



THIS
FEARLESS
MAID



Dedicated to my grandmothers
Norah Kelly & Kay Clinton



Printed by CRM Design & Print

Contents

Introduction ... 1

1. Songs of Our Land ... 5
2. Snuff Box Song ... 7
3. Lament of the Irish Mother ... 9
4. Kittie's Toys ... 11
5. Patriot Mother ... 15
6. For the Sake of Those Who are Gone ... 17
7. Mrs Kelly ... 19
8. Betsy Gray ... 21
9. My Son Phelim ... 25
10. Hold the Harvest ... 27
11. The Female Duel ... 31
12. The Witchcraft Murder ... 33
13. Heezh-ba ... 35
14. Anti-War Song ... 37

Notes ... 39

List of Authors ... 40

Bibliography ... 41

Acknowledgements ... 43

Howth Singing Circle Young Singer in Residence ... 44

Introduction

When asked by Howth Singing Circle to research songs on a theme of my choosing, I decided to make things difficult: to find songs that feature a woman who is not defined by her relationship to a man. Specifically, this might be a song written by, about, or from the perspective of a woman, which does not involve any romance. In addition, the song must have been written or sung in Ireland before 1950 and be in the English language (the last condition being made out of necessity!). The majority of songs in my own repertoire are about love—unrequited or otherwise—so I decided to try and uncover songs that feature women as protagonists in their own right.

The collection presented in this booklet fulfils these criteria to varying degrees. Some of the songs centre on a mother-son or grandmother-grandchild relationship and so do not exclusively focus on the woman in the song. However the female characters in these instances are strong and are not merely trying to please their men. The mother in ‘My Son Phelim’, for example, threatens to wage war between Hungary and Spain as vengeance for the loss of her son’s legs in battle.

The songs presented here are all from printed sources as I hope to bring to light some lesser known material, though there are plenty following this theme that have been recorded. Songs like ‘Biddy Mulligan’, ‘The Female Prize Fighter’, ‘Dicey Reilly’ (Frank Harte’s version), ‘The Fairy Boy’, ‘The Finding of Moses’, ‘The Doffing Mistress’ and ‘Nell Flaherty’s Drake’ all qualify but there is no need to reiterate them here. Most of those included were written in the 1800s or early 1900s—an interesting time for women’s rights, given the rise of the suffrage movement and the then prevailing ideology of separate spheres. It was against this background that women writers were contributing to the nationalist literary canon which, although it granted their work access

to the public realm, tended to subsume the actual lived experience of women into the overall narrative of a shared Irish identity. Female characters in songs were often reduced to symbols of the nation and many of the songs written by these nationalist authors did not deal with the particulars of life as a woman. Further to this, we should not conflate the experiences of women from different socio-economic backgrounds: what has survived in printed form is largely the work of the wealthier and therefore more educated authors who would have had the means to publish and distribute their work. Unfortunately this means there is a lack of songs that deal with the everyday lives of women in poorer rural and urban contexts—again, I can only account for those songs written in English.

I hope that this collection is a fair representation of the diverse subjects, styles and sentiments that emerged from my research, some themes of which I will briefly outline:

Nationalism

Very often when there is a woman mentioned in an Irish nationalist song she is a metaphor: whether ravaged damsel-in-distress (see ‘A New Song Called Granuaile’) or forlorn mother (see ‘A Mother’s Lament’ by Brian O’Higgins), she is merely a vehicle for the expression of a weakened and passive Ireland. I have attempted therefore to include songs that, if concerned with the nationalist struggle, either feature actual heroines (e.g. ‘Betsy Gray’) or less explicitly gender the nation (e.g. ‘Songs of Our Land’). The obvious exceptions here are ‘The Patriot Mother’ and ‘Kittie’s Toys’. The former—though the mother can be read as a symbol for Ireland—chimes with Mary Kelly’s own fierce nationalism and relates to events in her life, i.e. her lover’s transportation to Australia for his refusal to plead guilty to charges of sedition. Or even if the mother is just a metaphor, the language is so severe, argues Gerardine Meaney, that this constitutes a kind of participation in history through the “rejection of the attributes

traditionally considered feminine or maternal insofar as they are deemed incompatible with insertion in that history”.¹ In the case of the latter, the allegory is so obvious and simplistic—it is written in the style of a children’s song—that it seems somehow less insidious in terms of diminishing women to the status of emblem and I include it more as an historical curiosity and as an example of the kind of censorship active at the time. A final note about nationalism and women: these songs must of course be read in the context of the time in which they were written. Ballad writing offered a platform for women to participate in the national debate in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, according to Antoinette Quinn, “most appear to have regarded the gendering of the nation as an empowering strategy in a male-dominated rhetoric”.²

