschool Themes* (Gryphon, 2003), 316.

<sup>54</sup> Dana Fentiman, ‘Instructional Resources: The Magical Mystical Marvelous Coat’, *Language Arts: Creative Writing*, (2006), <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=bmFzZHNjaG9vbHMub3JnfGRmZW50aW1hbnxneDo3Yjk2NDM0ZmJzYyMTY2>).

<sup>55</sup> Esmé Raji Codell, *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2003), 396 and John Thomas Gillespie and Catherine Barr, *Best Books for Children: Preschool Through Grade 6 (Supplement)*, 7th ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 15.

<sup>56</sup> Judy Dworin, ‘Moving Matters: Residency at Parkville & Burr Elementary Schools’, *Non-profit, Judy Dworin Performance Project*, (1 April 2013), <http://www.judydworin.org/moving-matters-residency-at-parkville-burr-elementary-schools-culmination-may-2/>.

<sup>57</sup> Anonymous, ‘Kern County Oral Languages Festival’, *Kern County Library*, 2014, <http://kerncountylibrary.org/oral-language/>.

Bog” [Roud 129], versions of which, as “The Tree in the Valley” or “And the Green Grass Grew All Around”, are known all over Britain and America, and of the children’s classic, “I Know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly” [Roud 9378]. First there’s a bog, then a tree in the bog, and before long you will be singing about a speck on an egg in a nest on a twig on a branch of the tree. First the old lady swallows a fly, and the internal logic of the song ensures that, by the last verse, she is eating a horse. The folklorist Cecil Sharp was one of those who wrote about such ballads in an article about ‘forfeit songs and cumulative songs’, where the songs are said to be repositories of ancient traditions and entertainments:

Trivial though these nursery jingles and traditional recitations may seem... they are fragments of forgotten things: of beliefs, ceremonies and pastimes which played a part in the life of grown-up men and women of the past.<sup>58</sup>

One of the ‘pastimes’ Sharp referred to here was the test of memory involved in recalling, in the right order, the verses of songs that had a mnemonic structure – and there was a forfeit to be paid by anyone who forgot an element in the list in, for example, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” [Roud 68].

I set out deliberately to write a simple verse-story which would fit this genre. I remembered the glee of hearing “The Rattlin’ Bog” for the first time, sung by my uncle, Gerry Cullen<sup>59</sup>, in my grandmother’s house in Drogheda. Here, the entire list is crammed into one growing, clause-heavy sentence:

Now on that bird there was a feather,  
A rare feather, a rattlin’ feather,  
The feather on the bird and the bird on the nest  
And the nest on the twig and the twig on the limb  
And the limb on the branch and the branch on the tree  
And the tree in the hole and the hole in the bog  
And the bog down in the valley-o!

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<sup>58</sup> Cecil J. Sharp, A.G. Gilchrist, and Lucy E. Broadwood, ‘Forfeit Songs; Cumulative Songs; Songs of Marvels and of Magical Animals.’, *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 5, no. 20 (1916): 294.

<sup>59</sup> A well-known singer and song-collector in Ireland, see Chapter 1

There was the usual coterie of cousins and young aunts and uncles around, vying with each other to remember the growing line. The older ones were inventing smaller and smaller items to add to the list, with ‘a pimple’, ‘an amoeba’ and ‘an atom’ all featuring, and the few lisping toddlers were trying to keep up. I was determined to have by heart every word of the tongue-tripping catalogue of items in that rare, rattlin’ bog.

### **Thirsty Baby – the list story**

Decades later, when I set out to compose my own list-story, there was a list of requisites in my mind. Firstly, there was “I Know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly” as a model. Eating larger and larger animals had been done to great comic effect in this song, but what about drinking larger and larger bodies – of water, for instance? Secondly, I was aware that, in order to engage a young audience, I wanted to avoid giving them a long list they would have to remember. Instead, could I harness the power of repetition and accumulation *ad absurdum* without a list? (My publisher’s guidelines for this book was that it was for ages 2-5, rather than 5-8 for *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*.) Thirdly, there was my sense that a ballad for young children should begin and end at home, as had the previous book, whatever magical adventures would occur in between, echoing Lloyd’s contention that ‘The road of the ballad runs from the magical to the heroic to the domestic.’<sup>60</sup>

Finally, there was a rhythm for the story already in my head. The rhythm that is closest to it in an English song is “Three Little Fishes” also known as “Over in the Meadow” [Roud 25654], with a stressed syllable followed by three unstressed:

    | x x x |   x x x | x x x |  
Over in the meadow in a little bitty pool  
(x)     | x x | x x x   | x x x |  
Were three little fishes and their mammy fishy too...

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<sup>60</sup> Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 139.

A similar rhythm is found in a counting-out rhyme we used in primary school {Roud 19230]:

I x x x | x x x | x x x |  
One potato, two potato, three potato, four..

The words of *Thirsty Baby* fits this rhythm, although there is more variation on some of the other lines:

I x x x | x x x | x x  
(I'm) thirsty said the baby and I need a drink

But beyond that beat, there was a structure and rhythm in my subconscious mind:

...inspirations, influences and writing processes... may find their way unconsciously into the text in the act of writing, but the... creative writing researcher... is obliged to make them explicit, reflect on them, analyze and examine them. <sup>61</sup>

That rhythm, hidden even from myself until I was 'obliged to make it explicit', was from an Irish-language poem I learned in primary school, "Cé Atá Láidir?" (Who Is Strong?), written by Lionárd Ó hAinmí, which went:

'Táim láidir,' arsa an bláth, nuair a shéid an ghaoth,  
Ach tháinig bó agus d'ith sí é.  
'Táim láidir,' arsa an bó, sa pháirc ina luí,  
Ach tháinig fear is mharaidh sé í.  
'Táim láidir,' arsa an fear, lena mhac Tomás.  
Ach tháinig an lá agus fuair sé bás.  
Níl aon duine láidir, níl ionainn ach cré,  
Níl aon duine láidir ach Críost, mac Dé.

('I'm mighty,' said the flower, when the wind blew 'round,  
But a cow came along and gobbled her down.  
'I'm mighty,' said the cow in her grassy bed,  
But along came a man and struck her dead.  
'I'm mighty,' said the man, to his small son, Shay,  
But along came the hour when he passed away.

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<sup>61</sup> McLoughlin, 'Writing Poetry', 48–49.

Nobody's mighty, we're dust, everyone,  
Nobody's mighty but Christ, God's son.)

My translation here is faithful to the rhythm of the Irish rather than to the exact words – láidir means 'strong', but the two equal syllables of 'mighty' echo the rhythm and syntax of the Irish perfectly – and exactly match the rhythm and structure of *Thirsty Baby*:

'I'm thirsty,' said the baby, 'and I need a drink.'  
So we gave him a bottle, and what do you think?

"Cé Atá Láidir?" is a bleak *memento mori* for young children – I was seven or eight years old when I learned it in school. We recited it then in a sing-song way which belied the full force of its meaning. Margaret Atwood has said that

If the act of writing charts the process of thought, it's a process that leaves a trail, like a series of fossilized footprints.<sup>62</sup>

It was only by murmuring the words of *Thirsty Baby* over and over to myself, until they became a sing-song rhythm buried deep in my psyche, that I was able to follow the trail of those 'fossilized footprints' back to that dark Irish verse – along with its 'frame repetition' structure. The grim superstition inherent in the verse is a 'pride goes before a fall' story, and such stories formed a strong tenet of my early school education. There were the obvious myths, such as Icarus, and Adam and Eve, but often the stories were more immediate. Even discussion of the *Titanic* disaster was always framed in terms of the almost-blasphemous challenge to God's omnipotence posed by the builders and owners of a liner they claimed was unsinkable, a challenge that God had to answer by sinking the ship. This attitude to God as capricious and vengeful is identical to the Irish attitude to the fairies or 'Good People' that was still prevalent in Kerry when I was growing up. There was a strong superstition about the danger to a child if the fairies overheard a person praising him or her. Parents accepted that it was better not to 'praise your own', but if anyone did admire a

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<sup>62</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, 156.

child's beauty or skill, the compliment was always tempered with the charm 'God bless him': 'He's a lovely boy, God bless him,' or 'She's great with the needle, God bless her,' an invocation that was believed to keep the child safe from supernatural vengeance or covetousness.

So, two songs or verses intersect under the surface of *Thirsty Baby*: "I Know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly" [Roud 9375] as the conscious 'list' model, and 'Cé Atá Laidir?' as the unconscious structural and rhythmic model. Both of those songs end with the death of the human character, and there are several other deaths along the way in each. This was clearly not an appropriate end for a baby, even one who drinks an entire sea, as the baby in my story does.

Instead, my baby not only survives and indulges himself in everything, but is praised for doing so by every member of his extended family, in flagrant defiance of Catholic and pagan superstition. This praise, 'Good boy!' is offered despite obvious misgivings by the speaker – the mother muttering it as she mops the floor, the granny giggling it nervously as she stands on the shore of the dried-up river, the sister saying it in the empty pond 'though she wasn't sure'. The only break from the 'good boy' reaction is when the grandfather, taken aback when the sea disappears, exclaims instead, 'Good grief!' a 'minced oath' which is a euphemism for the original 'Good God!'

If the inspiration for *Thirsty Baby* is the rhetorical, pessimistic question, 'Who is strong?' in that sombre Irish verse, the defiant answer my story gives is, 'the baby'. The baby is all-powerful, consuming everything in his path and able to break the laws of nature without a consequence, not quite the anti-Christ, perhaps, but definitely not the meek and mild Christ-child either. In her long list of answers to the question of why she writes, Margaret Atwood includes: 'To subvert the establishment'<sup>63</sup>, and clearly here I have done exactly that, turning on its head the concept of divine retribution which was ingrained in my child self at school and at home.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., xii.

But if *Thirsty Baby* is subversive in content, it is conservative in form. The story has a strong 'frame structure', with the repetition of first and subsequent lines found in many folksongs. One such song is the German/Scandinavian ballad translated into English as "Spin, Spin, My Dear Daughter" [Roud 1570]. The version I learned from cousins in Drogheda differs slightly from other translations I have found:

Spin, spin, my dear daughter, I'll buy you a gown,  
Yes, Yes, my dear mother, the finest in town,  
But I can't keep spinning, my fingers are hurting,  
It's sore, it's sore, I'll spin no more.

Each verse is similar, with the mother offering shoes, a hat, etc, and the daughter agreeing to the purchase, but complaining that 'It's sore, it's sore, I'll spin no more'. In the final verse, the mother promises a beau, and the daughter's line changes to, 'It's fine, it's fine, I'll spin all the time.' *Thirsty Baby* mimics the strong 'frame repetition' of such songs, in contrast to *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, where the frame is on the periphery of each verse: in each eight-line stanza of the book, there are five lines that are more or less 'new'. In *Thirsty Baby*, however, the frame is far more rigid: of the six-line stanzas, the entire first line: 'I'm thirsty, said the baby, and I need a drink,' the third, 'He started with a sip and he finished with a sup,' and the sixth, 'But the baby said, I'm thirsty, and I want more!' are identical in most of the verses, and the remaining three lines each have one repeated phrase: 'what do you think?' in the second line, 'he drank it all up' in the fourth, and 'Good boy' in the fifth.

Gummere called this framing structure

the chief mark of ballad style... a sort of progressive iteration... each increment in a series of related facts has a stanza for itself, identical, save for the new fact, with the other stanzas.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Francis B. Gummere, *Old English Ballads Selected and Edited* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1894), xxxii.



So each of the new facts in *Thirsty Baby* – the different repositories of water that the baby drinks – has a stanza to itself which strongly echoes the stanzas that went before. “Spin, Spin, My Dear Daughter” also offered me the model of a ‘list song’ without an actual list – the hat, gown, shoes, etc, are offered in turn rather than added to a growing list. In *Thirsty Baby*, the list of the items that the baby drinks is eventually catalogued by the baby himself in the last verse: ‘I drank the bottle and the bath-tub too, and the pond, and the river, and the sea so blue,’ but the child reader or listener is not required to memorise the list as they go along.

I also used alliteration in the story, as I had done in the previous book. Everything the baby drinks: the pink plastic bottle, the blue bubbly bathtub, the pond in the park, the red rolling river, and the shining sea of silver, is described in an alliterative phrase. Alliteration is one of the stock-in-trades of ballads – Pound refers to

stock alliterative epithets... ‘merry men’, ‘wan water’... so helpful to the technique and to the memory of the Old English scop [ie poet or minstrel].<sup>65</sup>

Some of the phrases I use in *Thirsty Baby* are based on alliteration in other ballads and folksongs. The ‘red, rolling river’ comes from a combination of two American songs: “The Red River Valley” [Roud 756], with its poignant, ‘Just remember the red river valley, and the cowboy who loved you so true’, and “Oh Shenandoah” [Roud 324], with its chant, ‘Away, you rolling river’. Both of these songs are about leaving and loss. In *Thirsty Baby*, of course, there is neither loss nor leave-taking – the baby is firmly embedded in his extended family, with mother, father, sister, and grandparents all playing their loving part in his story. The ‘shining sea of silver’ has echoes of the anthem “America the Beautiful” [Katharine Lee Bates 1859-1929] with its line, ‘from sea to shining sea’, as well as of a beloved lullaby of my childhood, “Connemara Cradle Song” [Roud V40948], whose chorus contained the lines: ‘Silver the herring and silver the sea, soon there’ll be silver for my love and me.’

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<sup>65</sup> Louise Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 109.

The second line of most of the stanzas of *Thirsty Baby* ends with the question, 'what do you think?' It's a familiar expression in children's songs, occurring in "The Bear Went Over the Mountain" [Roud 3727], where the child is asked in alternating verses, 'And what do you think he did?' or 'And what do you think he saw?' The questions are immediately answered – 'He saw another mountain' and 'He climbed that other mountain'. This 'what do you think?' motif also occurs in a carol that was one of my childhood party-pieces, "I Saw Three Ships" [Roud 700], which has, 'And what do you think was in them then/On New Year's Day in the morning?' The listener is invited to speculate for a moment on the content of the ships, until we hear they contain three fair young maids, who can whistle, sing and play the violin.

In the same way, in *Thirsty Baby*, the children are asked what they think will transpire, and are soon told what does happen – with the slight delay effected by the repeated line, 'He started with a sip and he finished with a sup'. It's logical enough for the baby to drink the bottle, but children are not necessarily prepared for him to drink the bathtub. Once that's happened, though, they are ready to believe that he will empty the pond, and then the river. When it comes to the sea, they are less certain – for a start, the sea is salty, so they are not sure the baby would want to drink it, and for another thing, the sea is just too big. My experience of reading the story aloud to children is that they are used to the sequence in a story breaking for the final link in the chain – something has to change to stop the story, and so, when asked, 'What do you think?' in the fifth stanza, they often decide that the baby really isn't going to drink the sea. They are reckoning without the uncommon 'commonplaces' of ballads,

often presented through a kind of heightened realism, perhaps even a magical realism, so that their situations and personnel are rarely quite those of the ordinary folk.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> David Atkinson, "The Ballad and Its Paradoxes", *Folklore* 124, no. 2 (2013): 123

## Chapter 2: Conclusion

I have interrogated in this chapter a rich variety of ballad, hymn and song influences on my two children's books. Employing traditional forms, motifs and rhythms has sprung naturally from my early immersion in ballads, but subverting these forms and motifs, often by turning a dark song or character into a joyful experience for children, 'turning darkness into light'<sup>67</sup>, has equally been a constant although not always a conscious feature of my work.

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<sup>67</sup> From "Pangur Bán", (anonymous, 9<sup>th</sup> Century) written in Irish and translated by Robin Flower (1881-1946).

### **Chapter 3: Something Rich and Strange:**

#### **Ballad influences in two short stories for children, one broadcast on radio and one published in an anthology**

This chapter interrogates, in terms of their ballad heritage, two short stories for children, “Sea Change”, which was commissioned for RTÉ Radio 1, Ireland’s public service broadcaster, and “Golden Feathers”, a first draft of an animation script that became a short story published in an anthology. The first story uses a version of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Irish language ballad, “An Chúilfhionn” (The Fair-haired One), as a central motif, and the second uses themes and phrases from ballads as well as recurring fragments of childhood songs and lullabies.

#### **“Sea Change”: Shakespeare, Joyce and a lost 16<sup>th</sup> century ballad**

My short story for children, ‘Sea Change’, is presented through a subtler kind of heightened realism than are my children’s books, in a meditation on the sea’s dangerous magic and its restorative power. The small cast of characters have all been touched by tragic drownings, in a way which was the mainstay of ballads of my childhood. (I have written about such ballads in Chapter 2 in relation to the sailor characters in *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*.)

