

Good Books for Irish Musicians

An article by:

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By far the most commonly employed printed materials used in Irish traditional music are tunebooks, and that is as it should be: the music lives in the notes, and the tunebooks, though no substitute for the oral/aural tradition, have always played a key role in passing on the repertoire. However, the following thumbnail sketches focus not on tunebooks, but on other kinds of printed resources, especially useful for those who have not grown up in the music's indigenous culture.

There is no substitute for learning both tunes and lore from living players, but the following books can help one "get up to speed" if coming from outside. It's also worth commenting that Irish traditional music has a long history of respect for the written word, and a love of fine writing for its own sake. Loving and learning about the music in part from books is nothing to be ashamed of.

- **Ireland, a Bicycle, and a Tin Whistle** . David A. Wilson, Justin Palmer (Illustrator). Toronto: Queens University Press.
Midway between an anecdotal travel guide and an anecdotal musical rumination. Presents a more realistic, less idealized picture of how the music is made nowadays, and of the people who make it. Some great stories and snippets of comic dialogue. Useful antidote to misty-eyed romanticism about the music and players.
- **Last Night's Fun** . Ciaran Carson. New York: North Point Press, 1996.
The best book I've ever read on the Irish experience of traditional music. Not conventional narrative (Carson talks about everything from fried breakfasts to American old-timey music to poitin to how to smoke a cigarette), but every page contains gems. Absolutely essential though one needn't take all of his dicta at face value, his feel for the music, its history, players, environment, and culture, and his ability to convey these, are unmatched.
- **Blooming Meadows** . Fintan Vallely and Charlie Piggott (authors), Nutan (photographs). New York:

Roberts Rinehart Pub, 1998. A beautiful coffeetable book. Probably assembled as a "companion" to Vallely's encyclopedia Companion (see below), this is more anecdotal and interview-oriented. Always nice to have commentary from the players themselves about what they do, where they learned it, and why they care about it. Nice representation of both singers and players, both Free State and Ulster stylists. The photographs are very nice, though they are essentially posed portraits (it would be a pleasure to have a book of Nutan's photos of these same players in sessions).

- **Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community** . Henry Glassie. Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.
Folklorist Henry Glassie's magnum opus on the history, culture, agriculture, and expressive arts of the people of a small farming village in County Fermanagh. Though the book is prolix and in places repetitive, it is by far the most comprehensive, insightful, and "far-seeing" picture of how Ulster rural culture works, and the role of music and musicians in that culture. The chapter called "Ceili at Flanagan's" (about a casual visit to the home of Peter Flanagan, one of Cathal McConnell's strongest influences) is essential if you want to understand how music worked in the vanished rural environment.
- **A Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music** . Gearoid O' hAllmhurain. Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1998
An astonishing work of subtle scholarship and commendable brevity. In 144 pages (and a small format to boot), O' hAllmhurain gives a credible, solid, and effective history of the role of music (in various genres) throughout the history of Irish culture. He begins with Columba and other medieval Irish monastics and takes the reader up through Riverdance. An essential foundation work, great for placing the music in historical context. N.B.: O' hAllmhurain is also a superb lecturer, and his presentations on Irish traditional music, even those designed for the general audience, are a goldmine for serious players as well. Also a good demonstration of ways to talk about the music's significance to those who might not be aficionados.
- **Companion to Irish Traditional Music** . Fintan Vallely. New York : New York University Press, 1999.
An essential reference work. In encyclopedia format (and, like all encyclopedias, necessarily limited in the range of its coverage), it's nevertheless a fine and entertaining read. Includes articles on topics not often discussed in less formal publications on the music (lambeg drumming, bands, etc).
- **The Northern Fiddler** . Feldman and O'Doherty. New York: OAK Publications, c1977 (out of print).
Seminal work on the Donegal fiddle tradition. In terms of research and as a tune source, this work is problematic (a better alternative is Mac Aoidh's *Between the Jigs and Reels*),

but the Feldman is very useful because of its extensive transcriptions of interviews with essential players like the Doherty's and John Loughran. More effective, therefore, as ethnography than musicology (n.b.: the tune transcriptions and titles are not highly regarded). Excellent photographs and sketches by O'Doherty.