Women at Work

There is only one song included here that deals with life as a worker. The ‘Snuff Box Song’ is from the point of view of a spinner in a flax mill and tells of the hardships associated with the job. It is this category of song that I was most keen to explore but have had little success finding any. According to Tom Munnely, this might be attributed to the Famine. Much of the work in rural Ireland would have been done by Irish speakers and, by the time most the country spoke English, the Famine had taken its toll. He asks, “Where was the work to sing them for? Many are improvisational and ephemeral so who had the heart to sing them?”³ This might also explain the lack of equivalents in the Irish language tradition to the Scottish waulking song. What we are left with therefore is mainly songs from the mills in the north of Ireland (see the singing and publications of Maurice Leyden). Munnely also makes the point that although every occupation had its songs, the occupation itself was not necessarily the focus of those songs. ‘You Might Easy Know a Doffer’ and ‘Campbell’s Mill’ both involve women working but I have disqualified both for their romantic content! However this is not always the case as, Maurice Leyden says: “A lot of the songs sung were by the ‘millies’ who worked in the mills. They were aged up to sixteen

and borrowed the tunes of children's games and rewrote the words about their work. Many are short quatrains. Different trades sang and slagged the other trades in the mills because they all thought they were better than everybody else. ...Interesting that women were wage earners and had a certain financial independence to make their own choices".⁴

Other songs included in this booklet cover themes such as death, the supernatural, war and emigration. Hopefully many will be unfamiliar to readers and should serve as interesting examples of the various roles played by women in Irish song. As recently noted on the Irish Traditional Music Archive's website, "The lines between Irish popular and traditional song and music are hard to define, and the genres have significant resemblances. Often sheet-music material that is created by known poets and composers for commercial, literary, or other cultural purposes, enters oral tradition and comes to be considered as of anonymous origin." I cannot therefore definitively state that my selection has been exclusively 'traditional' but perhaps time will change that. After all, songs collected by P.J. McCall like 'The Female Duel' and 'The Witchcraft Murder' would not have been considered traditional at the time of their writing.

This collection is by no means exhaustive and I would be delighted to hear of songs on this theme that are not included. Equally, this introduction and the notes to the songs are from my own personal perspective and are not the work of a professional historian. All I would like to do here is offer a caveat to Frank Harte's great line "Those in power write the history, those who suffer write the songs". The songs that have survived often concern a male perspective in which women are subordinate. Those songs then become part of history, perpetuating the patriarchal power that Harte is implicitly criticizing. Let's remember the songs that give a voice to those who may have been forgotten along the way.

Songs of Our Land

Songs of our land, ye are with us forever,
The power and the splendour of thrones pass away;
But yours is the might of some far flowing river.
Through Summer's bright roses or Autumn's decay.
Ye treasure each voice of the swift passing ages,
And truth which time writeth on leaves or on sand;
Ye bring us the bright thoughts of poets and sages,
And keep them among us, old songs of our land.

The bards may go down to the place of their slumbers,
The lyre of the charmer be hushed in the grave,
But far in the future the power of their numbers
Shall kindle the hearts of our faithful and brave,
It will waken an echo in souls deep and lonely,
Like voices of reeds by the summer breeze fanned;
It will call up a spirit of freedom, when only
Her breathings are heard in the songs of our land.

For they keep a record of those, the true-hearted,
Who fell with the cause they had vowed to maintain;
They show us bright shadows of glory departed,
Of love that grew cold and hope that was vain.
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.

Songs of our land, ye have followed the stranger,
With power over ocean and desert afar,
Ye have gone with our wanderers through distance and danger,
And gladdened their path like a home-guiding star.
With the breath of our mountains in summers long vanished,
And visions that passed like a wave from our strand,
With hope for their country and joy from her banished.
Ye come to us ever, sweet songs of our land.

The spring-time may come with the song of her glory,
To bid the green heart of the forest rejoice,
But the pine of the mountain, though blasted and hoary,
And rock in the desert, can send forth a voice,
It is thus in their triumphs for deep desolations,
While ocean waves roll or the mountains shall stand,
Still hearts that are bravest and best of the nations,
Shall glory and live in the songs of our land.

—Frances Browne (1816-79)

‘Songs of Our Land’ was first published in 1841 in the *Irish Penny Journal* by Frances Browne, the poet and novelist from Stranorlar, Co. Donegal. Known as ‘The Blind Poetess of Ulster’, she moved to Edinburgh and then London to pursue her career as a writer, publishing stories with great titles such as *The Botheration of Ballymore*. I first discovered this song in the Walton’s *Irish Fireside Songs No. 5—Grave and Gay*, although it is widely found in various collections of Irish song. I think the words go nicely with the tune ‘(The) Green Fields of America’, as sung by Len Graham.

Snuff Box Song

I give my heart to any wee girl
What lives to be a spinner.
That has a discontented mind
From breakfast time to dinner.

When I go in, the mill is on,
The belts are always shakin',
I turn on the spinning frame,
And the ends are all a breakin'.

Johnny Larkin comes down to me,
And his tongue goes clitter, clatter.
Sez I, "Come here upon my soul,
Will you tell me what's the matter?"

My work is bad, and, when I go home,
I cannot take my dinner.
Unless you damn near change it Johnny
Look out for another spinner."

And when the work is good again,
I'm in a better temper.
Bring out your box; we'll have a snuff,
For I'm the girl who'll venture.