The use of the ballad in this story differs significantly from its use in my two children’s books. In the books, the ballad form itself is extensively drawn upon, with its rhythms, narrative structure and stock characters. In ‘Sea Change’, however, the ballad is used in two different ways – as a backdrop to the themes of the story, and to create another, hidden layer within the text. In embarking on the story, I was attempting to draw on the work of James Joyce in a number of his short stories in the collection, *Dubliners*.<sup>68</sup>

I first read *Dubliners* as a young teenager: indeed, one of the stories, “Clay”<sup>69</sup>, was a prescribed text on the school curriculum. Both “Clay” and the final and most famous

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<sup>68</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–104.

story of the collection, “The Dead”<sup>70</sup>, use ballads in a way that fascinated me: to say something that was not made explicit in the story. In both stories, the extracts of the ballads used are ‘the tip of the iceberg’ – the full impact is felt only when one knows the whole ballad. In “Clay”, the lonely Maria, who works as a drudge in an institutional laundry, visits the family of a man she once nursed. After a few glasses of wine, she sings “I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls,” a popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century song by the Irish composer Michael William Balfe, which is also known as “The Gipsy Girl's Dream”. The character in the song dreams she is centre and mistress of a fabulous world, with ‘riches too great to count’. In the second verse, she dreams of suitors coming ‘her hand to claim’, ‘but I also dreamt, which charmed me most, that you loved me still the same.’ The unmarried Maria forgets the words of the second verse and instead sings the first verse again. No one points out her mistake, but Joe has tears in his eyes. Joyce does not quote the missing verse, but anyone familiar with the song will know that the omission slyly emphasises Maria’s loveless state. As one recent critic puts it:

without knowledge of that which is not written down... Joe’s tears make little sense. But armed with the image of the suitors coming to seek the maiden’s hand, the reader realises the implication of Maria’s error.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps Shovlin over-stresses the point here – even with the verse that is quoted by Joyce, there is great poignancy in the contrast between Maria’s impoverished existence and the ‘marble halls’ of the song, albeit a more subtle contrast than the devastating one that emerges with the added detail of the suitors.

Joyce’s short story “The Dead” also uses a snippet of a song, when the main character Gabriel hears “The Lass of Aughrim”, an Irish version of the Scottish “Lass of Rock Royal” (Child 76) where a young mother pleads with the local lord and father of her child to let them in out of the frightful night. But it is the disapproving mother of the lord who is speaking to the lass, and not the lord himself.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 173–220.

<sup>71</sup> Frank Shovlin, *Journey Westward: Joyce, Dubliners and the Literary Revival* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

If you be the Lass of Aghrim,  
Which I don't believe you to be,  
Tell me the last love token  
That passed between you and me.

O, the rain falls on my heavy locks  
And the dew it wets my skin,  
My babe lies cold within my arms,  
Lord Gregory, let me in!

Many of the other verses begin with the words, 'Oh, don't you remember.....?' sung to a drawn-out and haunting air. But from within the castle, there is no recognition.

Joyce uses just two and a half lines of the song, overheard by Gabriel as his wife Gretta stands listening on the stairs:

O, the rain falls on my heavy locks  
And the dew wets my skin,  
My babe lies cold ...<sup>72</sup>

In the story, Gabriel is filled with memories of and love for his beautiful wife, but fails to notice that the song has a different effect on her – she is remembering Michael Furey, a young man who died of consumption soon after he visited her and stood under a tree in the rain, calling to her window.

The tiny snippet of the ballad that Joyce quotes fails to capture two important elements of the song, while foregrounding two others. It is raining – as in real life it is snowing – and 'my babe lies cold', as Gabriel's beloved will lie cold, and not in his arms, later in the evening, and as Michael Furey lies cold in his grave. What is left out, and available only to someone who knows the song, is 'Lord Gregory, let me in!' – the vain pleading of the lover to be recognised, as Gabriel's love is not recognised by his wife, and as Gretta's emotions are misinterpreted by Gabriel. Joyce also leaves out that plaintive line, 'don't you remember?' Gabriel's entire evening has been filled with memories of 'their secret life together', while Gretta's has been filled with memories of Michael Furey.

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<sup>72</sup> Joyce, *Dubliners*, 207.

We know Joyce loved this song and that he found it very affecting, as instanced in two letters to his beloved Nora Barnacle in 1909:

I was singing an hour ago your song *The Lass of Aughrim*. The tears come into my eyes and my voice trembles with emotion when I sing that lovely air.<sup>73</sup>

My dear little runaway Nora, I am writing this to you sitting at the kitchen table in your mother's house!!! Have been here all day talking with her and I see that she is my darling's mother and I like her very much. She sang for me *The Lass of Aughrim* but she does not like to sing the last verses in which the lovers exchange their tokens...<sup>74</sup>

What I wanted for “Sea Change” was to follow Joyce’s lead and to use a song that had a personal resonance for me, and also a depth that would not be fully apparent to anyone who did not know the song in detail. I thought it would be interesting to write something that could be read at different levels, and would yield more depending on the awareness of the reader.

“Sea Change” is set in a small fishing community and begins with the funeral of the narrator Conor’s father, a fisherman, who has drowned. I had already decided that I would use part of “Ariel’s Song” from *The Tempest* in the story, for three reasons: it is about a drowned father; I had taken the name of the story from it; and I believed its descriptive and alliterative qualities would be atmospheric when heard on radio. Clearly, any other song I would use in the story should have some reference to the sea, and should work well with “Ariel’s Song”.

I had several reasons for deciding on the ballad “An Chúilfhionn”, often known in Hiberno-English as “The Coolin” or “The Coulin”<sup>75</sup>, a phonetic version of the Irish name. The word means ‘the fair-haired one’. (Cúl means ‘back’, so the literal

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<sup>73</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Letters of James Joyce*, vol. II (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 242.

<sup>74</sup> Shovlin, *Journey Westward: Joyce, Dubliners and the Literary Revival*.

<sup>75</sup> I was interested to discover that Joyce himself performed this song in public: ‘On the afternoon of Monday 22 August 1904 Joyce sang two songs, “My love she was born in the North Countree” and “The Coulin”, at a concert.’ (‘James Joyce Centre Website’, *The James Joyce Centre*, 22 August 2013, <http://jamesjoyce.ie/on-this-day-22-august/>).

meaning is 'fair-backed', from the fact that the back is covered by the long blonde hair.)

The song is about a young girl, and contains the two lines quoted in my story, 'have you seen my love by the sea?' and 'they won't get my treasure, no matter what they think.' The word 'treasure' echoes the quote from "Ariel's Song", 'of his bones are corals made, those are pearls that were his eyes,' and so I wrote a line for the father in the story that would tie the verse and the song together, when he jokingly predicted his own death, saying he would 'be turning into treasure on the sea-bed.'

The question I use from "An Chúilfhionn" – 'have you seen my love beside the sea?' – comes in the song as part of a joyful description of the loved one. When sung about someone missing or drowned, however, I thought it would serve to highlight the loss. The other line from the song that comes in the opening of the story – 'they won't get my treasure' – is even more biting in the context of the funeral, as it is clearly untrue: 'they', the unknown forces of nature and death, *have* got the family's treasure, in the form of Conor's father.

The binoculars that Conor's grandfather confiscated and threw into the sea are another treasure 'they won't get' in the story. I added these into the plot to make the ballad resonate further, creating various 'treasures' to echo the song throughout the story.

I have a family connection to "An Chúilfhionn" which made it a particularly emotional choice. The song was played at the funeral of my cousin and godson Andrew Malone, who drowned, along with a friend, after his car went off the road and into the River Boyne about a mile from his home in the small village of Baltray one eerily foggy night. He and his friend were both twenty-one. I was just eleven when I stood as godmother for him, while his then ten-year-old brother, Peter, was godfather. In the tradition of our large and inclusive family, Peter and I, as the oldest grandchildren, had been next in line as 'sponsors' after our youngest aunt and uncle had 'stood for' the grandchild born before Andrew.



As godmother, I was asked to read at Andrew's funeral. There were several devastating moments, one of them when "An Chúilfhionn" was played on the traditional Irish uileann pipes (not unlike the bagpipes), and the other when my uncle Gerry and his friends sang the Robbie Burns song, "Ae Fond Kiss (and then we sever)", which Burns wrote to an air composed by an Irishman, Rory Dall Ó Catháin of Derry, whose period was somewhere between 1550 and 1650<sup>76</sup>.

"An Chúilfhionn" has long been considered one of the most beautiful of Irish melodies: the 18<sup>th</sup> century Irish antiquarian and writer Joseph C. Walker said the air 'is universally admired' <sup>77</sup>, and another writer on Irish music, Francis O'Neill, called it 'the queen of Irish airs' <sup>78</sup>. The words themselves are charming rather than sad, but the air, especially when played on the pipes, is very much a lament.

When I began to research the song to use in "Sea Change" (I had known the air but was only vaguely familiar with the words), I discovered that there was reputed to be an older version, now lost. This version is mentioned by Brendan Behan in his autobiography *Borstal Boy* <sup>79</sup> and, in a recording of Behan singing a fragment of the song, he bookends the performance with the following spoken description:

There was another song I used to know in the Irish language which was called the Chuileann<sup>80</sup>, I understand it refers to a habit the Irish had in the middle ages of cutting their hair short... it's a girl singing of her lover.... It goes as follows (he sings) ... That sounds a sad song – in actual fact, all it says is.. 'Have you seen my dear love... with his fair hair cut in the Irish style' which was illegal, I believe, at the time – it's a song of the 15<sup>th</sup> century... 'Have you seen my bright star of the morning at the early dawning of the day?' <sup>81</sup>

In fact, what Behan sings here is the usual version of the song, with the subject of it changed from a woman to a man. But he is not alone in mentioning an alleged

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<sup>76</sup> Donal O'Sullivan, *Irish Folk Music and Song* (Dublin: Colm O Lochlainn, 1952), 32.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph C. Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (Dublin: Luke White, 1786), 134.

<sup>78</sup> Francis O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Chicago: Regan Printing House, 1913), n.p., <http://billhaneman.ie/IMM/>.

<sup>79</sup> Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (London: Hutchinson, 1958).

<sup>80</sup> This is the spelling on the track list of the album.

<sup>81</sup> Brendan Behan, *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folksongs and Ballads* (New York: Spoken Arts Records, 1959), track 26.

earlier version, a song about a man defying the forbidden. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century Irish music scholar, Joseph Walker, describes it here:

In the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Henry VIII [i.e. c1537], an Act was made respecting the habits and dress in general of the Irish, whereby all persons were restrained from being shorn or shaven above the ears, or from wearing Glibbes or Coulines (long locks) on their heads, or hair on the upper lip called a Crommeal. On this occasion a song was written by one of our Bards, in which an Irish Virgin is made to give the preference to her dear COULIN (or the youth with the flowing locks), to all strangers (by which the English were meant), or those who wore their habit [i.e. those Irish who conformed to the English style].<sup>82</sup>

That such an earlier song ever existed has been disputed by other scholars<sup>83</sup>, and the facts are complicated by the fact that the Irish writer W.B. McBurney, under the pen-name Carroll Malone, wrote a poem called “The Coulin Forbidden”<sup>84</sup> based on the story. Whether the song existed or not, however, has no bearing on its existence in the folk memory epitomised by Behan’s words above. The lost song, we are told, is about a man who has been forbidden to do what he wants – to wear his hair in his native style. This idea – that an activity that seems natural to the young man is forbidden – became important to me in the construction of the story. I wanted something to be forbidden by Conor’s grandfather, and later by his father, and decided bird-watching would be an interesting taboo to introduce. For me, the significance of bird-watching, in this wild place close to the natural bird sanctuaries of cliffs and outcrops, is that it integrates the human, the landscape and the wild creatures. Myles explains to Conor how all living things are connected,

how the sand was once shingle, the shingle once stones and shells, the stones once rocks, and the shells once living creatures.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, 134.

<sup>83</sup> Luke Donnellan, ‘Traditional Irish and Highland Airs’, ed. Rev. James Quinn, *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society* 3, no. 1 (1912): 11–12.

<sup>84</sup> Denis F MacCarthy, *The Book of Irish Ballads*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: James Duffy, 1869).

<sup>85</sup> Cullen, “Sea Change”.

By contrast, Conor's father only ever speaks of being integrated into the landscape and nature in death – both in his quote from *The Tempest* and in his claim that if he drowned 'he would be turning to jewels on the sea-bed.'

The signs that Conor is finally comfortable with his own integration into the landscape come at the end of the story, where the last lines contain his analysis of his own rite of passage – his own 'sea change':

*For everything the sea takes away, it brings something back. Something rich and strange. And maybe the best thing the sea brought me that autumn were the binoculars Grandad had thrown to the waves all those years ago. Or Myles, who'd rescued the precious bundle and kept it safe for me. Or the birds, or the memory of my dad as a boy, for the sea brought me those too. Or a part of myself, that was shell or shingle or rock.*<sup>86</sup>

In this final passage of the story, I bring together the opening quote from Myles, the quote from "Ariel's Song" and the idea from "An Chúilfhionn" of the treasure that was forbidden and has now been retrieved. Under the skin of the song about a loved one by the sea was that forgotten song of the taboo, which for me provided an extra layer and a tension that I could write into the story.

Like *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, "Sea Change" involves a motivation identified by Atwood for writing, that of 'bringing something or someone back from the dead'<sup>87</sup>. Conor cannot bring his father back, but he can resurrect his buried love of bird-watching, rehabilitating the father as a man who is like rather than unlike his son. Myles cannot bring his wife and children back, but he can bring new life to a child who is worried that he is betraying his father's memory. Myles has brought back from the dead and treasured the binoculars, waiting until 'the time is right' to give them to Conor. Like the wizard in *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, Myles is the savant disempowered by tragedy and saved by the intervention of a child.

"Sea Change" was written in the knowledge that it would be heard rather than read. I believed that the song and the verse from Shakespeare, both already established in

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, 156.

the oral tradition, would imbue the start of the story with familiarity, drawing listeners in. I employed alliteration, 'so helpful to the technique'<sup>88</sup> of the minstrel, echoing its use in "Ariel's Song". Myles's cottage, for example, is 'full of bleached branches, strange shells, starfish and sea anemones.' I also deliberately included other aids to the aural appreciation of the story, such as assonance and consonance. Conor muses that the parcels in the cottage might contain 'driftwood sculpted by the sea into human faces, or the delicate skeletons of small birds.' Phrases such as 'driftwood sculpted' with the echoing vowels of 'wood' and 'sculpt', and 'delicate skeletons', with two three-syllable words with the emphasis on the 'ell' sound of both, were written for the pleasure of hearing them aloud.

The resonance of the vanished song may be lost on many or most readers (or, more accurately, listeners, as the story has never been published in print form<sup>89</sup>). However, I believe there is an echo that comes from the writer's emotional engagement with the background to a story, and that the text carries a trickle of the song in the writer's head, what Atwood calls 'the process of thought... that leaves a trail, like a series of fossilized footprints'<sup>90</sup>.

I have a long-term project in mind for a collection of short stories about birds for children, which would include "Sea Change". Having reflected on the story here, I can see ways I would change it for publication, and one of these would be by making explicit the earlier version of "An Chúilfhionn", to intrigue more listeners with the mystery of the lost version.

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<sup>88</sup> Pound, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*, 109.

<sup>89</sup> After "Sea Change" was broadcast, I did receive emails from two adult listeners who asked if I was familiar with the earlier song.

<sup>90</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, 156.

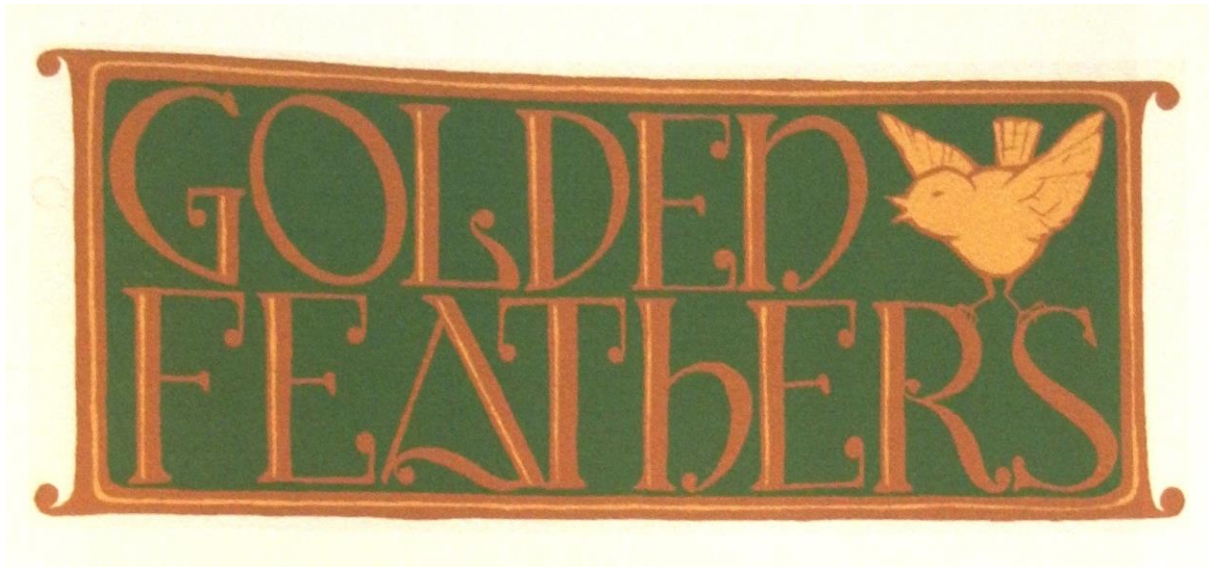


Figure 6: Title graphic of the funding proposal for the animated film, *Golden Feathers*

### **Golden Feathers**

My future collection of short stories would also include “Golden Feathers” which, like “Sea Change”, emerged from one of the commissions I have worked on as a writer and journalist. As well as writing radio stories to order, I have been commissioned to produce or assist with screen-writing proposals, some of which received initial funding but failed to make it to the big or small screen. One of these was for an animated version of an old Irish story, called by a variety of names but best known as “The King of Ireland’s Son” (of which Brendan Behan wrote one version), “The Bird of the Golden Land” or “The Golden Bird.”

