Chapter 16

Green Fields of Wisconsin: Irish Music in the Badger State

Program 16 Performances

1. Paddy O'Brien, "The Lament for Eoin Rhua." 2. J. W. Green, "Skibbereen." 3. Patrick Bonner, "The Maid of Kildare." 4. Charles Bannen, "Pat Malone." 5. Tommy McDermott, "The Walsh Dancers" and "Tom's Polka." 6. Boxty, "Hammy Hamilton's Jigs." 7. Tom Dahill, "The Newry Highwayman." 8. Liz and Kevin Carroll, "Hare's Paw" and "Castle Kelly."

Rebel Songs and Sentiment

When my dad, Warren Leary, was a boy in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, in the late 1920s, he would often crank the Victrola for his Irish grandmother. She would listen to John McCormack sing "Mother Macree" in his unmatched tenor voice and tears would stream down her cheeks. My mother, Patricia Berigan Leary, delighted each St. Patrick's Day as her grandfather, John Berigan, sang a nineteenth-century ballad, "The Wearing of the Green," likewise popularized by McCormack.

Born in Athlone, Ireland, and trained in Italy in the bel canto tradition, McCormack dazzled American audiences during concert tours between 1909 and 1912. His numerous recordings on Victor's classical Red Seal label included the still popular "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" and "Danny Boy" (Moloney 1982).

When I was a kid in the 1950s, the old John McCormack 78s had long since been worn out, lost, or broken. It was the Irish-American pop crooner Morton Downey who enchanted me with "It's the Same Old Shillelagh," "Galway Bay," and even "Who Put the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder." These songs of rambunctious foolery, of rebellion, of sentimental longing immediately captured my ethnic imagination.

But apart from the voices spun in studios, I wondered about the music of my region's Irish immigrants. And so I paid attention when our old Irish neighbor, George Russell, talked of Irish singers in the lumber camps and of Red Donnelly, the Irish fiddler who enlivened Barron County barn dances at the turn of the century. There were others who told much the same story.

Shanty and Stage

The Irish immigrants who came to the Upper Midwest as miners, laborers, farmers, and loggers in the nineteenth century brought a rich tradition of singing and

fiddling. One of the earliest accounts, although set down much later, is the reminiscence of Catherine Woodlawn, fictionalized by Carol Ryrie Brink in her classic children's novel *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935). It concerns life along northwestern Wisconsin's Red Cedar River in the 1860s.

Robert Ireton, the Woodlawn's Irish hired man, is presented by Brink as a hard-working fellow who was always ready with a song. His repertoire was mostly comic and included classics like "Leather Britches"—in which Paddy Haggerty feeds some gluttonous roisterers with a "leather burgoo"—as well as a set of verses that are still sung to the tune of "The Irish Washerwoman."

> Say, Ike, did ye ever go into an Irishman's shanty?
> Sure, it's there where the whiskey is plenty.
> With his pipe in his gob, is Paddy so gay,
> No king in his palace so happy as he.
> There's a three-legged stool and a table to match,
> And the door of the shanty it hooks with a latch.
> There's a pig in the sty and a cow in the stable,
> And, sure, they are fed of the scraps from the table.

This song's portrait of the happy-go-lucky shanty Irishman with his whiskey, his pipe, and his pig in the parlor was extremely common in nineteenth-century America when Irish immigrants left their famine-stricken homeland. Indeed "stage Irish" performers—outfitted with red wigs, green suits, whiskey jugs, and a blackthorn cudgel—held forth as tent show and vaudeville "Paddies" until the early twentieth century.

The songs associated with them were sung far more widely and for a longer period. While a few Irish regarded them as slander-set-in-verse, most considered stage Irish songs as simply a bit of exaggerated fun—certainly not to be mistaken for vicious stereotypes that cast the Irish as superstitious and bestial slaves of popery. In the 1920s when Franz Rickaby traveled northern Wisconsin in search of lumber-camp ballads, he encountered comic Irish singers and declared, "the hegemony in song belongs to the Irish" (Rickaby 1926:xxv). In the 1940s when Helene Stratman-Thomas sought folk songs throughout Wisconsin, she was rewarded with "Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake," "Pat Malone," and a half dozen other humorous gems chronicling feasting, tippling, music, pugnacity, and shenanigans (Peters 1977). In the 1970s when Philip Bohlman recorded Charles Bannen, an octogenarian Crawford County dairy farmer, he found that Miss Fogarty's inedible confection and Pat Malone's whiskey-drenched insurance scam were still the stuff of songs (Bohlman 1980).

Rosin the Bow

Besides singing, Charles Bannen played the pump organ, sometimes chording for such fiddlers as old Dean Powers. Irish fiddlers, like Irish singers, commanded audiences in the homes, boweries, and lumber camps of the nineteenth century. Patrick Bonner (1882–1973) is perhaps the most eminent of the Upper Midwest's Irish fiddlers. A descendant of County Donegal immigrants, Bonner lived on Beaver Island in northern Lake Michigan where he played for dances from his early teens until his mid-seventies.

There were many Irish fiddlers on the island when Bonner was young. He learned tunes from them, but a fair number came from the "mouth music" or "lilting" of "an old lady," Kathleen O'Donnell McCauley, who knew "them old Irish reels." Field recordings of Bonner, made between 1938 and 1952, captured eighty-five tunes, including such Irish numbers as "Blackthorn Stick," "Boys of Arranmore," "Connaught Man's Rambles," Flanigan's Ball," "Green Fields of

Larry Drea tending bar at his tavern, Loretto, 1991 **Photo: Jim Leary**

America," "The Maid of Kildare," "Paddy's Going Away," and "Rocky Road to Dublin" (Hendrix 1988).

Tom Croal was Wisconsin's most noted Irish fiddler. Croal's parents, John and Catherine, immigrated from Ireland to the rural Hill Point area of Sauk County in 1856. Thomas, the third of eight children, was probably born in the 1860s and was certainly in his eighties in 1944, when journalist Fred Holmes called him "The Last of the Irish Bards." A railroad worker and labor organizer, Croal spent time in St. Louis and Milwaukee, winning an old-time fiddlers' contest in the beer city in 1926 (*Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 23, 1926).

He was best known and is still remembered in rural Sauk County, however. I listened to accounts of Croal's St. Patrick's Day fiddling at Drea's Tavern in Loretto in 1991, just as, a decade earlier, Phil Martin learned from locals like Jim Fargen that Croal played for events throughout the area:

> I remember once they were building a house, and they had a big dirt pile from digging out the basement, and Tom climbed up on it and started fiddling from the top, and the yard was packed with people. They couldn't dance because it was so crowded. But Tom put on quite a concert for them. He was a talented musician, not one of these rough fiddlers. He played all the old songs, and sang the verses. (Martin ca. 1980)

When Croal died, the tunes and songs went with him.

The performance of Irish music dwindled with the passing of the immigrants' children. From the 1940s until the 1980s, with the exception of a few elderly at-home exponents like Charles Bannen, Irish music was confined to phonograph records. But it was not forgotten. The recent revival of traditional Irish music in Ireland and throughout Irish America has coaxed a modest resurgence in the Upper Midwest. St. Paul, Milwaukee, Madison, and Chicago currently boast Irish music "scenes," with active bands, "Irish bars," and annual festivals.

No longer an integral part of everyday home and community life, Irish music has become an overt means of celebrating Irish ethnicity, especially on St. Patrick's Day. Meanwhile the beauty of the music has attracted many non-Irish enthusiasts. The small but dedicated numbers of young players and singers suggest that Irish music in the Upper Midwest may enter its third century.