This song is mentioned in Betty Messenger's *Picking up the Linen Threads: A Study in Industrial Folklore* (1978). It was given to the author by three sources: a spinner, a doffing mistress and a drawer. All born in Ulster between 1901 and 1907, they started work in the mills at just twelve years old. Songs were sung in loud unison that they might be heard over the machinery, often to the tune of a hymn and adapting the lyrics to the names of people particular to that mill. Working conditions were extremely difficult and the odd pinch of snuff may have offered some small, brief consolation.

Suggested air: The Waxies' Dargle.



Lament of the Irish Mother

Oh! why did you go when the flowers were springing,
And winter's wild tempest had vanished away,
When the swallow was come, and the sweet lark was singing,
From the morn to the eve of the beautiful day?
Oh! Why did you go when the summer was coming,
And the heaven was blue as your own sunny eye;
When the bee on the blossom was drowsily humming—
Mavourneen! Mavourneen! Oh, why did you die?

My hot tears are falling in agony o'er you,
My heart was bound up in the life that is gone;
Oh! Why did you go from the mother that bore you,
A chara, mo chuisle! Why leave me alone?
The primrose each hedgerow and dingle is studding;
The violet's breath is on each breeze's sigh,
And the woodbine you loved round your window is budding—
Oh! Maura, mavourneen! Why, did you die?

The harebell is missing your step on the mountain,
The sweetbriar droops from the hand that it loved,
And the hazel's pale tassels hang over the fountain
That springs in the copse where so often you roved.
The hawthorn pearls fall as though they were weeping,
Upon the low grave where your cold form doth lie,
And the soft dews of evening there longest lie sleeping—
Mavourneen! Mavourneen! Oh! Why did you die?

When the bright silent stars through my window are beaming
I dream in my madness that you're at my side,
With your long golden curls on your white shoulders streaming,
And the smile that came warm from your loving heart's tide;
I hear your sweet voice fitful melodies singing;
I wake but to hear the low wind's whispered sigh,
And your vanishing tones through my silent home ringing,
As I cry in my anguish oh! why did you die?

—Mrs Mary C. F. Munster (1835-92)

This is a version of 'Lament of the Irish Mother', as found abridged in Pádraig Breathnach's *Songs of the Gael* (1922) and in full in Edward Hayes' *The Ballads of Ireland* (1856). I have substituted the religious final verse for the one where Maura appears as a ghost, and used the tune suggested by Breathnach: 'A Spailpín a rún'. Mary Munster (née Monck), whose pseudonym was 'Tiny', was born in Co. Offaly in 1835. She contributed two poems to the Robert Burns Centenary collection in 1859 and died in Holywood, Co. Down in 1892.

Kittie's Toys
A Child's Song (written for Kathleen)

I wish I had a soldier, a soldier, a soldier,
I wish I had a soldier to fight for love of me
Marie has a soldier, a soldier, a soldier,
Marie has a soldier, a gallant man is he.

I wish I had a bright flag, a gay flag, a dear flag,
I would love a fair flag to fly in liberty,
Gretchen has a big flag, a brave flag, a strong flag,
Gretchen has a fine flag that floats all high and free.

I wish I had a small ship, a strong ship, a good ship,
I would love a trim ship to sail upon the sea.
Johnny has a big ship, a grey ship, a grand ship,
Johnny took my small ship with all his big navee.

I wish I had a penny, a penny, a penny,
I wish I had a penny that all belonged to me,
I would build a fair house, a great house, a strong house,
I would make one grand house for all the world to see.

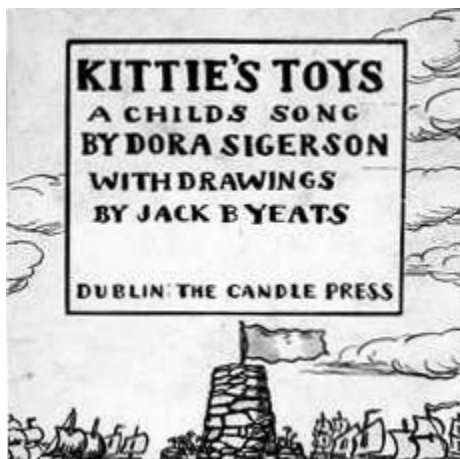
But Johnny stole my penny, my penny, my penny,
And Johnny took my bright flag that floated fair and free,
Then Johnny had my small ship, my trim ship, my good ship,
And Johnny broke my soldier that fought for liberty.

Now John would be my soldier, my soldier, my soldier,
But John he is a greedy boy, a selfish boy is he;
And Johnny beats the wee ones, the small ones, the weak ones,
He takes their playthings from them in the name of liberty.

When Johnny gets a whacking, a whacking, a whacking,
When Johnny gets a whacking, I think he'll let me be,
And I shall have my penny, my penny, my penny,
And I shall buy a bright flag to wave in victory.