Sometimes these film scripts which fail to attract further funding can find another use. For example, my poem “The Ballad of Síle na Gig” (see chapter 4) was written as a script for an animated short film about the stone fertility goddesses which are found on church buildings around Ireland. In the case of “Golden Feathers”, the script was published as a story in an anthology by Blackwater Press to raise funds for children with special needs.

The story is a classic quest where a king’s three sons set out to capture a golden songbird. The youngest son undertakes the arduous journey and tasks necessary, while the older two plan to take the credit for his efforts. The producer I was

working with, Tim Fernée of Moving Still, was keen to use an animation style based on illustrations from classic children’s books, with gold accents and a vintage poster effect. When asked to write a first draft of the script, I came up with the title “Golden Feathers”, which I thought would lend itself to stunning visuals and would also make an attractive book title if the designers wanted to use an illustrated book in the opening sequence or throughout the film. In fact, the proposal for the film had a stunning rich green graphic with the title in gold – along with a bird, of course – and evoked a classic children’s book from the late 1800s.

In order to help younger children to identify with the story, I wanted to bookend it with a contemporary child in a modern setting, who would enter into the fairy tale. I wondered where a child might unexpectedly find a golden feather, and I hit on the idea of a feather pillow, with the magical feather sticking out. From that point, it seemed natural to set the story in the room of a sick child, who travelled into the imaginary land of the story through the fields of his patchwork quilt – an unconscious memory of R.L. Stevenson’s poem, “The Land of Counterpane”<sup>91</sup>. The idea also followed an established thread in classic children’s stories by featuring a bed-bound child, as does *The Secret Garden* and *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

I decided that fragments of song in the form of lullabies and choruses would be an apt addition to the story. A sick child might often be sung to as well as read to, and the musical interludes would provide opportunities for visual sequences, for example, with the quilt becoming a landscape. A central motif of the original story was the singing of the golden bird, and making music a feature of the modern home in the story, with both Sean and his mother singing, would provide a link between the two worlds.

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<sup>91</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (London: Rand, McNally & Co, 1902), 33.



Figure 7: Still from *Golden Feathers*: Seán in the land of his quilt

I wrote the first draft of the treatment in the form of a short story rather than as a script. I thought this would give both the funders and the animators a stronger sense of the story, and we could then work on which parts of the plot we wanted to showcase and which to jettison or gloss over. However, I did obey some of the rules of screenplays. I wrote the story in the present tense, giving a sense of stage direction: ‘His mother smooths down the quilt’; ‘Sean opens his hand and looks at what he is holding – a golden feather that gleams in the sun as if it is alive.’ I tried to make the story as visual as possible, to spark images in the reader’s mind. I did this partly by using colour words, a vital element of many of the ballads of my childhood. My Uncle Gerry’s song, “The Blue Cuckoo”, also known as “The Irish Girl” [Roud 308] had a list of colours that were strung like beads in my mind when I heard it:

So red and rosy were her cheeks  
and yellow was her hair  
and costly was the gown of gold  
this Irish girl did wear.<sup>92</sup>

The colours I chose for “Golden Feathers” and especially for its songs, were gold and silver, to conjure up a sense of magic and wonder, and blue and green, for a sense of the natural world, especially the sky and the earth, which are central to the story.

In the original fairy tale, the main action of the story takes place in a land underground. In the version collected by Irish folklorist Jeremiah Curtin, for example, the brothers must break a hole in a rock to find the way down to the kingdom<sup>93</sup>, in other versions the land is at the bottom of a well.

I decided to move the action out of the earth and into the sky. I had several motivations for this change. I wanted to give the animators a better opportunity to use a blue, gold and green palette, one they could not employ in an underground world. I wanted to create a sense of clarity and brightness to echo the ‘Golden Age’

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<sup>92</sup> Lucy E. Broadwood, ed., *English Traditional Songs and Carols* (London and New York: Boosby & Co, 1908), 65, [https://archive.org/stream/englishtraditio00broagoog/englishtraditio00broagoog\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/englishtraditio00broagoog/englishtraditio00broagoog_djvu.txt).

<sup>93</sup> Jeremiah Curtin, “The Bird of the Golden Land”, *Béaloides* 11, no. 1/2 (December 1941): 14–24, doi:10.2307/20642560.



of illustrated children's books with their bright pages and gilt-embossed bindings. It also made more sense to me that a story with a bird at its heart would take place partly in the sky rather than in a subterranean world. I knew children would be familiar with precedents for this idea of a land at the top of a tree in "Jack and the Beanstalk" and in Enid Blyton's *The Faraway Tree* series (1939-1951), and I thought younger children would find such a place less frightening than the idea of going deep into the earth.

The colour gold occurred regularly in the ballad lullabies of my childhood. "Brahms' lullaby", often sung by my father, says of the angels, 'In dreams they unfold, Heaven's portals of gold.' My grandmother Kitty Cullen had a bed-time rhyme (as a child I called it her "sleeping song") which went:

Catherine at the wall for the golden ball,  
Pat in the middle for the golden fiddle,  
Romy at the side for the golden bride.

Of course, she substituted in the appropriate names of my siblings or cousins. Her rhyme was a variation on the traditional English nursery rhyme,

Go to bed first, a golden purse,  
Go to bed second, a golden pheasant,  
Go to bed third, a golden bird...

but my grandmother's version seemed particularly tailored to her home, where there were always at least three children to a bed. This idea of sleep itself as 'golden' is common in proverbs and folklore and is employed by Shakespeare in several plays including *Romeo and Juliette*:

Where unbruised youth with unstuffed brain  
Doth couch his limbs, there golden sleep doth reign <sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis, Arden Shakespeare, Three (Bloomsbury, 2015), 203.

Without realising it, I modelled the basic ballad fragment I use in the story on a popular verse from Thomas Dekker's play, *Patient Grissell*, which was also adapted by The Beatles in their Abbey Road song, "Golden Slumbers".

Golden slumbers kiss your eyes,  
Smiles awake you when you rise;  
Sleep, pretty wantons, do not cry,  
And I will sing a lullaby.<sup>95</sup>

Sean, the boy at the centre of "Golden Feathers", sings a lullaby which is close in both words and rhythm to Dekker's song:

Golden feathers fall and rise,  
Golden sleep close up your eyes,  
Silver stars and moonbeams take you  
Till the golden morning wake you.

The same rhythm is used throughout the story where rhyming couplets or four-line verses are interspersed. Several of the verses uses gold and silver together – 'Golden feathers, silver beak', and 'Silver stars... golden morning' – a classic combination in ballads, found for example in Sydney Dobell's ballad, "Keith of Ravelston":

Down the golden morning hill  
And thro' the silver meads.<sup>96</sup>

and in versions of "The Cherry Tree Carol" [Child 54, Roud 453] which I refer to in the Conclusion to this Context Statement:

He shall not be rocked in silver nor gold  
But in a wood cradle that rocks on the mould.

I was also mimicking the use of occasional verse in the fairy tales of my childhood. 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall' from "Snow White" is widely familiar, but I also loved

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<sup>95</sup> W. T. Young, *An Anthology of the Poetry of the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 134.

<sup>96</sup> Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed., *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 411.

versions of “Cinderella”, for example, which had rhyming couplets scattered throughout:

Shiver and quiver, my little tree,  
Silver and gold throw down over me.

Along with these gold and silver accents to the story, I wanted to evoke the colours of nature, as I do in one of the ‘quest’ couplets:

Over the green and under the blue  
Lies all that is false and all that is true.

This ‘over/under’ motif is one I remember loving from a rhyme – or the fragment of one – that I skipped to as a child, “Under the moon and over the stars”, and an echo of Padraic Colum’s quite different story, “The King of Ireland’s Son”, whose hero rode with

The blue sky above him...  
The green ground below him.<sup>97</sup>

The idea of dualities such as false and true fitted with my sense of both fairy tales and ballads, where true and false brides and true or false knights are stock characters. After Cinderella’s sisters cut off a toe or a heel to get their feet into the glass slipper, for instance, a little bird tells the prince as he rides away with the false bride:

Turn and peep, turn and peep,  
there's blood within the shoe,  
the shoe it is too small for her,  
the true bride waits for you.

Finally, some of the ballads I drew on for “Golden Feathers” were ones I had read as a child but never heard sung. I obsessively scanned the shelves of libraries and second hand shops for volumes of poetry and ballads, and internalised many of the

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<sup>97</sup> Padraic Colum, *The King of Ireland’s Son* (London: Henry Holt, 1916), 6–7.

words and characteristics of 19<sup>th</sup> century works. I memorised the words of ballads whose tunes I might learn years later, if ever. The songs had a musical quality even without the music, and some had a rousing lyric, such as one written by Dubliner P.J. McCall (1861-1919) about the Irish warrior king Brian Ború, which surely inspired the ‘all that is false and all that is true’ line in my story:

Brian A-Bu! Brian A-Bu!  
Death to the false, Life to the true!<sup>98</sup>

Along with Brian Ború was an English ballad, “Blondel’s Song”, which I had read as a child. It tells the tale of two brothers, one of whom takes the other’s inheritance, just as the brothers do in “Golden Feathers”:

Two brothers once did weeping part  
On the edge of the sea so blue;  
The one was fair and false of heart,  
The other was gallant and true.<sup>99</sup>

I considered adapting this Blondel verse to fit the three brothers of my story, rather than the two in the song, but as story evolved, with Sean very much at its centre and a present tense narration, Blondel’s grand scene-setting with an omniscient narrator no longer fitted. I did use several versions of the false/true and occasionally true/true lines in the story, however – as well as the lines quoted above, the last scene of the story has

Golden feathers, golden wings,  
The true prince comes, the true bird sings.

As I wrote, I kept the words spare, allowing the colours and the opposing concepts of falseness and truth to simplify what was a complex story. The present tense, unusual in stories for children that are not for teaching reading, is often employed in

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<sup>98</sup> M.J. Brown, *Ballads of Brian Boruimhe: Historical Ballad Poetry Of Ireland: Dublin and Belfast 1912* (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland Limited, 1912), 7.

<sup>99</sup> Menella Bute Smedley, *Lays and Ballads from English History Etc*, vol. 1 (London: James Burns, 1845), 45.

ballads, either throughout a song or at moments of tension in the story. One of my Uncle Gerry's songs, "Lord Thomas and Fair Eleanor" (Child no 73, Roud no 4), where the Lord is forced to marry a rich woman instead of the beautiful beloved, moves from the past tense to the present perfect tense as the denouement approaches with the true bride riding to the wedding of Thomas and the false bride, from

Lord Thomas, he was a bold forester..  
Fair Eleanor, she was a lady gay...

to

But she has dressed herself in the shining white,  
Her merry men all in green...  
And he's taken her by the lily-white hand,  
He's led her through the hall...

Many of the verses are variations on each other, opening with 'golden feathers, golden wings,' or 'golden fathers, silver beak' and have an identical musical structure, creating a sense of familiarity to ease children through the complications of the story.

Around the time that I heard that Irish Film Board funding was not forthcoming for any further development of the script, I was asked to contribute some work to the *Stories for Jamie* anthology. I suggested that "Golden Feathers" might be suitable, and offered to rewrite it in a more traditional story style – in the past tense, for example. The editor, however, found the present tense style appealing and insisted on taking the story as it was.

I have since been told by parents and teachers who have read the story aloud to their children that they found themselves singing the ballad fragments, rather than reading them as verse. I always sing the verses when I read the story aloud, but I was interested to discover that I was not alone. When I ask what tune they had used for the songs, parents and teachers are often vague, but occasionally I've managed to persuade them to hum a bar or two for me, and there is usually some similarity with the air of "Rock a bye, baby, on the tree top" rather than with Paul McCartney's

version of “Golden Slumbers”, which was probably in my mind as I wrote. I believe that basing the verses in the lullaby and ballad tradition, and having a sense of their music when I wrote them, is what has effected this spontaneous desire to sing parts of the story.

### **Chapter 3: Conclusion**

I have examined two of my short stories for children in this chapter, in light of a variety of song influences. These have ranged from modelling Joyce’s employment of ballad extracts in *Dubliners* to create meaning, hidden depth and atmosphere in a radio story, to using fragments of traditional-style song to give a fairy tale quality to an animation script that became a short story. The resonance of the vanished song in the radio story, as well as the impulse of readers to sing some of the lines of the published story, are evidence of what one modern Irish critic calls the ‘individual and community awareness of the enduring importance of song as a form of artistic expression and cultural communication’<sup>100</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> Nic Eoin, ‘Athbheatha Na hAmhrán (The Second Life of Song): Traditional Song in Modern Gaeltacht Prose Writing’, 168.

## Chapter 4: We Weave a Song Beneath Our Skin:

### Themes and motifs from ballads and folksongs in selected poems

In Chapters 2 and 3, I examined the influence of ballads on a selection of my work for children. In this Chapter 4, I focus on my writing for adults in two poetry collections.

Works considered in this chapter include the poems “In Memory of Frank Harte”, along with “Fionnuala”, “Niamh” and “Conn” from “The Children of Lir” sequence, and “Family Crest” from my first collection, *A Bone in My Throat* (2007); and “Queen of the May”, “The Ballad of Síle na Gig”, “Leonardo’s Cradle Song” and “Sonnet from a Five-String Banjo” from my second collection, *Strange Familiar* (2013). For reasons of space and because of the importance of the poem to my ballad heritage, I begin with a detailed interrogation of “In Memory of Frank Harte” and then analyse more briefly several other poems in both collections.

The centrality of ballads, songs and hymns to my work for adults has been identified by contemporary poets such as George Szirtes, Gerald Dawe and Brendan Kennelly. Szirtes asserts that my first collection *A Bone in My Throat* is the work of ‘a very adroit lyrical poet, very much in control of the musicality and sense of her lines, always on the edge of song rather than speech’<sup>101</sup>. Dawe is still more definitive: ‘Her poems are folk songs, abundantly aware of the mythical Irish and classical past, yet unerringly tuned to the here and now, the “breaking open of the heart”’<sup>102</sup>. Kennelly, hearing me read the opening poem of *A Bone in My Throat*, “Song of Eve”, at a creative writing workshop, asked me to sing it. I did, a week later, after composing a suitable air!

This chapter takes its title from the sonnet “Apple”, in which the apple in the Garden of Eden asserts that both itself and Eve ‘weave a song beneath our skin/a spell to draw each other in’<sup>103</sup>. The poem is one of a series of twenty-five, which is sub-

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<sup>101</sup> Cullen, *A Bone in My Throat*, back cover.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 12.

divided into five sequences of five sonnets, each sequence centred on a story in which a forbidden act is committed.<sup>104</sup>

In “Song of Eve”, Eve construes the voice of the apple as that of both ‘a mother crying out for her child’ and ‘a child crying out for its mother’, two universal and irresistible songs. In the course of writing about my process here, I have realised that envisaging Eve thus was a subconscious expression of the transformative and tempting power of song in my own work, of reclaiming the creation myth for my own creativity. Margaret Atwood describes the necessity for artists of this kind of recovery:

All (writers)... must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more.<sup>105</sup>

### **Poem 1: In Memory of Frank Harte**

Bringing what was lost ‘back to the land of the living’ was especially pertinent for me in writing “In Memory of Frank Harte”, the poem of mine that most clearly and widely references the ballad tradition in Ireland. I will examine this poem in depth as an exemplar of song references in my work.

I was out of the country when singer and song collector Harte died in June 2005. I was shocked to hear of his passing, and that I had missed his ‘wake’. Because I hadn’t been there to mourn with his family and his wide circle of friends – singers, musicians, poets and many others – I felt compelled to write an elegy for him. To be worthy of its subject, the elegy had to be a repository of songs. Before I wrote the poem, I re-read Harte’s *Songs of Dublin*, with his pithy and personal notes accompanying each ballad.

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<sup>104</sup> The 25 sonnets are excluded from consideration as part of the published work of this PhD, as they were written as part of my M.Phil. in Creative Writing. I mention them here as part of the wider theme of ballads and aurality in my work.

<sup>105</sup> Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, 178.



