



# Piping up for the Pale

SIOBHÁN LONG



At next week's Temple Bar TradFest, a photographic exhibition will document Dublin's long, varied and sometimes underrated contribution to the history of traditional music

**T**HE URBAN/RURAL divide is at times a nebulous concept, but it always rears its dubious head when conversation turns to traditional music – and the many sources of spring water that feed it. An aficionado of the tradition might wax lyrical about the particular delights of the Sliabh Luachra style, its robust rhythms a boon for dancers, while another might champion the finer points of the Donegal fiddle style. In between, Sligo's sinuous flute style and Connemara's sean-nós singing will also come into sharp focus.

But what of the urban traditions that have salted more than a few musical doorsteps in their day? On Leaside, Cork Singers' Club thrives in the heart of the city, fuelled by a swathe of singers with a hunger for witty lyrics and rhyming slang.

Dublin has spawned more than its share of traditional music and musicians too. For this year's fifth Temple Bar TradFest, the flute player and former member of the Castle Céilí Band, historian and photographer Mick O'Connor, has compiled a photographic exhibition (assisted by graphic designer Martin Gaffney), which illustrates the continuity of traditional music activity in Dublin from 1900 to 2009. The exhibition includes a wealth of photographs documenting the capital's traditional music heritage before the phenomenal growth of Irish music in the late 1960s. Taking time out from his Herculean task of compiling a history of the Dublin Pipers' Club, O'Connor has relished the adventure of distilling Dublin's musical past into a coherent and substantial visual exhibition.

One of the most striking features of Dublin's traditional music scene at the beginning of the 20th century was the close proximity of music and politics, which won't come as a surprise to anyone conversant with the city's theatrical heritage.

"The origin of the Pipers' Club is tied up with the National Revival," O'Connor recounts with customary animation, "which focused interest on all aspects of our culture, including the music. The National Revival, which began

during the closing decade of the 19th century, heralded the birth of the Gaelic League, the Feis Ceoil Association and the Pipers' Club, all Dublin-based. A close examination of the Pipers' Club minute book (1900-1904) reveals the cross-fertilisation of interests coming together to promote Irish music. Many members had dual membership of the Gaelic League and, later, of the Irish Volunteers. Members of the Pipers' Club included some ardent nationalists and Gaelic propagandists."

Perhaps the most famous was Éamonn Ceannt, a leader of the Easter Rising and signatory of the 1916 Proclamation. He was secretary of the Pipers' Club until he resigned after his marriage to the treasurer, Áine Brennan.

Dublin's traditional music fraternity didn't limit its ambitions to the Pale either. In 1936, Seán Dempsey, one of piper Leo Rowsome's pupils, participated in the World Dance and Music Festival at the Berlin Sportpalast, where he had the dubious distinction of playing before Adolf Hitler, Hermann Goering and Josef Goebbels. O'Connor smiles as he recounts the tale in more detail.

"According to Seán, the other pipers played in the usual fashion, ie standing up. However, as there was no chair available and as uilleann pipers generally play seated, a stormtrooper was ordered to go on his hands and knees. Seán then proceeded to play while seated on the stormtrooper's back! Apparently Hitler was intrigued and sent for Seán afterwards, and he received a gold fountain pen as a memento. Liam Ó Floinn's father, Liam Flynn, played the fiddle and accompanied Seán on the trip."

**O'CONNOR'S EXHIBITION** documents the peaks and troughs of the tradition's past, capturing the struggles as well as the triumphs, and the hairpin bends it negotiated en route to the rude state of health in which it finds itself today. For example, he recounts the struggle to ensure the future of our piping tradition.

"Despite the revival of the Pipers' Club," he says, "it had a limited support with seldom over 50 members. It had many financial ups and downs. Tommy Reck recalled that while he was secretary in the 1940s, he often had to close the door of the club when other members failed to attend."

O'Connor casts a wry eye over the some of the more po-faced practices of the past too. "In a picture of the Kincora Céilí Band, who won the All-Ireland Céilí Band Competition in Longford in 1958, there is a notice in the background of the right side of the photo, and when it was enlarged, the following wording

appeared: 'Jitterbugging in this hall is not allowed and anyone who fails to comply with the order will be asked to leave.' No messing there!"

The cross-generational leadership roles undertaken by key Dublin piping dynasties have played a crucial role in securing Dublin's traditional music heritage, O'Connor believes.

"Uilleann pipes for many years have been

and continue to be a Dublin passion," he says. "Piping has flourished in Dublin with an abundance of young talented pipers, quite a few of whom have family connections with the Pipers' Club over several decades. A core of young musicians is studying the recordings and techniques of the previous generations and this is very evident in their playing. The Potts and Rowsome families are still to the fore in piping."

He is optimistic about the future too. "Over the past few decades, we have witnessed an extraordinary resurgence of interest in Irish traditional music," he says. "Most commentators would agree that Irish traditional music is saved for posterity. It was never in a healthier state."

"The other aspects of our native culture are also in the ascent. Dancing in its various forms is extremely popular. We now have people of unbounded talent taking an active interest in our music. In the present new generation, many are multi-instrumentalists, more numerous, more talented than any other generation that went before them."

*Traditional Music in Dublin*, a photographic exhibition dedicated to the memory of the great Dublin piper, Leo Rowsome, will take place in Temple Bar Gallery and Studios on Jan 27-30 as part of this year's Temple Bar TradFest. Exhibition times: Wed, Fri, Sat, 11am-6pm; Thur, 11am-7pm. Admission is free. For details of TradFest events, see templebartrad.com



**From top down: Seán Dempsey, one of Leo Rowsome's pupils, who played in front of Hitler at the 1936 World Dance and Music Festival; Mick O'Connor playing flute; and Éamonn Ceannt, the 1916 Proclamation signatory who was also secretary of the Pipers' Club. Right: Wren Boys in Dublin.**  
Photographs: Mick O'Connor, Donal O'Connor





**Four piping families, above from left: Luke McRannacháin (great-grandson of Leo Rowsome), Fiachra Potts (grandson, Sean Potts), Tomás Gilles (grandson, Tommy McCarthy), Fiachra Starr (grandson, Tommy Reck). Below: Kincora Céilí Band in the 1950s. Bottom: Paddy Glackin and Tony MacMahon. Photographs: Mick O'Connor**