—Dora Sigerson (1866-1918)

This is an allegorical song, dedicated to Caitlín Ní Uallacháin that was first printed by *The Gaelic Press* in 1917. An edition with illustrations by painter Jack B. Yeats was due to be published by Colm Ó Lochlainn's Candle Press in 1918 but didn't make it past the British censor. Apparently there were no objections to the illustrations - which are fairly innocuous - but the censor declared that the poem itself must not be published, not realising of course that it already had been. I've included the sheet music, also written by Sigerson and published in New York in 1921. Alternatively, the tune suggested in the *National Comic Song Book*, where I first came across 'Kittie's Toys', is given as 'Is Trua Gan Peata 'n Mhaoir Agam'.



Kittie's Toys

Words and Music by
DORA SIGERSON SHORTER

1. I wish I had a sol-dier, a sol-dier, a sol-dier, I wish I had a
2. I wish I had a small ship, a strong ship, a good ship, I would love a

sol-dier to fight for love of me Ma-rie has a sol-dier, a
trim ship to sail up-on the sea. John-ny has a big ship, a

sol-dier, a sol-dier, — Ma-rie has a sol-dier a gall-ant man is he. I
grey ship, a grand ship, — John-ny took my small ship with all his big nav-ee. I

Copyright 1921 By Irish Folk Song Publishing Corp. Ap. 6 B. 209 West 97th St. New York
The right to the use of this Copyrighted work upon the parts of instruments serving to produce it mechanically is reserved

wish I had a bright flag, a gay flag, a dear flag, I would love a
wish I had a pen - ny, a pen - ny, a pen - ny, I wish I had a

fair flag to fly in li - ber - ty. Ah! Gret - chen had a big flag, a
pen - ny that all be - longed to me And - I would build a fair house, a

brave flag, a strong flag, Gret - chen had a fine flag that float ed high and free
great house, a strong house, I would make one grand house for all the world to see

3. But Johnny stole my penny, my penny, my penny,
And Johnny took my bright flag that floated fair and free.
Then Johnny had my small ship, my trim ship, my good ship,
And Johnny broke my soldier that fought for liberty.
Now John would be my soldier, my soldier,
But John he is a greedy boy, a selfish boy is he.
And Johnny beats the wee ones, the small ones, the weak ones.
He takes their playthings from them in the name of liberty.
4. When Johnny gets a whacking, a whacking, a whacking,
When Johnny gets a whacking I think he'll let me be,
And I shall have my penny, my penny, my penny,
And I shall buy a bright flag to wave in victory.

The Patriot Mother

"Come, tell us the name of the rebelly crew
Who lifted the pike on the Curragh with you;
Come tell us the treason, and then you'll be free,
Or right quickly you'll swing from the high gallows tree.

"A leanbh! a leanbh! the shadow of shame
Has never yet fallen on one of your name,
And, oh! may the food from my bosom you drew
In your veins turn to poison if you turn untrue.

"The foul words, oh! let them not blacken your tongue,
That would prove to your friends and your country a wrong,
Or the curse of a mother, so bitter and dread,
With the wrath of the Lord—may they fall on your head!

"I have no one but you in the whole world wide,
Yet false to your pledge you'd ne'er stand by my side;
If a traitor you lived, you'd be farther away
From my heart than, if true, you were wrapped in the clay.

"Oh! deeper and darker the mourning would be
For your falsehood so base than your death proud and free;
Dearer, far dearer, than ever to me,
My darling, you'll be on the brave gallows tree!

"'Tis holy, a ghrádh, from the bravest and best—
Go, go from my heart and be joined with the rest,
A leanbh, mo chroidhe! O a leanbh mo chroidhe!
Sure, a 'stag' and a traitor you never will be!"

There's no look of the traitor upon the young brow
That's raised to the tempters so haughtily now;
No traitor e'er held up the firm head so high—
No traitor e'er showed such a proud flashing eye.

On the high gallows tree, on the brave gallows tree,
Where smiled leaves and blossoms, his sad doom met he!
But it never bore blossom so pure or so fair
As the heart of the martyr that hangs from it there.

—'Eva' Mary Kelly (1826-1910)

Quite a change in tone from the Lamenting Irish Mother above, Kelly's Patriot Mother seems to have little sympathy for her child. Also known as 'Eva of the Nation', after her contributions in prose, verse and journalism to the *Nation* journal, she was involved in promoting the role of women in the Irish Nationalist movement. According to Antoinette Quinn, ballads had been "co-opted as a medium of popular indoctrination by Thomas Davis and the Young Ireland movement. They set about producing and distributing a repertoire of ballads, with the object of constructing a sense of national identity, instilling in their readers/hearers the consciousness of a common history and a common destiny".⁵

Her popularity as 'Eva', along with fellow authors Ellen Downing ('Mary') and Jane Elgee ('Speranza') helped to establish women's prominence in nationalist discourse and therefore the public sphere.⁶ Echoing the sentiment of this song, she supported her future husband Kevin Izod O'Doherty's refusal to plead guilty to charges of sedition and promised to wait for him in Ireland while he served his sentence in Australia. The tune given for this song in *Songs of the Gaelis* the same as that of 'The Mountains of Mourne'.

For the Sake of Those Who are Gone

Friend of my youth we meet again!
Both changed in outward guise,
But the love we bore each other then!
Still lives in our tearful eyes!
Those who were wont, our hearts to fill
Have left us on earth alone!
But we'll love each other the better still
For the sake of those who are gone!
Old Friend! For the sake of those who are gone!