In my rough working for the poem, I jotted down lines and themes that most resonated with me from Harte's repertoire of songs from Dublin and further afield, and from songs I had heard in his company over the years. I subdivided the songs into categories: those that featured trees, or Dublin street characters, or rebellion; songs of workmen – on railways, in shipyards or mines; songs with unusual vocabulary – words that were obsolete, or that carried the peculiar accent of a place, time or trade.

I wrote down elements of Harte's life story that had stayed with me, beginning with childhood in his father's pub in Chapelizod, between two staples of Dublin ballads: the Phoenix Park on one side and the Liffey running towards Dublin city on the other. I noted his memories of overhearing old soldiers in the pub discussing their experiences in Flanders, mispronouncing 'Ypres' as 'Wipers' (anecdotal evidence suggests that this pronunciation was common among the British regiments). I also included his 'day job' as a lecturer in architecture – I had occasionally visited him in the Dublin Institute of Technology where he worked, to talk about an upcoming programme over a cup of coffee or to collect one of his gift packages of songs and booklets.

The research for the elegy crystallised under three main headings: Harte himself, as architect, collector and singer; the themes/motifs of the songs he sang and collected; and the structure and flavour of those songs, their vocabulary and their refrains. These three threads are sometimes difficult to pull apart from the fabric of the elegy, as two or more combine in many lines or thoughts.

The obvious choice of form for an elegy for a ballad-singer and collector might seem to be the ballad itself. It's a form I am familiar with, not only as a listener, reader and singer, but also as a writer of the occasional ballad – most recently, a street ballad about the women of the 1916 rebellion for *Eastrogen Rising: A Rebel Cabaret* at the Five Lamps Arts Festival in Dublin. However, I felt that choosing any one ballad form for this elegy would exclude the many other kinds of ballads that Harte sang and collected. Ballad elegies, such as those for James Connolly or Kevin Barry (discussed later in this chapter), are often in four- or eight-line verses. They typically recount

the life or the last days of the celebrated subject, and often end with an injunction to listeners to remember, pray for or weep for him or her. I wanted the freedom of a looser form, to include some rhyming sections near the beginning and at the end, scattered rhymed couplets and some internal rhyme, and some sections of blank verse, so I could give the fullest possible flavour of the subject and his songs.

### 1a) Harte the man: singer, collector and architect

The opening line of the elegy, ‘Oh where, oh where is the voice of Frank Harte?’ is an echo of the first line of “James Connolly”, one of the songs Harte loved to sing: ‘Where, oh where is our James Connolly?’

**JAMES CONNOLLY**

Where oh where is our James Connol - ly? Where oh  
 where can that brave man - be? He is - gone to or - ganise the  
 u - nion - That work - ing men might yet be free.

Where oh where is the citizen army?  
 Where oh where can the brave band be?  
 They have gone to join the great rebellion  
 And break the bonds of slavery.

And who'll be there to lead the van?  
 Who will be there to lead the van?  
 Oh who should there be but our James Connolly,  
 The hero of each working man?

Who carries high our burning flag?  
 Who carries high our burning flag?  
 Oh who but James Connolly, all pale and wounded  
 Carries high our burning flag?

They carried him up to the jail.  
 They carried him up to the jail.  
 And 'twas there that they shot him one bright May morning  
 And quickly laid him in his grave.

Who mourns now for our James Connolly?  
 Who mourns now for the fighting men?  
 Oh lay me down in yon green garden  
 And make my bearers union men.

We laid him down in yon green garden,  
 With union men on every side  
 And we swore that we'd make one mighty union  
 And fill that gallant man with pride.

So come all you noble young Irish men,  
 Come join with me for liberty.  
 And we will forge a mighty weapon  
 And break the bonds of slavery.

WE SERVE NEITHER KING NOR KAISER  
 BUT IRELAND

The various rebellions throughout Irish history have each produced a crop of good patriotic songs, and the 1916 produced very few. This is one of the few. Besides being a leader of the rebellion, James Connolly was also a leader of the Trades Union movement and the Citizen army mentioned was originally organised to protect union members at meetings during the formative period when they came under attack from police and anti-union factions. It then joined in the struggle for national independence. When the English decided to execute the leaders of the rebellion James Connolly, who was wounded in the fighting, was unable to stand, so they put him sitting on a chair and shot him. When I recorded this song some years ago I said in the notes that I knew nothing of its origin. Since then I have learned that it was written by the Cork-born poet, Patrick Galvin. When I met Patrick Galvin I mentioned that I had been singing the song for years without knowing that he had written it. He was pleased that the song had been accepted by the singers and said that it was not important that they should know who the author was.

Figure 8: “James Connolly”, from *Songs of Dublin* by Frank Harte (1993)

The ballad was written by Cork poet Patrick Galvin (1927-2011), who also wrote “My Love Came to Dublin”, a timeless ballad that I chose for my wedding ceremony, editing out the bleaker verses for the occasion. “James Connolly” is a lament that tells us that its subject is ‘gone to organise’ – that, even after his execution for his part in the 1916 rebellion, Connolly’s spirit lives on. Galvin was consciously or

unconsciously echoing the American ballad “Joe Hill”, written by Alfred Hayes (1911-1985) and Earl Robinson (1910-91), about another murdered activist who is ‘alive as you and me’, because ‘whatever they forgot to kill went on to organise’. Like Galvin, Hayes and Robinson, I wanted to evoke that idea of the surviving spirit, by giving a flavour of as many of Harte’s songs as I could in a narrative context or series of narrative contexts, and by bringing them into the present tense, rather than simply enumerating the songs. The elegy moves from past to present tense in describing Harte’s singing and songs, and in evoking him first as a person who has passed away and then as a person who lives on and has agency.

I also wanted to convey how songs make history present by giving the characters and events of the past an immediacy, something that Harte himself accomplished in his singing. He frequently quoted the poet Brendan Kennelly, who said in his poem “Living Ghosts” that ‘all the songs are living ghosts and long for a living voice’<sup>106</sup>.

Kennelly’s poem, about a singing session, opens with the lines:

Richard Broderick celebrates  
This winter's first and only fall of snow  
With a midnight rendering  
Of the Bonny Bunch of Roses O.

A ballad about roses to mark a fall of snow must seem strange to those who do not know the song, “The Bonny Bunch of Roses O” [Roud 664], one of the many about the Napoleonic wars in the Anglo-Irish singing tradition, in which the roses are a symbol of a united England, Scotland and Ireland, and Napoleon’s attempt to win them is ‘o’erpower’d by drifting snow’ in Moscow.

I try to capture this immediacy in the lines of my poem that begin:

He peopled the streets with Zozimus and Moses,  
summoned Billy in the Bowl,  
launched a flotilla of ships up the Liffey, led by the Calabar.

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<sup>106</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *Familiar Strangers: New and Selected Poems (1960-2004)* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2004), 463.

'Zozimus' was the nickname of the blind Dublin street singer Michael Moran (c1794 – 1846) who wrote and carried songs that are celebrated in the Irish singing tradition today, many of them popularised by Harte himself. One of these, "The Finding of Moses", is a comic retelling of the biblical story with a Dublin twist: although it takes place 'On Egypt's banks, contagious [sic] to the Nile', Pharaoh threatens to kick the baby's errant father 'from the Dodder down to Donnybrook' – juxtapositioning a Dublin river and one of the villages it flows through with the African setting of the bible story. This appropriation of the story of Moses into the Dublin vernacular always struck me as the perfect example of one of the most endearing qualities of ballads: their ability to make an ancient story immediate and local, thereby inviting a stronger emotional connection with the listeners. The poet Patrick Kavanagh recognised the appeal of such 'localisation' in his poem, "A Christmas Childhood", in which he brings another biblical story to the hills of his native Monaghan:

Cassiopeia was over  
Cassidy's hanging hill,  
I looked and three whin bushes rode across  
The horizon — the Three Wise Kings.<sup>107</sup>

The ballad of "The Twangman" is often credited to Zozimus, although Harte disputed this authorship<sup>108</sup>. The ballad mentions a character called 'Billy in the Bowl', who is among those I reference in the poem, and many of Harte's ballads feature ships and boats, including "The Cruise of the Calabar", a comic song for 'dry-land sailors' about a barge on the canal.

I used Harte's background in architecture to give structure to some of the poem. 'Dublin made him' is a reference to a poem Harte used in his *Songs of Dublin*, "Dublin Made Me" ('and no little town with the country closing in upon its streets') by Donagh McDonagh<sup>109</sup>, but I invert the idea of the city making the man by writing that Harte 'in turn built his city out of old songs', as Joyce reconstructed the city of

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<sup>107</sup> Antoinette Quinn, ed., *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems* (Allen Lane, 2004), 41.

<sup>108</sup> Harte, *Songs of Dublin*, 45.

<sup>109</sup> Harte, *Songs of Dublin*.

his youth in *Ulysses*<sup>110</sup>. The line, 'restored lost bridges/so the dead could cross back to us' dovetails the two ideas of preserving architecture and reviving the heroes of old ballads. The bridges that Harte created and restored were bridges to the language, folk memories, character(s) and places of the past.

### **1b) Themes and motifs of Harte's songs**

In describing Harte's voice as 'a rebel blast across shivering rooftops', I invoked his huge repertoire of songs of Irish rebels. Later in the poem I suggest he is 'following someone he called Henry Joy', a reference to a song [Roud 3008] in which an Ulster man 'followed Henry Joy' McCracken, a Presbyterian founder of the United Irishmen movement who was hung in Belfast for his leadership of the unsuccessful 1798 rebellion in Ulster.

As a young child, I heard such 'rebel songs' sung proudly and affectingly by my maternal and paternal grandparents or their siblings. At the age of ten, after hearing news coverage and discussion of Bloody Sunday in Derry, I even wrote my own collection of about a dozen angry songs, mostly set to familiar Irish airs. One of them, "Rights", which I include below, has neither literary merit nor any nuanced view of the situation. What it does illustrate is that I had already absorbed the form of such ballads. The first verse lays out the historic situation, the second the present one, the third paints a picture of general misery, and the last invokes God to bring the situation to an end. The final couplet of "The Croppy Boy": 'Good people all as you pass me by, Oh say a prayer for the Croppy Boy' was no doubt one of my inspirations.

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<sup>110</sup> Joyce famously stated: 'I want [...] to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book.' Quoted in Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, Indiana UP 1960 Edn., p.67

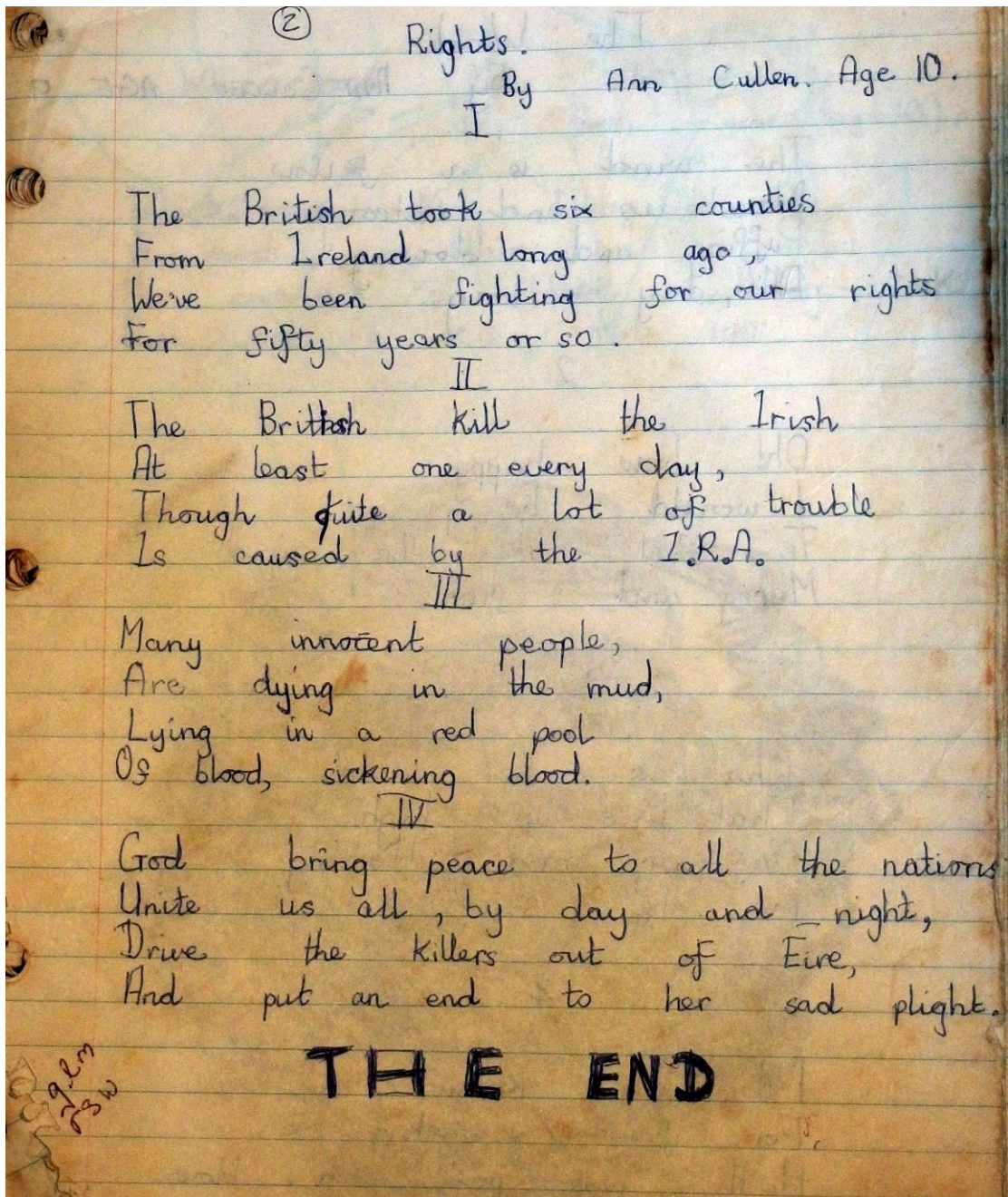


Figure 9: "Rights", a ballad poem from my own notebook, written at the age of 10

I believe I am alone among my siblings in having heard sessions of 'rebel songs'. For many years of what are still referred to as 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland, such songs, even if they treated of rebellions long past such as that of 1798, became an object of discomfort, especially for middle-class Dubliners. My father, whose own father came from Tyrone in Northern Ireland, worried that singing these songs might signal support for the IRA campaign, or discriminate against English people generally, and this feeling was widespread during the 1970s and 1980s. It made the singing of

such ballads even at family events more unlikely, and affected my own ability to appreciate some of the songs. It is only in recent years, by listening attentively to recordings or live performances of those songs, that I have begun to hear again their poignant resonance when sung unaccompanied by singers such as Harte (and in the case of “Henry Joy McCracken”, by Scottish singer Dick Gaughan, whose intensely emotional voice made me cry the first time I heard it). In many of these songs, the substance or ending is the execution of the rebel, and Harte’s plaintive delivery always underlines for me the lonesome, human aspect of the death and those left behind. In “Henry Joy McCracken”, the penultimate verse not only foreshadows Joy’s death, but reflects on the deaths of other participants in the fight:

And many a lassie mourned her lad,  
And mother mourned her boy;  
For youth was strong in that gallant throng  
That followed Henry Joy.

The sadness of Harte’s voice in such songs compelled me to conceive of a redemptive role for him in my elegy, in somehow reversing these young deaths. ‘He’s unlocking Kilmainham, he’s opening Mountjoy’ references the two main jails in Dublin, the former where the 1916 rebel leaders were executed, an event commemorated in many Harte songs such as “James Connolly”, the latter where rebels such as Kevin Barry ‘gave his young life for the cause of liberty’ [Roud 3014]. ‘He is sending home safely a rosy-cheeked boy’ is an echo of 1798 rebel Seán O’Farrell in “The Rising of the Moon” [Roud 9634] whose cheeks ‘were all a-glow’, and a reversal of the ‘pale, pale cheek’ of the dead lover in the 1798 song, “The Wind That Shakes the Barley” [Roud 2994] as well as of the aforementioned “James Connolly” song, where he is taken ‘all pale and wounded’. My ‘rosy-cheeked boy’ also expresses the youth of many of those who are put to death in such songs, such as “Kevin Barry” [Roud 3014] who was ‘just a boy of eighteen summers,’ or the heart-

breaking "Croppy Boy"<sup>111</sup> [Roud 1030], where the young rebel is marched past his own front door where his family bewails his fate, and on up the hill to the gallows:

As I was climbing up Wexford Hill,  
Well who could blame me if I cried my fill?  
I looked behind and I looked before,  
But my tender mother I shall ne'er see more.