- **Shamrock, Rose, and Thistle** . Hugh Shields. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1981.
An excellent biography, song collection, and ethno-history of the Derry singing tradition, focusing on Shields's extensive fieldwork research with singer Eddie Butcher. In format rather similar to *The Northern Fiddler* (above), this is a substantial improvement in terms of ethnography accuracy and musical specificity.
- **The Heartbeat of Irish Music** . Peter MacNamara. Roberts Rinehart Pub
A beautiful book, really two books in one: the text is a fictionalized autobiographical sketch told by several members of an Irish rural family in two generations, which encompasses the history of the music as it migrated from rural settings in the 1920s through the dance hall period of the 30s-40s, drought and emigration in the '50s and '60s, and resurgence in the '70s. The (magnificent) accompanying photographs are not illustrations of the text, but instead are candid shots of players, singers, and dancers in contemporaneous West Ireland and London. Together, a highly evocative work.
- **Irish Music in America: Continuity and Change** . Mick Moloney. Ph.D. Dissertation (Folklore) University of Pennsylvania, 1992.
Though he now downplays this work, for its time Mick Moloney's doctoral dissertation was a groundbreaking piece of research on traditional music in America. It is somewhat useful as statistical ethnography, but the heart of the material is the fieldwork interviews Moloney conducted with a succession of seminal Irish emigrant players in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, and Moloney's own commentary on the music. Rumored to be scheduled for (long-awaited) publication in book form in 2000. In the meantime, only available from university libraries via interlibrary loan.
- **A Harvest Saved: Francis O'Neill and Irish Music in Chicago** . Nicholas Carolan. Ireland: Ossian Publications, 1997.
A flagship publication from the Dublin-based (and state-funded) Irish Traditional Music Archive. Carolan, a player, archivist, lecturer, and author, provides a great example of the kind of basic historical/biographical research on seminal figures in the music which is still largely lacking. Though the tradition has always had a strong oral history component, and oral histories form an important part of the corpus of literature, there is still a great deal of work to be done on the historical/archival materials available. Carolan's (short) work points the way.

- **The Stone Fiddle: My Way to Traditional Song** . Paddy Tunney. Belfast: Appletree, 1991. *Where Songs Do Thunder: Travels in Traditional Song* . Paddy Tunney. Belfast: Appletree Press, 1991.

Two books of anecdote, reminiscence, and folklore from the Ulster traditional singer. The writing is episodic, chatty, and fanciful, and captures very well the interplay of myth, history, and storytelling that surrounds traditional song in a traditional setting. Not the same as having Paddy sitting by your fireside with a pint and a song, but not too far away either.
- **Traditional Music in Ireland** . Tomas O Canainn. London ; Boston : Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1978.

A dense, closely argued investigation of some core instrumental and song traditions: pipes, fiddle, and sean nos. Includes detailed transcriptions and a lengthy discussion of melodic analysis, to which Cowdery (below) is indebted, but some of the most valuable material is in the biographical profiles and stylistic commentary of O Canainn's three principal informants: Matt Cranitch (fiddle), Darach O Cathainn (sean nos), and Paddy Keenan (pipes).
- **Between the Jigs and Reels The Donegal Fiddle Tradition** . Caoimhin MacAoidh. Drumlin Publications, Nure, Manorhamilton, Co. Leitrim, Ireland, (072)55237. 1994
- **The Melodic Tradition of Ireland** . James Cowdery. The Kent State University Press, Kent Ohio. 1990.

Like O Canainn (above), Cowdery is heavily concerned with developing an analytical method for explaining the structural parameters of Irish traditional dance tunes. As such, this work will not "tell" you how to play the music. However, he is an immensely knowledgeable and experienced player, and his insights are valid.
- **Irish Minstrels and Musicians** . Francis O'Neill. The Mercier Press Limited, 4 Bridge Street, Cork; 24 Lower Abbey Street, Dublin, 1987.
- **Irish Music: A Fascinating Hobby** . Francis O'Neill.

Captain O'Neill's contributions to the tradition were not limited to his enormously influential tune collections. Both of these titles, which antedate the collections by a number of years, are a treasure trove of information, history, and anecdote based in the Captain's own oral history research in Chicago and the West of Ireland. Like the tune collections, these books are an invaluable snapshot of the state of traditional music in the various locales between c1895-1915.

Numerous liner notes by Paul DeGrae, Liz Doherty, Maire O' Keefe, and Gearoid O' hAllmhurain. (among others).

These authors (and players) are setting new standards for the comprehensivity, accuracy, and precise scholarship available in liner notes to recordings of Irish traditional repertoire. In addition to the music encoded on the discs themselves, the notes to **The Smoky Chimney** (DeGrae), and **Tracin'** (O' hAllmhurain), for example, are first-rate musicological essays in themselves. A level of serious scholarship which, despite the tradition's occasional suspicion of ethnomusicologists, treats the music with the care and respect it deserves.

There are a number of other publications on Irish traditional music, including some which are spoken of very highly. However, I can vouch for the above.

Coming soon: a companion survey of Irish music on video.