We'll sit in the shade of these old, oak trees
And speak of the tried and true
Nor hide our tears which no one sees
But the Friend who is weeping too!
And if our wrath be idly stirr'd,
By a heedless look or tone,
We'll forget the look and forgive the word
For the sake of those who are gone!
Old Friend! For the sake of those who are gone!

Friend of my youth we part once more!
And our paths are distant far!
But we'll meet when the long day's toil is o'er
In the land where those loved ones are!
And oh while yet we linger here
Each journeying on alone
Let my name be dear to thy distant ear
For the sake of those who are gone!
Old Friend! For the sake of those who are gone!

—Helen Selina Blackwood (Lady Dufferin), (1807-67)

Helen Selina Blackwood (née Sheridan) was a British playwright, poet and composer and the grand-daughter of Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. She would spend her summers at her late husband's estate in Clondeboye, Co. Down, and achieved success with the ballad 'The Irish Emigrant' (1843). It is hard to fathom how she could have any understanding of "the hunger pain gnawing", given her background, but apparently it was widely sung: according to ITMA, over 200 instances of the song are recorded in the Roud Index. I include 'For the Sake of Those Who are Gone' because it typifies the kind of sentimental songs written by privileged women that I have encountered through this research.



HELEN'S TOWER, CLONDEBOYE

Mrs Kelly

My grandame was a tidy lass,
Was frolicsome and frisky, O,
She ne'er could pass without a glass
A shop that sold good whiskey, O.
A spouse she had, as tight a lad
His name was Darby Kelly, O;
Whene'er I'm sad it makes me glad
To drink his health in whiskey, O,
For with each wrist he'd such a twist,
Of raising of the bumper, O;
She had the trick of getting tick
While Darby beats the row dow dow;
A row dow dow, a row dow dow,
She had the trick of getting tick
While Darby beats the row dow dow.

At Waterloo our men did show
How little for the foe they car'd;
My dame did go for whiskey, O,
To think that Darby's life was spar'd.
Then in galore they drank it o'er,
And wish'd success to crown their arms;
Whiskey in store, and nothing more,
But to be free from war's alarms.
But now we hear with roaring cheer,
The war it is quite ended, O;
With whiskey neat we'll go to meet
Our Darby with his row dow dow;
His row dow dow, his row dow dow,
With whiskey neat we'll go to meet
Our Darby with his row dow dow.

But now there's peace, quite at our ease,
We'll sit and drink good whiskey, O;
May this ne'er cease, but always please,
We'll sing and dance so frisky, O.
Come then with glee, drink three times three,
Immortal glorious Wellington;
For each country has stood to see
The foe well whack'd by Erin's son.
But now we're met, we'll never forget
The glories of that battle, O;
Let glasses ring, we'll drink and sing
While Darby beats the row dow dow;
His row dow dow, his row dow dow,
Let glasses ring, we'll drink and sing
While Darby beats the row dow dow.

—*The Sprig of Shillelah: A Collection of the Most Humorous & Popular Irish Songs* (1852)

'Mrs Kelly' is a boozey companion to the song Darby Kelly, which can be found in *The Pocket Melodist; or Dramatic Muse* (1815). That song predates the music hall style but was composed for the Theatre Royal stage, by T. Dibdin, Esq., with music composed by Mr. Whitaker. This version, focussing more on the grandmother Kelly, is sung to the same tune and follows a similar storyline as the original, except with more whiskey. It brings to mind the legendary feast that took place in a chamber beneath the Wellington Monument in the Phoenix Park on the night before it was unveiled. A waiter, taking advantage of the leftover wine, passed out under a table and was forever sealed inside!

Betsy Gray

Oh, many a noble lad and lass
Who joined the fight of ninety-eight,
To right the cruel wrongs of years,
Did meet with sad and bloody fate.

On Ednavady's sloping heights,
In June, upon the thirteenth day;
In thousands stood the Patriots bold,
To fight for home and victory.

But bravest of them all, I ween,
Who mustered there upon that day,
And drew the sword for fatherland,
Was lovely, winsome Betsy Gray.

From Granshaw, near to Bangor town,
With Willie Boal that day she came;
Her brother, too, was by her side.
Inspired by patriotic flame.

And when the tide of battle raged,
And showers of bullets fell around,
Still in the thickest of the fight,
Was noble-hearted Betsy found.

When adverse fate with victory crowned
The loyal host upon that day,
Poor George and Willie joined the flight,
And with them lovely Betsy Gray.

Along the Lisburn Road they fled,
Pursuing Yeomen keeping watch;
Then Betsy drew her gleaming sword
And hid it in a farmhouse thatch.

She reached the vale of Ballycreen—
Her friends some distance were behind—
And quickly did she look around
A quiet hiding-place to find.

But, ere 'twas found, she heard a cry
Alas! too well she knew the sound;
Her brother and her sweetheart true
Had by the Yeomen band been found!

Then from the grassy vale she sprang—
This beauteous, noble, fearless maid—
And back she ran with bounding step,
That she might seek to give her aid.