Many contemporary Irish poets, including such giants as Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon, have used, re-imagined and referenced the ballads of 1798, employing both what some would call 'sectarian' songs (ie those that glorify one religious tradition, in this case that of Catholicism) and 'inclusive' songs (which celebrate the 1798 Rising as a joint enterprise of Protestants and Catholics) as one researcher into their poetry and the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion attests:

While Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies" and "Craig's Dragoons" can be read, respectively, as reflecting the negative, sectarian Catholic versions of "The Croppy Boy" and "Clare's Dragoons," his "Munro" and "A Postcard from North Antrim" depict an affirmative communion between Catholic and Protestant, a rapprochement underscored by the communal singing of ballads such as "Henry Joy McCracken," "General Munroe," or "The Social Thistle and the Shamrock"... Similarly, Muldoon's "The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants," through its allusion to "The Croppy Boy," depicts both the positive history of Protestant-Catholic cooperation in the '98 and the negative reality of sectarian violence in eighteenth-century and contemporary Ulster and Europe. [Both] anticipate the efforts of the Wexford Commemoration Committee and other groups, nationalist and loyalist, to avoid the sectarian commemorations of years past.<sup>112</sup>

The problem remains, however, that the 'inclusivity' of acknowledging the Protestant leadership of the United Irishmen is not necessarily appreciated by Unionists or Loyalists today, whose object is to preserve the union with Britain and prevent any moves towards a united Ireland.

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<sup>111</sup> The rebel 'Croppies' were so named after the cropped hairstyle they copied from French revolutionaries.

<sup>112</sup> August Gering, 'To Sing of '98: The United Irishmen Rising and the Ballad Tradition in Heaney and Muldoon', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 10, no. 2 (1999): 175–6, doi:10.1080/10436929908580240.



It seemed to me that Harte dissociated these songs from the rancour they had sometimes attracted by going a step further than merely celebrating the Protestant contribution to the fight for Irish republicanism, for example by pairing United Irishmen songs with songs of the Unionist/Loyalist tradition such as “Croppies Lie Down” [Roud V17442] on his 1998 album that commemorated the 1798 rebellion. For this reason, I wanted my elegy to give him, in death, the power of saving not only the songs but the young men who had died in them, ‘sending home safely’ the rosy-cheeked boys who fought.

Trees were another constant motif in the ballads of my childhood which I heard again from Harte’s singing. My line, ‘trees where men were hung’ refers to many songs of Irish rebellion, for example “Roddy McCorley”, who ‘died upon the gallows tree’<sup>113</sup> or “Kevin Barry” who ‘High upon the gallows tree... gave his young life/For the cause of liberty’. Trees ‘where birds told fates’ often featured in these rebel songs, for example, in the haunting ballad of the 1798 rebellion, “The Croppy Boy”, ‘the birds did whistle and sweetly sing.... and the song they sang was “Old Ireland Free”’<sup>114</sup>.

Another characteristic of trees in Harte’s songs is the fact that people meet, die and are buried under them. ‘Trees where lovers were blessed or betrayed’ is how I bring these songs together in my poem. Songs in this category include “Miss Brown” [Roud 15], an eerie ballad about a sailor who murders his lover after promising ‘strange things they will happen, strange sights we will see.’ Afterwards ‘he laid his poor Mary underneath a green tree.’<sup>115</sup> The phrase, ‘green grows the laurel’ features in the same song. Patrick Galvin’s plaintive ballad, “My Love Came to Dublin” has ‘I’ll go out to the woods of the birch trees and branches, and I’ll ask them to raise up their arms in the air’<sup>116</sup> – conveying a sympathy between the abandoned lover and the trees. ‘A

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<sup>113</sup> Frank Harte and Donal Lunny, *1798 - The First Year of Liberty* (Dublin: Hummingbird, 1998).

<sup>114</sup> Harte and Lunny, *1798 - The First Year of Liberty*.

<sup>115</sup> Harte, *Songs of Dublin*, 24.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

board of alder and a board of holly'<sup>117</sup> are used to make a coffin for the drunken husband whose wife has found a younger man in "Oh the Brown and The Yellow Ale". The grave of Napoleon (or Boney, as he is often called in these songs) is 'surrounded with trees called the fair weeping willow'<sup>118</sup>.

Harte collected songs about the area known as the Liberties of Dublin, where Huguenot weavers, fleeing persecution in France, established a thriving trade in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the local names in the area bear witness to the trade, such as The Tenters, called after the hooks on which the fabrics were stretched to dry, and Weavers Square. A song by the above-mentioned Zozimus, "Ye Men of Sweet Liberties Hall", is addressed to these weavers whose trade was doomed by the 'vile Act of Union' of Britain and Ireland in 1801, which saw Dublin flooded with cheap fabrics from England. I tried to imbue sections of the poem with the sounds of weaving, invoking the onomatopoeic quality found in ballads, often those concerning trains, where the clacketty-clack rhythm echoes the sound of the wheels on the track. I listened to some sound recordings of looms and, in the line 'To the whirr of the loom of the Liberties weavers', I tried to mimic the rhythm of weavers at work with the long vowels of 'whirr' and 'loom' imitating the shuttle flying back and forth in a soft, soothing motion and the shorter, consonant-heavy phrase 'Liberties weavers' meant to convey the thudding of the weaving comb which effectively hammers the threads tightly together after each line is spun. The poem also ends with a reference to the Harte the singer as a weaver, who 'has spun his last song.'

### **1c) Vocabulary and refrains of Harte's songs**

Another of the fascinations of old songs for me is how they preserve or popularise words that are otherwise obsolete, or whose use would be confined to specialist groups. As a child I remember first noticing such words or phrases in hymns: 'blaspheme' or 'the foe malign'. This ability of songs to preserve words is referenced by Frances Browne (1816-1879), the 'blind poet of Donegal' in one of her own songs:

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>118</sup> Frank Harte and Donal Lunny, *My Name Is Napoleon Bonaparte* (Dublin: Hummingbird, 2001).

The page may be lost and the pen long forsaken,  
And weeds may grow wild o'er the brave heart and hand;  
But ye are still left when all else hath been taken,  
Like streams in the desert, sweet songs of our land. <sup>119</sup>

My line about Harte's voice as 'a keening for dead trades and dreams' refers to the many songs that lament for or list trades that are no longer with us, as well as the broken dreams of revolutionaries that peppered Harte's repertoire. As the contemporary songwriter Pete St John writes of the cooper's barrel-making skill in his song, "Dublin in the Rare Ould Times", 'Like my house that fell to progress, my trade's a memory'<sup>120</sup>. A list of occupations and the streets where they were found is in "Dublin Jack of All Trades" [Roud 3017]. 'Keening', from the Irish 'caoineadh' or 'crying', is a traditional wailing in lament for the dead, carried out over the coffin.

I reference several unusual words from the ballads of Harte in the stanza which begins, 'He sang of lost worlds with lost words'. 'Tabinets' (fabrics made of a mix of silk and wool), is one of the specialist weaving words in "Ye Men of Sweet Liberties Hall". A 'twangman', according to Harte's notes on the song of the same name, was a man who sold 'a kind of sweetmeat' – possibly stretched toffee. 'Waxies' are cobblers, so called after the wax they used to waterproof their thread, who feature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Dublin song "The Waxies' Dargle", about an annual day trip to the Dublin port suburb of Ringsend, while 'swaddies', from the song, "The Spanish Lady" [Roud 542], is an obsolete word for rank and file British soldiers, now often known as 'squaddies'. Other interesting words adopted from ballads into my poem include 'fornenst' a Scottish/Northern Irish word for 'up against', used in the phrase, 'I sat fornenst a hawthorn tree' in the song, "Sarah Jane". Along with these words which have been preserved in the amber of old songs, I added a series of nonsense lines as refrains – a feature of ballads defined by one researcher into the Child ballads as

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<sup>119</sup> H. Halliday Sparling, ed., *Irish Minstrelsy: Being a Selection of Irish Songs, Lyrics and Ballads* (London: Walter Scott, 1887), 2.

<sup>120</sup> Harte, *Songs of Dublin*, 76.

the syllabic nonsense of the refrain or burden-line... which brighten the tone and add gaiety while they relax the strain on recollection.<sup>121</sup>

The refrains I used were influenced by ‘right tan tan tena’, from “The Rambling Irishman” [Roud 3572], which was recorded by my uncle Gerry and which I heard sung in Frank’s company many times, and ‘whack fol de diddle all the dirol day’ from “Whack Fol The Diddle”<sup>122</sup> also known as “God Bless England”, Peadar Kearney’s ballad that sarcastically praises England’s civilising effect on Ireland.

This use of extracts from songs is an established element in modern Irish-language poetry, and according to Crosson is also a wider phenomenon:

a common characteristic of primary oral cultures where the composition process involves the incorporation of elements from previous songs... [is] also found in contemporary Irish poetry. Both Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh... include lines, phrases or sometimes entire verses from the song tradition within their work.<sup>123</sup>

The last stanza of the elegy is a reference to the first Harte song I ever heard, “Henry, my Son” [Child 12, Roud 10], which I referred to in Chapter 1 for its early influence and in Chapter 2 for its use of incremental repetition. In the song, the mother asks her poisoned son ‘what will you leave’ various members of the family. To his children, he tells her, he will leave ‘the moon and stars’ (in some versions, ‘the keys of heaven’). So, when I ask: ‘Oh what shall he leave us? The sun and the moon, and the air when it carries an old Dublin tune’, I am adapting this ‘moon and stars’ phrase and adding to it the air that will continue to carry Harte’s songs. I also bring the elegy ‘full circle’, as is often done in the ballad tradition: opening with a ‘Where, oh where..?’ in an echo of that first ever Harte song, which opens, ‘Where have you been all day?’ and ending with another “Henry, My Son” reference.

The fact that my elegy has become a feature of the annual Frank Harte Festival, set up after Harte’s death by his friends in the Góilín traditional singing club, is a great

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<sup>121</sup> Bertrand Harris Bronson, *The Ballad as Song* (California: University of California Press, 1969), 168.

<sup>122</sup> Harte, *Songs of Dublin*, 52–53.

<sup>123</sup> Crosson, *The Given Note: Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry*, 24.

pleasure to me. For a decade now, I have read the elegy at the festival, and it will feature in a new edition of *Songs of Dublin* to be published in 2017. This recognition by traditional singers that the poem belongs in their tradition is, in a small way, the equivalent for me of what Ewan McColl achieved when his song, “Freeborn Man of the Travelling People”<sup>124</sup> was embraced as part of their repertoire by travellers themselves.

### **Poems 2, 3 and 4: “Fionnuala”, “Niamh” and “Conn” from “The Children of Lir” sequence**

I have written in Chapter 2 about the story of the Children of Lir, who are transformed into swans by their jealous stepmother, in the context of *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, pointing out how my redeemed swan upends Thomas Moore’s ballad, “The Song of Fionnuala”.

In *A Bone in My Throat* I revisit this legend in a sequence of five poems from the point of view of five of its characters (2007, pp. 72-77). In the *Coat* book, I had reclaimed the idea of the enchanted, frozen swan of Ireland’s best-loved legend and transformed it into a swan who was able to ‘take to the air in fine flying form’ with ‘the first song in her throat’ one of celebration. Moore’s ballad is one of stasis: although it looks forward to a time when alteration will come, this transformation is effected only by death:

When shall the swan, her death-note singing,  
Sleep, with wings in darkness furl'd?  
When will heav'n, its sweet bell ringing,  
Call my spirit from this stormy world?<sup>125</sup>

In my poem “Fionnuala”, one of the five poems in the Children of Lir sequence, I look closely at the other moment of transformation in the story, when Fionnuala and her

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<sup>124</sup> Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger, *The Travelling People*, LP, Radio Ballads (London: Argo Records DA 133, 1971).

<sup>125</sup> Moore, *Irish Melodies*, 22.

brothers are turned into swans. Again, as in *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat*, I use the image of snow in connection with the swans. At this point of the legend, there is no snow, although during the nine hundred years of their lives as swans, the four children spend three hundred years on the freezing Sea of Moyle:

And they were crying and lamenting the hardship of their life, and the cold of the night and the greatness of the snow and the hardness of the wind... and as they rested... their feet and their wings and their feathers froze to the rock.<sup>126</sup>

For the Fionnuala in my poem, the first inkling that her family are being shapeshifted into swans is ‘a sudden flurry of snow’ – this is how, in one image, I combined her impression of the feathers appearing with a foreshadowing of the children’s fate.

As I have outlined earlier in this chapter, birds are a regular feature in rebel songs, but they also feature in songs with more bucolic themes: in the northern Irish song “Sarah Jane”<sup>127</sup>, which was recorded by my uncle Gerry Cullen as well as by Harte, the landrail (an old name for the corncrake) frankly tells the lovelorn narrator, ‘You may as well go home and make your poem/For you’ll ne’er wed with Sarah Jane’. In an unusual twist on unrequited love songs, the lover tells us at the end of the song that ‘the pain it is decreasing daily’ and he wishes that his love ‘may... always have happy days’.

Throughout the Children of Lir sequence of poems, I employ many images of birds as menacing creatures, in contrast to the way they were almost always portrayed in the songs of my childhood as symbols of love or creatures who shared confidences with humans<sup>128</sup>. One of the most common motifs I remember, often occurring in the last verse, is that of the singer/narrator wishing to become a bird, to fly to the loved one

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<sup>126</sup> Lady Augusta Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha de Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland, Arranged and Put into English by Lady Gregory* (London: J. Murray, 1904), 284, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14465/14465-h/14465-h.htm>.

<sup>127</sup> Frank Harte and Donal Lunny, *Daybreak and a Candle End*, CD (Dublin: Faetaín, 1987).

<sup>128</sup> The destructive bird did occasionally dive out of the more comic revolutionary verses, such as this one quoted in a monumental work by piper and collector, Terry Moylan: ‘Oh Lord above, send down a dove/With beak as sharp as razors/To cut the throats of the dirty louts/That shot our brave Free Staters!’ Terry Moylan, *The Indignant Muse: Poetry and Songs of the Irish Revolution 1887-1926* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2016).

and land on his or her breast. In songs where the lover is a soldier, the narrator often wants to heal his wounds in this way, as happens in one of my uncle Gerry's best-loved songs, "The Bonny Light Horseman" (Roud no 1185), where the lover has been killed fighting in the Napoleonic wars:

If I were a blackbird and had wings to fly,  
I would fly to the spot where my true love does lie,  
And with my little fluttering wings his wounds I would heal,  
And it's all of the night on his breast I'd remain.<sup>129</sup>

Another example is in "The Blue Cuckoo" [Roud 308], also known as "The Irish Girl", where several flying creatures are mentioned in this context:

I wish I was a butterfly, I'd fly to my love's breast.  
I wish I was nightingale, I'd sing my love to rest.  
I wish I was a blue cuckoo, I'd sing till morning clear,  
I'd sit and sing for you my girl that once I loved so dear.

The motif also occurs in the popular "If I Were a Blackbird" [Roud 387] which begins:

If I were a blackbird, I'd whistle and sing,  
And I'd follow the ship that my true love sails in,  
And on the top riggings, I'd there build my nest  
And I'd pillow my head on his lily white breast.

Such stanzas are so commonplace that they are described as 'floater verses'<sup>130</sup>, that is, verses that are attached to many different songs.

I had referenced birds from folk ballads in my elegy for Frank Harte, as creatures who 'told fates'. But in the poem sequence of "The Children of Lir", birds are a darker presence, particularly in the images of birds around Aoife, the wicked stepmother who wants to destroy the children of her new husband – even though they are the children of her dead sister, Niamh. In the poem "Niamh", instead of the

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<sup>129</sup> Terry Moylan, *The Age of Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition 1776-1815* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2001), 139.

<sup>130</sup> Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger, *Travellers' Songs from England and Scotland*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), 139.

'little fluttering wings' of birds which heal wounds, the wings that Niamh sees fanning out over her evil sister are 'obscuring the sky'. Unlike the dreamers in countless songs who 'would fly' to their lovers, Aoife is doubly incapable of flight: she is caged with a damaged wing, shrunken by her ill-feeling 'till her heart was a pent-up bird, a nightjar with a dead wing.' Throughout the poem, the image of the gentle bird continues to be subverted – Aoife's plot to destroy the children is described by their mother as 'a monstrous egg' that Aoife sits on, 'to hatch four swans out of my broken brood.' Her rage is 'white as the sun on a waxen wing,' her torment

A beak that pecked and hissed through all her nights  
A long neck snaking into all her dreams.

The sweet love-birds of ballads are transformed into nightmarish creatures and the graceful necks of swans are shapeshifted into snakes, those creatures of sexual temptation that lead to damnation and doom.

In "Conn", my poem written from the point of view of the youngest of Lir's children, I look with a child's eye at the fateful carriage ride with their stepmother to the lakeside where she will transform them into swans:

I'd only begun to stumble through my letters  
I could not read her face

I use this clear child's voice to subvert the persistent idea in song and story that swans are always beautiful womanly creatures. Such womanly swans appear in "Molly Bawn" (discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to *The Magical Mystical Marvelous Coat*), where the young man shoots his love, believing her to be a swan, and in this version of "The Two Sisters", also called "The Bonny Swans" [Child 10, Roud 8]:

Oh father, oh daddy, here swims a swan,  
With a hey ho and a bonny o!  
It's very like a gentle woman.  
The swans swim so bonny o!



I begin my poem “Conn” with the child’s voice telling us that the portrayal of the family as swans is never right – but it is not until the end of the poem that he explains why. Between those two points, he emphasises the fact that ‘we were only children’, leading up to the moment where he clarifies that they started out not as white swans but as ‘cygnets... stubble-feathered, the colour of mud or sackcloth’ – an original twist to the story.

I give the wicked stepmother, Aoife, some characteristics of devoted women from ballads – she wears ‘a hat of green velvet’, like the woman in “The Curragh Of Kildare” [Roud 583] who says she will dress as a man (‘in velvet so green I will appear’) so that she can meet with her soldier lover at the Curragh camp. Aoife too is prepared to go to extreme lengths to win her husband’s love, but in her case she transforms his children rather than herself. Green velvet is also associated with fairies, as in the Ulster song, “John McAnanty’s Courtship” [Roud 6875], where the fairy king McAnanty courts a young woman:

The dress that he wore was a velvet so green,  
All trimmed with gold lace and as bright as the sea.  
And he said, Love, I'll make you my own fairy queen  
If you are but willing to ramble with me<sup>131</sup>.

I put Aoife in fairy clothing because she has elements of the wicked fairy in stories such as “Sleeping Beauty” – taking magical and long-lasting vengeance on those she feels have wronged her. The Children of Lir have a harsher fate than the household of “Sleeping Beauty”. Instead of sleeping for one hundred years, and waking to continue their normal lives, they are forced to endure hardship in the form of swans for nine hundred years, and resume their human shape only to die.

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<sup>131</sup> Huntington and Herrmann, *Sam Henry’s Songs of the People*, 354.

### Poem 5: “Family Crest”

Song elements feature in a more whimsical way in my poem, “Family Crest”, which was written shortly before my Poetry Ireland Introductions reading<sup>132</sup> in 2004, when I realised that the poems I had planned to read were serious and I needed something to provide light entertainment. I decided to focus on my family crest, which has a mermaid combing her yellow hair stretched on the top. The result was a poem about this iconic female figure, no poor “Little Mermaid” but a femme fatale siren in control of her sexuality.

I took the rhythm for the first and last verses of the poem from “The Spanish Lady”<sup>133</sup> [Roud 542], a Dublin song of Harte’s, which is also about a sensual woman – in this case, one who is seen washing her feet by the narrator of the song. In some versions, she is later seen washing and/or combing her hair. Here are the first two lines of the ballad, followed by the first two lines of my poem, with matching stresses (x represents an unstressed and | a stressed syllable). The two openings even rhyme with each other:

x | x | x | x | x | x  
As I walked out through Dublin City  
| x | x | x |  
At the hour of twelve at night

x | x | x | x | x | x  
Reclining on the coat of arms my  
| x | x | x |  
forebears bore into the fight

My poem echoes “The Spanish Lady” in other ways – the song proposes that the woman

With her ivory comb and her mantle fine  
Would make a wife for the Provost Marshall  
Drunk on brandy and claret wine,

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<sup>132</sup> An annual platform for emerging poets funded by the Arts Council of Ireland

<sup>133</sup> Harte, *Songs of Dublin*, 48–49.

while “Family Crest” speaks of ‘luring men to rocks in late night bars’. My mermaid ‘takes long baths, sometimes they last all day’, in parallel with the Spanish Lady who in some versions of the song is ‘washing her feet’ at midnight, and ‘washing her hair’ at ‘half past eight’. But unlike this exotic creature, who by the end of the song is ‘lifting her petticoat over her knee’, the mermaid cannot lift her skirt, or wear trousers or jeans, in case they reveal her true identity.

“Family Crest” ends with the mermaid quizzically referring to her ‘landlubbery’ and her “shipwrecklessness”. Landlubbers are relatively common in ballads but rarely encountered elsewhere, and ballads make it clear that only a landlocked mermaid would suffer from a lack of shipwrecks. The song, “The Mermaid” [Child 289], for example, describes an encounter between a ship’s crew and a ‘fishy mermaid’ who, like mine, has ‘a comb and a glass in her hand’:

And we poor sailors are skipping at the top  
While the landlubbers lie down below, below, below.

Poor sailors they are indeed, as the ship ‘went three times round’ and then ‘sank to the bottom of the sea’, making my mermaid with her ‘moist-voiced aquarian teasing’ a much safer proposition.

### **Motifs from ballads and hymns in *Strange Familiar***

Along with ballads, traditional hymns were a feature of my childhood. These were sung not only at the obligatory Catholic Sunday Mass, but at various events that marked the church and seasonal calendar. There are two poems in particular in my second collection, *Strange Familiar*, that are prompted by hymns I sang as a child. “Queen of the May” is my irreverent take on the annual festival in honour of the Virgin Mary, the Christianisation of the Celtic *Bealtaine*, and “The Ballad of Síle na Gig” is a celebration of the female fertility symbols found on church walls around Ireland. Both poems subvert in different ways the Marian hymns and tradition, that were woven into everyday Catholic life in Ireland, where housing estates have grottos to Our Lady, and the Angelus bell still rings out on national television and radio at 12 noon and at six o’clock every evening. One of my favourite poems from

the Inchicore Haiku sequence by Limerick poet Michael Hartnett (1941-1999) has a wry look at how even this tradition is subject to streamlining:

From St Michael's Church  
the electric Angelus  
– another job gone.<sup>134</sup>

**Poem a) “Queen of the May”<sup>135</sup>**

This poem takes its name from a hymn that was sung on the first of May every year, as part of a church procession around the streets of our parish. I wrote an article which described the event for a book published to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my primary school:

[It] involved a huge loudspeaker blasting Canon Sydney MacEwan singing ‘Bring flowers of the rarest, bring blossoms the fairest,’ while younger children strewed petals... One of the First Communicants was always chosen to play the role of Mary... I remember looking at her in awe and envy as she was crowned with a garland of flowers... I was already known as a ‘giddy goat’ and would never be ‘Mary’ material. Still, parading around the streets... singing loudly and waving flowers and branches, was a fine way to spend a sunny summer’s evening.<sup>136</sup>

It seems to me that the lyrics of this May hymn, despite the intention of its author in a collection of Marian songs, clearly reflect the festival’s origins as a pagan celebration of fertility. It begins:

Bring flowers of the rarest, bring blossoms the fairest,  
From garden and woodland and hillside and dale,  
Our full hearts are swelling, our glad voices telling  
The praise of the loveliest flower of the vale.  
Oh Mary, we crown thee with blossoms today,  
Queen of the angels and queen of the May.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Michael Hartnett, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2001), 152.

<sup>135</sup> Cullen, *Strange Familiar*, 38.

<sup>136</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, “Prefabs Presences”, in *St Pius X Schools: 50 Years in a Class of Their Own 1965-2015* (Dublin: St Pius X Schools, 2015), 23.

<sup>137</sup> Mary E Walsh, “Bring Flowers of the Fairest”, in *Wreath of Mary: A Collection of Hymns to the Blessed Virgin*, by Sisters of Notre Dame (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1883).

Despite the increasing secularisation of Irish society, this hymn, in the version mentioned above by the Scottish tenor MacEwan (1908-1991), is still played by popular request on the first of May every year on national public radio.

My poem reasserts the origins of the May Queen in a pagan fertility festival. It references several pagan superstitions freely practised by Irish Catholics including my paternal grandmother, but defies both the pagan and the Christian beliefs. 'I won't wash my face in the dew at first light' refers to the superstition that washing in the May morning dew would ensure lifelong beauty. A riddle I knew as a child went:

I washed my face in water  
That had neither rained nor run  
And I dried it on a towel  
That was neither woven nor spun.  
Answer: the dew and the air<sup>138</sup>.

An unusual Irish ballad, "The May Morning Dew" [Roud no 5405], declares 'how pleasant' it is 'to pluck the wild flowers in the May morning dew'. In the sleeve notes to one recording of the song, the ballad collector A.L. Lloyd and folk musician Sandra Kerr point out that

English and Anglo-Irish folk songs tend to be rather like short ballads, telling at least a bit of a story. True folk songs that are simply evocations of nature aren't all that common in English, though they may be reasonably abundant in Gaelic. <sup>139</sup>

In a counterpoint to the sentimental evocation of nature in the song, and in the floral hymn, I declare myself resistant to the May dew, stating that 'the dawn water would run off me like a mother's warning' and that 'I won't heed my grandmother's *piseogs*' (the Irish language word for superstitions, often used in Hiberno-English – the 's' plural is the anglicised form, the Irish plural being 'piseoga'). The so-called may blossoms, from the hawthorn or 'may' tree, were considered unlucky, as hawthorn was believed to be ruled by the fairies. My grandmother, as the poem

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<sup>138</sup> David Kitchen, *Earshot: A Poetry Anthology* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1988), 48.

<sup>139</sup> John Lyons, *The May Morning Dew*, Vinyl LP (Dublin: Topic, 1974).

says, blessed herself as protection from the ill-luck if we brought its branches or flowers indoors.

Declaring that I will 'cross the threshold of summer with a bold stride' runs counter to the established belief that these thresholds between seasons were associated with crossovers between this world and the next, and between the supernatural world and the human one. When I 'toss my hips at virgins and fairies', I am associating both faith and superstition together, and rejecting the belief systems of both the Christian world and the pagan world.

The 'starry crown' I choose to make myself in the poem is a common motif in religious songs. One spiritual I remember from childhood was "I'm Gonna Wear That Starry Crown Over There"<sup>140</sup> [Roud 17638]. More recently, the soundtrack of the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) popularised the song "Down in the River to Pray" which asks, 'who shall wear the starry crown?' During the May processions of my early life, as recorded in the extract from the school anniversary book above, the young 'May queen' was crowned with a wreath of flowers, a sign of her purity and relationship with the Virgin Mary. In an act of revenge for my failure to be chosen for this honour as a child, I announce in the poem that I will 'be my own queen of the may', defying anyone to deny me 'my starry crown'.

The 'sweet bouquet' and '*objets trouvés*' of the poem refer to the makeshift May altars, where wild or garden flowers were put in jam-jars before a statue of the Virgin on a table in our classrooms and homes for the month of May. Other natural manifestations of summer were sometimes added, such as shells from a trip to the seaside, and there were many more Marian songs sung before them than the one that gives its name to my poem: "Hail, Queen of Heaven, the Ocean Star", "I'll Sing a Hymn to Mary" and the bewildering "Oh, Mother, I Could Weep for Mirth", which contained the lines,

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<sup>140</sup> Newman Ivey White, *American Negro Folk-Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 80.

My soul today is heaven on earth,  
Oh, would the transport last!

(It was impossible not to visualise a bus when we sang that one, as we had only ever seen the word 'transport' in the phrase 'public transport'.) In rejecting these manifestations of both Catholic and pagan Ireland, I declare a desire to return to the reason for all these superstitions in the first place, that 'summer is coming and May needs nothing else to be magic' – and I suggest a sexual rather than a sublimated transport, with 'my love' as the maypole. In doing so I am making explicit the hinted sexual encounters in another kind of May ballad, epitomised in the song "Under the May Bush" (Roud no V7778), where a young maiden 'eighteen years old, and just growing bold' is asked for a kiss:

'I never denied it, but there and then tried it,  
Beneath the bright May-bush all burdened with bloom,  
And like a May-flower it served as a bower,  
It seemed quite as sweet as the lovely perfume.'

Even Mayday as a workers' holiday is rejected in my 'feckless and reckless' poem, for I have nothing to lose but my 'chains of daisies that each say, he loves me'. Our childhood mantra of 'he loves me, he loves me not' and the rallying call for workers that they have nothing to lose but their chains are both equally excluded, in this declaration against all beliefs, faiths and superstitions.

### **Poem b) "The Ballad of Síle na Gig"**

Another of my poems that subverts a hymn to the Virgin is "The Ballad of Síle na Gig", which deals with the different interpretations of this ancient fertility symbol or gargoyle found on church walls in Ireland, in the voice of the lusty creature herself. In Britain these are often known as 'female fertility figures'<sup>141</sup>.

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<sup>141</sup> Margaret Murray, "Female Fertility Figures.", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* LXIV (1934).

My poem begins with a traditional ballad opening ‘Come gather round’, a form so familiar that it was used by W.B. Yeats in his poem “Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites” written in 1936<sup>142</sup>. It is also used, for example, by Bob Dylan in several songs, e.g., “The Times They Are A-Changing”. Similar openings occur in numerous Irish ballads including “The Anglers on the Roe” [Roud 23475] which begins, ‘Come gather round, you fishermen’<sup>143</sup> and in two of Frank Harte’s favourites, “The Ragman’s Ball” [Roud 3006]<sup>144</sup> and “The Twangman” (a song by Dublin street-singer Michael Moran, also known as Zozimus)<sup>145</sup>.

The ‘come gather round’ is often followed by a promise of what is to come: ‘Come all young men where e'er you be and listen to me lamentations’ from “Wearin’ the Britches”<sup>146</sup>, ‘a story I will tell’ or ‘it’s about a sad event’. The promise in my poem is, ‘I’ll show ye a sight that ye won’t see again/Although it is little, its impact is big.’

The ‘Síle’ ballad was commissioned by Tim Fernée (see Chapter 3) as the script for a short ‘adult’ film about the female fertility figures. I had worked with Fernée on an earlier short about the 18<sup>th</sup>-century caricaturist Sir Thomas Rowlandson, *Rowlandson Rides Again* (2006), for which I wrote a series of comic couplets to go with a rough cut. *Rowlandson* had some success at international film festivals. Some of the action in *Rowlandson* had taken place in a bumpy carriage, and *Síle* was to follow a similar style with a tour of Ireland’s exhibitionist figures by the earthy icon herself.

“The Ballad of Síle na Gig” sits within the tradition of bawdy ballads which ranged in my childhood home from what A.L. Lloyd called the ‘venerable and indecorous “Crabfish” song’<sup>147</sup> [Roud 149] to more obscene ballads like “Seven Drunken Nights” (see Chapter 2). As a child I heard only the first five verses of the latter song, the stronger sixth and seventh verses having been censored out in deference to the

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<sup>142</sup> See for example Jeffares, 1968 p355

<sup>143</sup> Hugh Shields and Lisa Shields, eds., *All the Days of His Life: Eddie Butcher in His Own Words: Songs, Stories and Memories of Magilligan, Co Derry* (Dublin: Irish Traditional Music Archive, 2011), 56–57.

<sup>144</sup> Harte, *Songs of Dublin*, 42.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>146</sup> Frank Harte and Donal Lunny, *And Listen To My Song*, Vinyl LP (Dublin: Hummingbird, 1975).

<sup>147</sup> Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, 61.



family audience. “The Crabfish” was a favourite of my teenage years, and easily memorised. I first heard it sung at a party of the extended family – one of the many that combine in my mind into one long session at my father’s sister Madeleine’s house in Baltray, County Louth. My father’s brother Michael, who had an ear for the more risqué songs, was the singer, and the song went straight into the repertoire of my siblings. It starts like a child’s song: ‘There was a little man, and he had a little horse...’ and indeed the story, of a man who goes fishing, comes home late with a crabfish and, finding no dish for it, puts it in the ‘pot that his missus used to pish’, with predictable consequences, was always appreciated by the children in the circle.

My “Ballad of Síle na Gig” would not be heard by child audiences, although its form and rhyming scheme followed many of the ballad-poems I’d written for children – a series of the anapestic tetrameters beloved of Dr Seuss, Clement Clarke Moore and many others, with four anapaestic metrical feet per line, each foot having two unstressed followed by one stressed (See Chapter 2).

It is a ballad filled with actual locations, and required research into ‘Síles’ around the country so that I could provide descriptions of and differentiation between them. I also observed the settings around the figures for visual ‘props’ that could be used by the animators. I did this with books, photographs and online research, although we planned to visit some of the sites if the project got more than initial funding. When it did not, I submitted the ballad with my second poetry collection and my publisher, Noel King, declared it a favourite.

### **Poem c) “Leonardo’s Cradle Song”: true life ballads**

As a young child, I lived every ballad as if the characters in them were real people and the stories actual events, and this early emotional identification continues to give a heightened effect to the ballads I first heard or sang. I realised later that a small number of ballads were indeed based on reality, and that some of the most popular broadsides were today’s equivalent of the ‘True Crime’ newspaper genre –

songs about gruesome murders, criminal trials and punishments. As Underwood and Parris point out,

there are some... based on identifiable and well documented court cases (e.g., Omie Wise, Tom Dooley and Pearl Bryan). Sometimes old ballads resurfaced, modified only slightly to fit new cases.<sup>148</sup>

Of the three songs referenced by the researchers here, the first two were often sung at our family gatherings. The versions we knew of them were from the same album by my favourite American country blues singer and flatpicker, Doc Watson<sup>149</sup>. His unornamented delivery made the voice of Omie Wise, an indentured servant killed by her social-climbing boyfriend in North Carolina in 1807<sup>150</sup>, especially affecting:

Have mercy on my baby and spare me my life,  
I'll go home as a beggar and never be your wife.