Ah, what a sight then met her gaze!
Her Willie weltering in his gore;
And George, her brother, by his side,
Pleading for life in accents sore.

A Yeoman raised his sword to strike,
As Betsy to the rescue ran—
"Oh, spare my brother's life!" she cried,
"Oh, spare him, if you be a man!"

She raised her white and rounded arm
As if to ward the dreaded stroke;
Vain was her prayer—the weapon fell
And smote her hand off as she spoke.

Another of the murderous crew,
A man who came from Anahilt,
Laughed at the brutal deed and cried—
"More rebel blood must yet be spilt!"

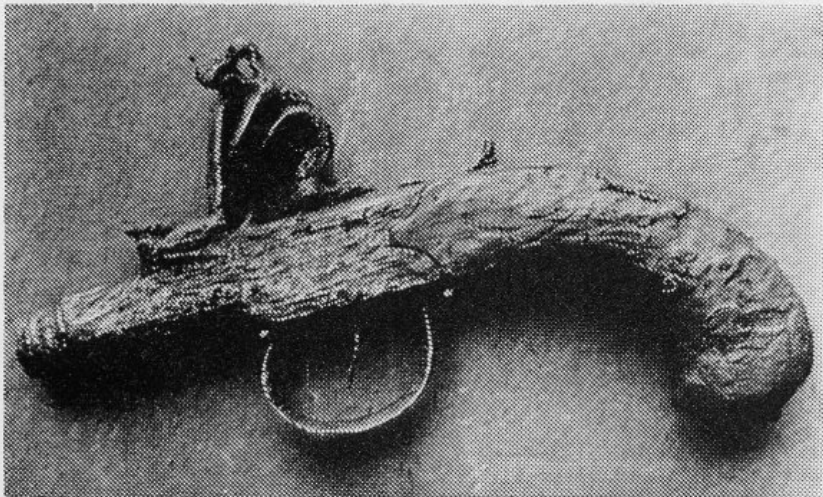
He drew a pistol from his belt,
And shot poor Betsy in the eye;
She sank upon the heathery mound,
And died without a sob or sigh.

That night the murdered three were found,
By Matthew Armstrong—then a lad;
Who, quickly running to his home,
Related there his tidings sad.

No tombstone marks that humble grave,
No tree nor shrub is planted there;
And never spade disturbs the spot,
Where sleeps the brave, where rests the fair.

Shame on the cruel, ruthless band,
Who hunted down to death their prey!
And palsy strike the murderous hand,
That slew the lovely Betsy Gray!

Betsy Gray, a Presbyterian from Co. Down, fought under General Henry Munroe in 1798, alongside her brother and her lover. She is often described as being mounted on a white steed and wearing a flowing green gown in battle. In 'The Patriot Maid', another Betsy Gray song, no mention at all is made of her bravery and she is reduced to giving "heart and hand" to the youth "who serves his country most". In this version however she is praised as a heroine in her own right, with none of the 'wasn't she very brave for a woman!' sentiment that is sometimes present in songs featuring a strong female. Unlike the woman who goes off to fight beside her lover in the wars in 'The Undaunted Female', Gray is never described as having a "tender body" or as "weeping" and "virtuous". She dies without a peep, a death of which any Patriot Mother would be proud. The tune to 'Lord Afore and Mary Flynn' goes well with this song, as would 'Willie O Winsbury' or maybe 'Johnnie O'Breadisley'.



This photograph of the pistol believed to have been carried by Betsy Gray at the Battle of Ballynahinch was taken at the beginning of the 20th century by the late Mr. T. McNeilly, father of Miss McNeilly, Mourne View, Ballynahinch.

My Son Phelim

I had a son and a son in law,
But they both trotted off to Americaw:
Oh! I will make them rue the day
That they shot my Phelim's two legs away.
With his ding dong da, fal de ral de ra,
With his ding dong da, fal de ral de ra,
With his ding dong da, fal de ral de ra,
Fal de ral de ral, fal de ral de re.

Oh! I greased my brogues and I cut away,
And never cried crack till I came to George's Quay,
There I saw two ships sailing on the sea,
"Arrah ships, dear ships, won't you wait for me!"
And my ding dong da...

"Arrah ships, dear ships, won't you wait awhile-
Arrah ships, dear ships, won't you wait awhile
And tell me of Phelim who cut one day
With a friend of his to Amerikay?"
With his ding dong da...

I went up to spake to one of the crew,
"Arrah tear-an-ages Pheilm sure this can't be you;
Oh! was it a-walking on the salt say
That you wore your two shins to the stumps away?"
With your ding dong da...

"Oh mother, dear mother, I wasn't drunk or mad,
But if you want to know where the two pins I had;
Just as we were sailing on the salt say,
A chain shot come and took the whole bunch away."
With my ding dong da...

Oh my son Phelim was tall and slim,
And to each thigh he had a most illigant limb;
But now he's come without a leg at all—
Oh! why didn't he hide from the big cannon ball?
With his ding dong da...