Contemporary singer-songwriters occasionally write ballads in this genre, including Bob Dylan with “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (1964) and “Hurricane” (1975), and Bruce Springsteen with “Nebraska” (1982). The latter song, about Charles Starkweather, who with his teenage girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate murdered 11 people over eight days in 1958, I found particularly frightening as it contained the words of the killer. The third verse,

I can't say that I'm sorry for the things that we done  
At least for a little while, sir, me and her we had us some fun.

are a paraphrasing of the words written by the young man in a letter to his parents from prison, saying he was ‘not real sorry for what I’ve done cause for the first time me and Caril had (sic) more fun.’<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Richard H. Underwood and Carol J. Parris, “Crimesong: Some Murder Ballads and Poems Revisited”, *Journal of Social Legal History* 12 (2004): 5–6.

<sup>149</sup> Doc Watson, *Doc Watson* (New York: Vanguard, 1964), tracks 8,13.

<sup>150</sup> Underwood and Parris, “Crimesong: Some Murder Ballads and Poems Revisited”, 9.

<sup>151</sup> June Skinner Sawyers, “Nebraska”, in *Tougher Than the Rest: 100 Best Bruce Springsteen Songs* (Omnibus Press, 2006), 74.

When writing poems and songs about real people, I often follow this lead and use their own words to provide authenticity and convey some of their personality. A song I wrote this year for *Eastrogen Rising: A Rebel Cabaret* contained the spoken words of several of the women involved in the rebellion, including Countess Markievicz's complaint to the court which had commuted her execution to life in prison because she was a woman: 'I do wish you lot had the decency to shoot me.'

When asked to write about Leonardo Da Vinci as part of a theatre project for children based on his notebooks, one of the pieces I wrote was the ballad, "Leonardo's Cradle Song", later published in my second collection, *Strange Familiar*. The poem uses as an opening quotation a line from the notebooks where Da Vinci reflects on how he was destined to study birds, especially the kite:

... it seemed to me that, as I was in my cradle, a kite came to me and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me several times with its tail inside my lips.

I thought children would identify with the idea of a childhood dream, and the image of Leonardo and his obsession with birds and flight would be reinforced by repeating the same opening line for each verse, with slight variations: 'In my cradle I dreamed that a bird touched my lip...'

The poem has other quotes from the notebooks. For example, the lines

Feathers shall raise us, as feathers raise birds,  
though quills be our feathers, though wings be but words.

are a paraphrasing and reinterpreting of Leonardo's statement: 'Feathers shall raise men even as they do birds towards heaven, that is by letters written with their quills.'

By the use of anaphora in that repeating first line, I was aiming to create a hypnotic effect, as befitted a 'cradle song' or lullaby. Such songs often invoke birds, those hardworking motifs in ballads, as children fly in their dreams, rocking 'on the tree-top' or promised that "Papa's Gonna Buy You a Mockingbird" [Roud 470].

Leonardo's painting, *The Last Supper*, was also featured in the theatre piece, so I looked for parallels between Leonardo's life and the painting. (I use a similar point of

departure in my most recent collection where, in a series of seven poems based on Caravaggio's *Seven Works of Mercy*, I imagine the artist identifying with various characters in the painting.) Leonardo expresses a sense of betrayal by friends and, as *The Last Supper* captures the moment when Jesus identifies his betrayer, I draw Leonardo and his subject together in several of the stanzas.

Finally, I was aware that the poem would be used as part of an experience where children would see, act out and make flying machines like those in Leonardo's notebooks, so I wanted a host of bird and feather images to help fire their imaginations and to provide ideas for the designers to explore. The notion that the cradle 'rose up like a great flying ship' was one of these 'staging' ideas, but it also gave me a strong sense of those mythical journeys in ballads, those many songs which begin with a ship setting sail, across a sea that might be raging with storm or that is merely a sea of dreams invoked to rock children to sleep.

#### **Poem d) "Sonnet of a Five-String Banjo"**

When I work as a writer in residence with children or teenagers, I enjoy reversing their usual experience of school by inviting them to give me homework. The homework I seek is a theme for a poem, and the following week I produce the poem they have 'commissioned'. Not all of the poems written in this way have been published – some are very much children's poems – but many of those written by request from teenagers are in both of my collections. Working in this gives me a sense of being part of the bardic tradition where poets in Ireland and elsewhere made their living by writing poems for their patrons, though for the patrons to be teenagers or children who reward the poet with their approval is the best of both worlds for me.

"Sonnet of a Five-String Banjo" is one of these 'homework' poems, written for and relished by the Transition Year students<sup>152</sup> in Gaelcholáiste Reachrann in Dublin. One

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<sup>152</sup> Usually 15-16 year-olds who have finished one state examination cycle and will begin the final two-year examination cycle after this Transition Year.

of the projects we did together was a book of poems about music, and the banjo poem came about when they asked me if I played any instrument. I told them I played guitar reasonably well and banjo badly, and so my homework was decided on.

I enjoy writing sonnets and variations on them, and I felt a sonnet about a banjo would require long lines, read fast, to mimic the “duelling banjos” style of playing. I’m interested in bluegrass and country blues music and so I had a checklist of relevant song motifs in my head, and the idea of having several rhymes within each line would provide both an opportunity to use a wide range of references and a breakneck speed that I knew the teenagers would enjoy – a sort of banjo rap. I referenced as many characters from blue grass and country songs as I could: coal miners, as in “Sixteen Tons”; gold miners, such as the ‘miner forty-niner’ in “Clementine” [Roud 9611]; and moonshiners, those drinkers of illicit liquor, like the one in a song my father sang, “I’m a Rambler, I’m a Gambler” [Roud 12708], who boasted ‘and if moonshine don’t kill me, I’ll live till I die.’ I took poetic licence with some other characters: lonesome piners, from “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine” [Roud v36501] and patched pantsers, from a Tom Paxton song I learned as a young child, “Bottle of Wine”, where the narrator had “pants so old that they shine.” I also had to get in a whole verse of trains, based on the enormous number of songs featuring trains I had heard growing up. Country songs seemed to bristle with freight trains, trains with many coaches, runaway trains, and especially train whistles. One of our favourite lullabies, “Morningtown Ride”<sup>153</sup>, began with ‘Train whistle blowin’, makes a sleepy noise’, but mostly whistles seemed to be ‘lonesome’, so my sonnet had, ‘I’m a lonesome whistle, hopin’ this’ll pierce your heart like a fresh-picked thistle.’ Like my elegy for Frank Harte, the banjo poem gave me a chance to use a rich store of songs, but this time both the songs and the poem were in different genres, country songs rather than the older ballads of Harte’s repertoire, and a rap written for fun rather than a poignant ‘in memoriam’.

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<sup>153</sup> The Seekers, *Hide and Seekers* (New York: Columbia, 1966), Track 2.

#### **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined a sample of poems influenced by ballads from my first and second collections. These range from an elegy for a ballad collector which draws together dozens of common themes and characters from his songs, to a pair of anti-hymns in the voices of powerful female figures, to a series of poems that draw on and subvert images of birds from ballads – imagining a renaissance man as a baby dreaming of a kite, and meditating on a jealous woman who turns her sister’s children into swans. I also borrow a rhythm and a hair-grooming woman from a Dublin ballad for a tongue-in-cheek poem, and pack another short poem with bluegrass and country music motifs for a homework exercise.

Through this broad sweep of themes and forms runs one thread – a song-line that gleams on the surface of the ballad poems, and holds the other poems together with stitches that are almost invisible until the reader looks and listens closely.

## Chapter 5: To Hear the Nightingale Sing:

### Telling ballad stories in selected radio essays

In Chapter 4, I examined the influence of ballads on a selection of my poetry. Here I focus on a selection of my prose writings for radio which are much more directly *about* ballads and songs: “May Morning Songs”<sup>154</sup>, “One Hand Clapping” and “Happy Birthday, Mr Cohen”. This chapter examines how, in these radio essays, I attempt to draw together the motifs of and background to songs for a wider audience.

The RTÉ radio programme, *Sunday Miscellany*, broadcast weekly for over 40 years, consists of a selection of radio essays and poems separated by suitable pieces of music. Over about twenty-five of those years, I have contributed both poetry and short essays to the programme, sometimes on a commissioned theme and occasionally because I offer a seasonal piece or one written to mark an anniversary or event.

The essays on the programme are short (typically about five minutes in length) so there is a ‘less is more’ element to contributions. The audience is not going to absorb many details in the time allowed, so the challenge for the writer is to find and expand on one or two ‘hooks’ or interesting angles which will appeal to listeners with some or no prior knowledge of the subject.

I worked in radio for eleven years, and the skills I acquired in the job are especially relevant to writing for this kind of radio programme: a sense of the difference between words read and words heard, of the ‘sound’ of the piece, and of the informal tone required, and a strict sense of timing. Some of the skills are transferable to writing for children, especially the light touch of tone, and to writing in general where, for me, a sensitivity to the sound of the piece is always important. Because the essays or poems in *Sunday Miscellany* are interspersed with music, it is

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<sup>154</sup> *May Morning Songs*.

useful if the contributor can suggest a suitable song to be played after the piece and, in the case of an essay about songs, to 'write in' to this song to provide a seamless *segway* from spoken word to music.

### **Radio Essay 1: "May Morning Songs"**

Writing about ballads in radio essays is for me an opportunity to gently proselytise for them. In "May Morning Songs", I look at a small number of the many songs that begin with their narrator roving out and either observing or finding himself at the centre of a story that usually involves a courting couple – or a couple who have parted after a betrayal. As a young child, I remember noticing how often people in ballads walked or roved out on mornings or evenings, and this essay gave me a chance to bring a number of those songs together and to give listeners a checklist of characteristics that they in turn could look out for.

The essay opening places the listeners themselves as characters in a ballad, asking: 'If you went a-walking one morning in May... what would you expect to see?' and follows this with the colloquial 'I'm only asking because...' 'Only asking', while not grammatically correct, is a familiar usage in Irish speech, and provides a friendly entry-point into the essay. I then introduce some songs of the 'May morning' genre, beginning with an Irish connection – a song [Roud 277] sung by Armagh song source Sarah Makem (1900-1983), which provided both the name and the theme tune for the BBC Radio programme *As I Roved Out* in the 1950s.

The essay moves to a variation on the same song by American singer-songwriter James Taylor (b1948), "One Morning in May", about a maiden and a soldier with a fiddle in his knapsack, and draws in a similar song from the sixteen hundreds which warns maidens to beware of soldier's knapsacks.

In 850 words, without seeming too burdened with knowledge, I touch on eight different May morning songs, alerting listeners to the arch nature of some of the common images to be found in them, such as the nightingale, which like the fiddle, can have several meanings.



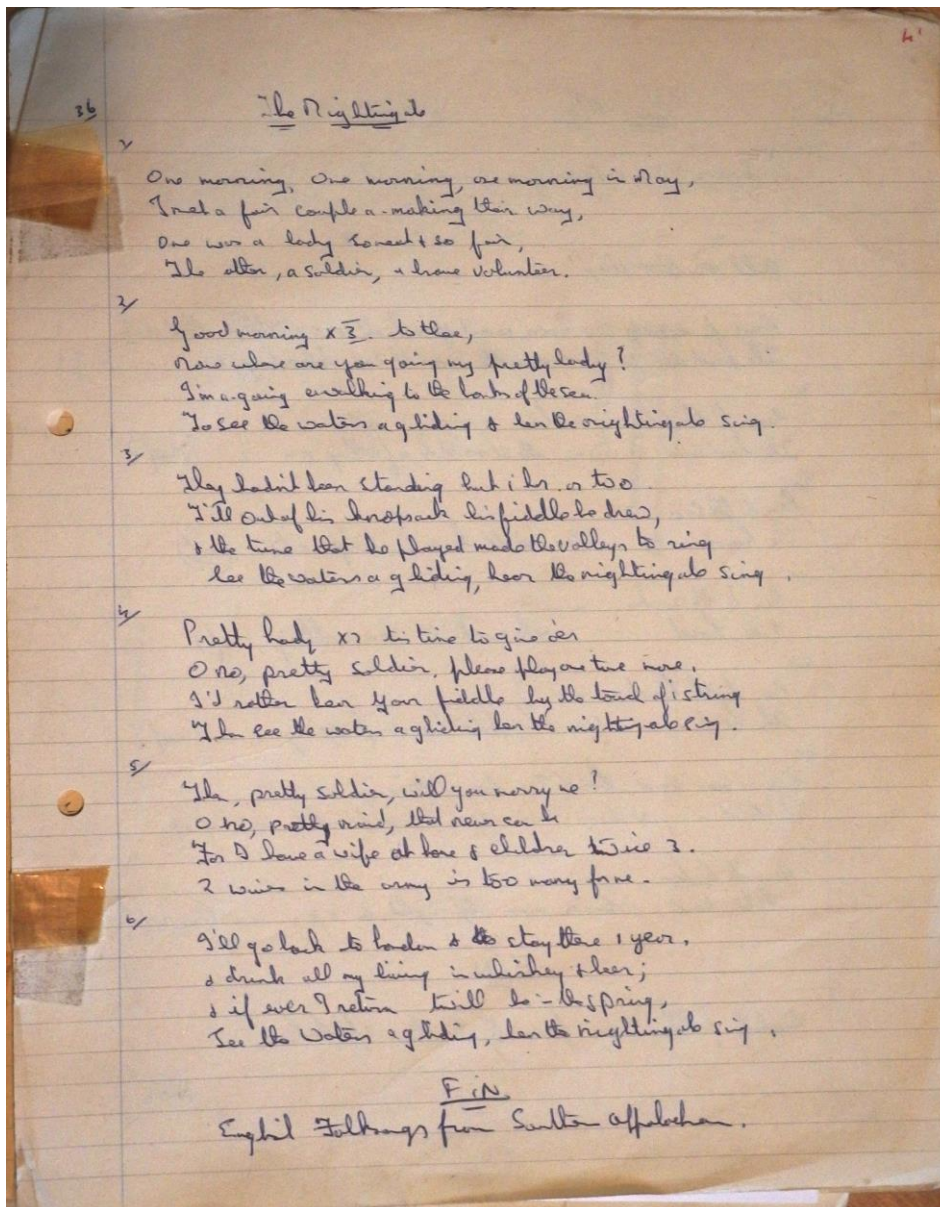


Figure 10: The Nightingale, a 'May morning song' from Gerry Cullen's notebook c1967

I also show how songs can have many versions, and 'write in' to the song that follows the piece – my last sentence begins by again placing the listener into the narrative, and setting up the first line of the song to come, with 'So if you're roving out this May morning'. The sentence ends with a warning – 'don't mention marriage!' – a warning that listeners can by now predict will be lost on the maiden.

One of the ballads I didn't mention in this essay is one where the 'young couple a-making their way', have been Christianised as Mary and Joseph. In this version, instead of

One was a lady so rich and so fair,  
And the other was a soldier and a brave volunteer.

the couple is replaced by 'three travellers':

One was an old man, the second a maid,  
and the third was young Jesus, who smiled as he said...  
We have bread and fishes, and a jug of red wine,  
To share on our journey with all of mankind.

Why did I leave this out, and on a Sunday morning too? The fact is, I was irritated that this version lacked a story and, worse, it was the kind of adaptation I occasionally made when I sang with a folk-group at Sunday masses as a teenager. In this role I turned Andy Fairweather Low's 1975 hit "Wide-Eyed and Legless" into a wedding song (I've forgotten the chorus I wrote for that one), and transformed a hit from the following year, "Lying in the Arms of Mary", by the Sutherland Brothers and Quiver, into a sort of Marian hymn. Perhaps it was best to leave the May morning ballads as they were.

## **Radio Essay 2:**

### **"One Hand Clapping"<sup>155</sup>: a commission on the theme of 'Hands'**

Occasionally I have been asked to contribute a radio essay to *Sunday Miscellany* for a themed programme, as was the case with a piece on the theme of 'Hands'. I initially planned to write an essay on some aspect of a craft or handiwork, but as I jotted down my thoughts, I recalled two dreams I had had in my early days at university which both featured hands in different ways. I decided to combine the two, and wondered if the early Sunday morning radio slot would mean that some listeners would experience my dreams as their own, in that half-awake state that might enhance their vivid quality.

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<sup>155</sup> "One Hand Clapping", *Sunday Miscellany* (Dublin, Ireland: RTÉ Radio 1, September 2004).

To briefly summarise the dreams – in the first, I am trying to read a dictionary in the college library but keep tearing the pages with my hands, which turn out to be hooks. I look up and see Jesus coming towards me and I realise that the holes in his hands are for slotting my hooks into, and together we float up to a lighthouse room where he tells me I will stay forever. In the second dream, I am carrying the zither Gerry gave me through a forest looking for a teacher. I meet an old man who tells me I will not be able to play until I don't realise I am playing. I feel scornful of this 'mysticism', but when I get tired and lean against a tree – 'That's when I hear the music, the lovely, lilting zither music that flows and swirls around me in the air.' The music is the zither 'playing' as my skirt blows against it.