“Oh Phelim, dear Phelim, what will you do now?
Oh Phelim, dear Phelim, what will you do now?
Will you be all your life just like a poor crowl,
Goin' round the world like a Billy in the Bowl?”
With your ding dong da...

It's a mighty big war that I'm going to proclaim,
Twixt the Queen of Hungary and the King of Spain;
Oh I will make them rue the day
That they stole my Phelim's legs away.
And his ding dong da...

—*The Sprig of Shillelah: A Collection of the Most Humorous & Popular Irish Songs* (1852)

This might be sung to the tune of the Belfast song 'My Aunt Jane'. I've included this song for its reference to Billy in the Bowl who, born without legs, used to convey himself around the streets of 18th century Stoneybatter and Grangegorman in a large iron bowl. Unsuspecting maidens would be lured into hedges and ditches by his plaintive call and then "undone in one way or another". I also like the image of the indignant mother declaring war on Hungary and Spain in defence of her poor son, his legs and his ding dong da.

Three hundred years your crops have sprung, by murdered corpses
fed—
Your butchered sires, your famished sires, for ghastly compost spread;
Their bones have fertilized your fields, their blood has fall'n like rain;
They died that ye might eat and live—God! have they died in vain?

The yellow corn starts blithely up; beneath it lies a grave—
Your father died in 'Forty-eight'—his life for yours he gave;—
He died that you, his son, might learn there is no helper nigh
Except for him who, save in fight, has sworn he will not die.

The hour is struck, Fate holds the dice; we stand with bated breath;
Now who shall have our harvest fair?—'tis Life that plays with Death;
Now who shall have our Motherland?—'tis Right that plays with
Might;
The peasant's arms were weak indeed in such unequal fight!

But God is on the peasant's side—the God that loves the poor:
His angels stand with flaming swords on every mount and moor;
They guard the poor man's flocks and herds, they guard his ripening
grain—
The robber sinks beneath their curse beside his ill-got gain.

O pallid serfs! whose groans and prayers have wearied Heav'n full
long,
Look up! there is a Law above, beyond all legal wrong;
Rise up! the answer to your prayers shall come, tornado-borne,
And ye shall hold your homesteads dear, and ye shall reap the corn!

But your own hands upraised to guard shall draw the answer down,
And bold and stern the deeds must be that oath and prayer shall
crown;

God only fights for those who fight—now hush the useless moan,
And set your faces as a flint and swear to Hold Your Own.

—Fanny Parnell (1848-82)

These verses by the 'Patriot Poet', Fanny Parnell, were published in *Land League Songs* (1882), a pamphlet of which no copies have survived. The above was sourced from *Gill's Irish Reciter: A Selection of Gems from Ireland's Modern Literature* (1905). Fanny was heavily involved in fundraising for famine relief and set up the American Ladies' Land League, suggesting in 1881 in the *Nation* that women in Ireland might do the same. This task was taken on by her sister Anna, whose patriotism was more militant and less conventional than Fanny's in her conviction that women should be treated as equal to their male counterparts. Her "letters and pamphlets, written in an analytical, ironic and apparently dispassionate style, reveal an aspect of her character that was completely missing in Fanny's, an awareness and bitter resentment of the universal perception of women as inferior beings, and of the low status of middle-class women within their families".⁸

It is jarring to read such accusatory lyrics (however slyly provocative the intended tone) by an author who came from a wealthy Protestant background. Like Lady Dufferin, she is writing from a position of considerable privilege. Another irony missed perhaps is the call for the poor "pallid serfs" to shrug off the yoke of slavery only to submit again to the higher power of God Almighty. Her own defence of her nationalism was as follows: "That moral energy which inspires men with the ability and the desire to oppose themselves to injustice, to protest against the abuse of power, even when this injustice and this abuse do not directly affect themselves" is the "virtue which is the guaranty of order, security and independence".⁹

All of the above aside, I think that much of the sentiment of 'Hold the Harvest' resonates in contemporary Ireland. Questions of ownership of our "Motherland" in a time of increasing privatisation and international neoliberalism remain relevant and we would probably do well to try and 'hold our own'. Parnell's vivid imagery and rural setting in this poem pair nicely with the tune used for 'The Rocks of Bawn'.

kine: cattle

seignior: landlord

caitiff: a contemptible or cowardly person

recreant: cowardly



The Female Duel

In a clubhouse in Dublin at a merry meeting,
This quarrel between two young ladies began;
Where many a noble and gentleman dined,
And when dinner was over around went the wine.

The ladies were called on a health to propose,
When one, the most forward here present, arose
Saying: "Here is a health to King William the Free"
And to all his brave forces by land and by sea!"

A Jacobite lady was put to a stand
She instantly threw glass and wine from her hand
"Are you for King William?" the Jacobite cried
"I am, and I will till I die!" she replied.

"Each Williamite partisan here, I defy!
In the cause of King James I am ready to die!"
"Then you and I both shall have a trial of skill:
For I am resolved to kill or be killed!"

A suit of her brother's next day she put on
With her glittering broadsword she marched along
To meet her brave challenger whom she was to fight
She said she ne'er feared any Jacobite!