Because my first year in college was a strongly creative time for me, when I was both drawn to and repelled by a sort of artistic 'mysticism', my dreams were full of meetings with archetypal figures. Like the narrator in "One Morning in May", I encountered Jesus, and like the young woman in "Death and the Lady" I met 'an old man along the way' – perhaps a source of wisdom or a seer, perhaps the Grim Reaper himself. Looking back on this "Hands" essay now with a clear eye, I can see that both the essay and the dreams it describes were filled with inspiration from my uncle Gerry. The poem of his that I mentioned in Chapter 1 of this Context Statement, which was published in the *Irish Press* in 1970, was called "Triptych". The poem is addressed to Jesus – Gerry had spent some time studying for the Catholic priesthood – and refers to Christ's 'holed holy hands.'

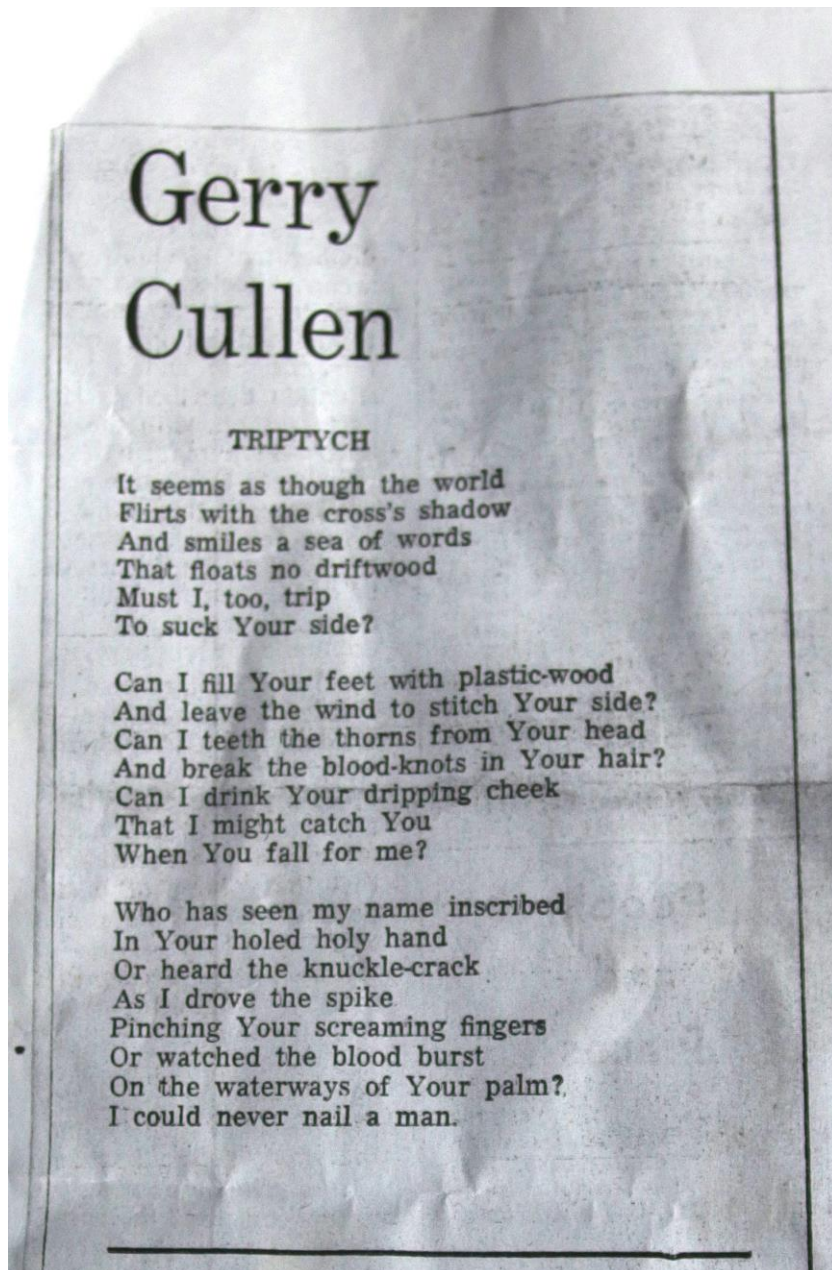


Figure 11: *Irish Press* cutting showing the poem by Gerry Cullen, February 1970

The lighthouse in the dream coincided with my reading of *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, but there was also another source for that lighthouse, a song source from childhood. The Burl Ives<sup>156</sup> song, "The Eddystone Light"<sup>157</sup> is the unusual story of

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<sup>156</sup> Ives was a family favourite with songs such as "I Know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly" and "The Wayfaring Stranger".

<sup>157</sup> Burl Ives, *Down to the Sea in Ships*, LP Record (New York & London: Decca, 1956), track 3.

a lighthouse keeper who has children with a mermaid. The mermaid mother reappears briefly to her human child many years later:

Then the phosphorus flashed in her seaweed hair,  
I looked again, but me mother wasn't there,  
But her voice came echoing back from the night:  
"To Hell with the keeper of the Eddystone Light!"

I've written in Chapter 4 about my "Family Crest", with its mermaid, so it is plausible to assume that the lighthouse in my dream is related to the Eddystone light in the song, and that the song has a strong Cullen/mermaid connection. It features the zither given to me by my uncle Gerry (see Chapter 1), and a wise old man who is arguably Gerry himself, always more in touch with his artistic self than I was with mine, and more open to ideas of folklore, magic and ritual. Going to the lighthouse is what the mermaid does in the song, and her choice of separation from the human world, from her children and her man, are clearly a metaphor for my struggling desire to be an artist, to set myself apart in some way. I was identifying with the mermaid subconsciously at this time, as it was not until years later that I did so consciously, in "Family Crest".

The radio essay centres on two dreams I had in the same week in my first year of college, a year when my poetry was beginning to flow. The ballad lighthouse standing firm in the emotional sea, along with the Aeolian harp of my zither playing by itself in the wind, are to me clear symbols of the creative world that I had often rejected as being too indulgent and uncontrolled. The dictionary that I unsuccessfully try to consult in the dream, on the other hand, is the epitome of the 'Gradgrind' hard facts book – I had read *Hard Times* the year before for my Leaving Certificate (the Irish A-level equivalent) – that I can no longer relate to. And by slotting my hooks into the hands of Jesus, that mystical figure who is not bound by earthly things, I transcend ordinary life and surrender myself to art.

Even now, I am often uncomfortable with the more mystical, muse-inspired side of writing. The Amsterdam-based writer and broadcaster Gary Carter, whom I met at the BBC Performing Arts Labs in the early 2000s, used a sonnet from my Pandora

sequence<sup>158</sup> and recounted our meeting in *The Pandora Effect*, a play that toured Britain and South Africa in 2003-4. In it, Carter described me as ‘a poet with a practical air’. This description appealed to me in my constant attempts to strike a balance between being grounded and being creative.

### **Radio Essay 3: “Happy Birthday, Mr Cohen”**

I was recording another essay for *Sunday Miscellany* when the producer asked me if I would be interested in contributing a piece about Leonard Cohen for his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday the following week. I told her that I’d had a long relationship with Cohen’s writings, beginning with his songs – I remember my father’s harmonic style of finger-picking “Suzanne” and my favourite Cohen song, “Hey That’s No Way to Say Goodbye”.

Cohen was for me both a singer and a poet – I first discovered one of his collections in my local library in the early 1970s, and I remember seeking out a copy for my father’s birthday in the wonderful Greene’s bookshop in Dublin, a creaky, mainly second-hand shop with a staircase that took an age to negotiate. The stairs were lined with bookshelves and people spent hours with their heads on one side reading the titles. When I was about 13, I wrote out one of Cohen’s short poems and pasted it up over my bed – “For Annie”:

With Annie gone,  
whose eyes to compare  
with the morning sun?

Not that I did compare  
but I do compare  
now that she’s gone.

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<sup>158</sup> Cullen, *A Bone in My Throat*, 34–39.

I liked the brevity of the poem, and the fact that it seemed to capture something of what writing was about – an awareness of one’s own perceptions, and an occasional rewriting of them.

My essay<sup>159</sup> for the radio programme explodes my own memories and assumptions – first, that a photograph of Cohen that has sat within the pages of a book at home since I was a child was not actually taken by my father; secondly, that a poem of Cohen’s that I had always relied on as the source of my interest in sonnets was not in fact a sonnet at all, and finally, that my parents’ devotion to Cohen, whose first concert they had attended in Dublin, was not whole-hearted, and that my mother was able to dismiss him with the wonderfully onomatopoeic Irish word, *leadránach* – which roughly translates as ‘long drawn out’. But there are other small details that appeal to me in retrospect, particularly in their relevance to this Context Statement. One of these is the detail that Cohen sang the Irish rebel song, “Kevin Barry”, mentioned earlier in connection with Frank Harte, at his Dublin concert. It must have been a surprising moment for the audience. The song had been sung in Ireland by singer, actor and civil rights activist Paul Robeson in the 1930s, but Cohen was not particularly known for his politics. Robeson’s version is short and leaves out most of the anti-British sentiment of the original, but my parents said Cohen sang the full version.

I think what inspired me about Cohen, and what I covered without realising in the radio essay, was how well he captured the artifice involved in art and writing. I was myself ‘guilty’ of this artifice in my fanciful construction of the facts of the piece, which are eroded by the end of the essay.

*Sunday Miscellany* is very much a memoir programme. My husband, Harry Browne, has also contributed occasional pieces to the show, and we often joke about the number of times men in particular write about their fathers. In looking at both the “One Hand Clapping” and the “Leonard Cohen” commissions, I can see that both are examples of a sort of artistic memoir, and both make a virtue of exploring the ideas

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<sup>159</sup> Catherine Ann Cullen, *Happy Birthday Mr Cohen*, Radio Essay (Dublin, Ireland: RTÉ Radio 1, 2004).

of art and memory. The Cohen piece is in many ways an anti-memoir piece, an essay about the unreliability of the genre that is so much a staple of the programme.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at three radio essays, two commissioned for and one offered to the RTÉ Radio 1 programme, *Sunday Miscellany*. Music is at the heart of all of them – the songs of Leonard Cohen with their unashamedly poetic sensibility; the zither that can only be played by the unconscious, creative mind; the song of a lighthouse and the mermaid writer who rejects human comforts for an unencumbered life; and the ballads of May mornings, full of broken promises and suggestive motifs. In the narrow confines of the radio essay, I have surrendered to the music of dreams, challenged the notion of the radio essay staple of memoir, and welcomed listeners into the ballad form in hopes that they will inhabit it with me – and on their own.



## Conclusion: All Past Reflections Shimmer into One

The chapter, which takes its name from “Enlightenment”, the opening sestet in my second collection<sup>160</sup>, will look at the developing personal poetics shaped by this study with the emergence of new work for radio, for my new collection *The Other Now* (October 2016), and for my planned next collection, against the backdrop of a greater alertness to my own craft, technique and place in the tradition.

When I look at the many genres in which I have worked, it is evident that the shorter form is my signature contribution to the canon. Poems, ballads, short stories, radio essays and children’s stories in verse – my individual works have the span of a song, whether I am writing a narrative ballad such as *The Magical, Mystical, Marvelous Coat* or a children’s short story that is punctuated by lullaby verses.

My memories are song memories. They are composed not only of the hundreds of ballads heard in childhood, but also of a more recent repertoire. The scrap book of my memories includes the rousing song that my not-yet-walking daughter Stella insisting on dancing to, “The Frost is all Over/Kitty, Lie Over Close to the Wall”<sup>161</sup>, along with one of her first party-pieces, a hilarious but hardly age-appropriate ballad, “The Close Shave”<sup>162</sup>, about a man who falls into a drunken sleep with a lady of the night ‘before she’d earned her fee’, and wakes to find his money and clothes replaced by ‘a yellow wig, a woman’s dress and a shaving kit’. Stella loved the song and sang it often in her clear, sweet voice.

My younger sister Pat and I still laugh at one of our own song memories about a song my father played, “The Pub With No Beer”. It was recorded in 1957 in Australia and written by an Irishman, Dan Sheahan of Newmarket, County Cork. Pat and I misheard the song as “The Pope With No Beard”. We also giggled helplessly at the line,

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<sup>160</sup> Cullen, *Strange Familiar*, 9.

<sup>161</sup> Len Graham, Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin, and Garry Ó Briain, *When I Was Young*, CD (Dublin: Gael Linn, 1999).

<sup>162</sup> Andy Irvine, *Abocurragh*, CD (Dublin: AK Records, 2010), Track 4.

‘there’s a faraway look on the face of the bum’, for obvious reasons. The combination of the misunderstood words and our giggles ensured that we were widely encouraged to sing our version to muffled hilarity from our relations.

My brother ‘hadn’t a note’ as my mother would put it, but undaunted by this lack, he would sing songs of his own composition about football from the age of three.

I remember the night of my grandmother’s funeral, when we went back to my aunty Madeleine’s house in Baltray and sang late into the night. My uncle Mike sang “The Unquiet Grave” [Child 78, Roud 51], an eerie song about a lover who mourns at his lady’s tomb ‘for a twelvemonth and a day.’ There was a certain amount of discomfort with the song’s sentiment, when the young man tells the lover’s ghost why he is staying put:

For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,  
And that is all I seek.  
‘You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips;  
But my breath smells earthy strong;  
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,  
Your time will not be long.’

I wasn’t put out by the maudlin words. It seemed to me that such songs are made for such times, allowing the mourners to express their grief and loss in a way that is corralled by the ballad form.

As I complete this Context Statement, autumn is taking hold. The changing of seasons is always marked in my mind with song and poetry – for spring there is “The Croppy Boy” [Roud 1030], with “Twas early, early all in the spring, the birds did whistle and sweetly sing’; for summer, “The Curragh of Kildare” [Roud 583] – ‘The winter is past and the summer’s come at last, and the birds they are singing in the trees’, or “Will you go lassie, go?” [Roud 541] with ‘Oh, the summer time has come, and the trees are sweetly blooming’. With autumn, even before the songs, comes Keats with his “Ode to Autumn”, and I remember how my father delighted in reciting the ‘Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’. I borrowed his voice for the father in

“Sea Change” who ‘rolled the Shakespeare round in his mouth’. My father relished the words, and his resonant tone made the poem, and the autumn, seem richer.

Along with its poems, as Keats wrote, autumn ‘hast thy music too’, including one of my favourite ballads, Robbie Burns’ “Ode to Autumn” [Roud 6936], recorded by my uncle Gerry with The Voice Squad as “Now Westlin’ Winds” (the opening words), and by Dick Gaughan with the same name but a different air. Burns knew the seasons and the country well: the many birds in the song are perfectly placed within their habitats. He also describes those birds and, by extension, human nature, in the song:

Thus ev'ry kind their pleasure find,  
The savage and the tender;  
Some social join, and leagues combine,  
Some solitary wander.

I am grateful for the traditions of ‘social joining’ in song that have combined to enrich my life and, I hope, my work. I have, at times embraced them, at times used them as starting points or backdrops, at times railed against them. It is a comfort to know that they are always there, ready to be put on like a magical coat to spawn encounters and adventures. I am conscious too of the many whose traces I have yet to find in my work, and the others I know of but couldn’t find the space to include here.

Setting out on this project, I had no idea where the song trails in my work would lead. There were some paths I was sure of, and some I have been astonished to discover along the way – the inspiration behind a dream finally unearthed after three decades, the rhythm of a dark poem learned as a child uncovered in a jaunty verse-story.

Writing this Context Statement has given me confidence in my knowledge of ballads, and in the past year I have done more song-related pieces for the *Sunday Miscellany* programme. For Christmas 2015, I recorded an essay called “The Feisty Holy Family”, where I introduced listeners to the sometimes gruesome carols based on the apocryphal gospels. Many in the Irish audience on a Sunday morning would be familiar with “The Cherry Tree Carol” [Child 54, Roud 453], where Joseph tells Mary

to ‘let the father of thy baby gather cherries for thee.’ But few would have heard of “The Holy Well” [Roud 1697] or “The Bitter Withy” [Roud 452], where first an angry Mary and then a young Jesus take fatal revenge on wealthy children who make fun of Christ’s lowly birth. I also wrote a piece to celebrate Shakespeare’s 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary, simply called “Shakespeare’s Songs”. It considered not only some of the songs Shakespeare wrote for his plays, but also his use of already-existing songs – Desdemona’s “Willow Song”, for instance, and several fragments sung by Ophelia. By highlighting the earthy Holy Family portrayed in the apocryphal carols, a family that bitched, sulked, fought and avenged itself, and by showing how Shakespeare exploited the popular songs of his day, I hoped to pique the interest of the radio audience in the rich vernacular of the ballad tradition.

With my new-found consciousness of my place in that tradition, I’m working on my next collection as a themed book of poems based on old ballads. One of them, “Sisters”, made it into my latest book. It’s based on the classic “The Two Sisters” [Child 10, Roud 8].

As happens in that ballad, I know now that the songs will out. When the minstrel strikes the harp made of the dead woman’s breastbone, or the string made of her hair, the hidden story will be sung out to the world. When a writer steeped in music begins to write, the ghosts of all those songs will haunt her work. I am grateful that they do – those ghosts are old friends, and I will continue to listen out for them and, if I have to choose my way of negotiating with the dead, to kiss their clay cold lips.

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