Here ends P.J. McCall's transcription, with the note: "I forget how the fight went on, or which was vanquished, probably the Jacobite lady, for the song has Williamite tinge. The above song was supplied by Mr John McCall from memory. It was sung in his boyhood through the county of Carlow (1830)". The English version (published in 1692) can be found in full and follows the same trajectory as the Irish. It ends with the following verses, which show McCall was right: the Williamite won the day.

Then bravely they thrust at each other I say,
But the Jacobite lady was forc'd to give way.
Their glittering swords they did heartily push,
Till the Jacobite lady fell into a bush.

A man who did spy them came running in haste,
And held, as he thought, a young man by the waist,
Till the lady who fell, and lay bleeding, did cry,
I am wounded, come help me, or else I shall die.

Her hat and wig falling off made them be known,
Or else they had gone for two young men unknown;
But when I found out who these young women were,
They beg'd I would not their strange quarrel declare;
And had not ones Brother came just as he did,
This secret for me should for ever been hid.

The English ballad sheet suggests Henry Purcell's 'If Love's a Sweet Passion' as a tune. An alternative might be 'An Lacha Bacach'.

The Witchcraft Murder
A woman roasted alive in Co. Tipperary

Within some miles of Clonmel Town a horrible deed occurred
‘Twas a murder cruel and shameful that every heart was stirred;
When the news was spread throughout the land of the woman’s awful
fate

She was roasted alive by her nearest friend— ‘tis awful to relate!

Bridget Cleary was her name, her age was twenty-six years
She dwelt in a place called Ballyvadlea, where she took ill, as it appears
They said she was a fairy, a spirit or a witch:
And so they cruelly murdered her and threw her in a ditch!

The night was cold in the month of March, she was lying in her bed
They marked her on the forehead with a poker burning red—
“Are you Bridget Cleary?” they asked her many a time;
She answered “yes” but they would not stop from doing the awful
crime.

They lifted her from off the bed, she was in a naked state,
And took her to the kitchen fire, and laid her on a grate;
Paraffin oil they poured on her no fear on them, no shame
So they burned this poor creature like a demon on a flame.

They buried her in a lonely place, her husband dug the grave
And not one there to breathe a prayer for her poor soul to save—
Her grave it was but three feet deep, not large enough for a child
‘Twas full of water near a ditch in a dismal place so wild!

Her father is charged with the crime, her husband is also:
Her cousins and her aunt, as the evidence goes to show
When they finished this cruel murder and thrown her in a grave
Her husband went distracted, this false and treacherous knave!

To a fairy fort then off he went, for he thought his wife was there,
As the fairy doctor told him she was taken in their snare.
She would be riding a milk white horse, guarded by fairies all around
He was to cut the string that tied her and take her from the ground.

But alas his hopes soon vanished as around him he did stare
There was the fort, but no fairy nor a wife was before him there.
Breathe a prayer for her poor soul, good Christians through the land
An angel bright we hope she is all in that heavenly land.

Some awful torments she did suffer before she met her death
And her own relations did the deed without the least regret
The fairy doctor mixed the herbs to be given to a witch
But they gave them to a Christian, then roasted her and threw her in a
ditch.

May God have mercy on her soul every Irish heart will say
May God forgive her murderers all on the Judgement Day.

P.J. McCall notes that the above is "copied from a ballad slip which I got a loan of, at Rathangan, Co. Wexford". The song describes the torture and murder of Bridget Cleary, aged just 26, by her husband, father and extended family in 1895. Michael Cleary claimed that his wife had been abducted by the fairies and replaced with a changeling. Apparently Bridget had been an unusually independent woman in the area, selling eggs and working as a seamstress. Michael received a sentence of 15 years in Portlaoise, then known as Maryborough, prison. The story of her murder was exploited by the Tory party at the time to argue against Home Rule, using it as 'proof' that a nation of superstitious Catholics were unfit to govern themselves.

Heezh-ba

When I was young I was airy and handsome,
A' my delight was in fiddlin' and dancin',
Noo I am auld and my joints are grown feeble,
Fittin' for nae thin' but rockin' the cradle.
Rockin' the cradle and singing heezh-ba,
Rockin' the cradle is nae work, ava,
I'll set my cradle on yon hill-top,
An' when the win' blows the cradle will rock,
An' when the win' staps the cradle will fa',
Doon come the cradle, wee babbie an' a'.

This lullaby is taken from Sam Henry's *Songs of the People* (1990). The source is Mrs Brownlow (Ballylaggan, Cloyfin, Coleraine), documented in 1935. I include this particular one, though there are doubtless hundreds out there, because no mention is made of waiting for Daddy to come home. The tune as transcribed by Henry is reproduced below.



Anti-War Song
World Congress, Amsterdam, August, 1932

At the heart of the world
Our banner is unfurled
Bear it on triumphantly o'er earth and air and sea
So that those who sit on high
May know the hour is nigh
When war, their deadliest menace, shall forever cease to be.

Chorus—

At the heart of the world
Our banner is unfurled
Bear it on; bear it on, o'er earth and air and sea.

In the small hours of the morning
We have heard the solemn warning
Be ready, stand erect: the hell-hounds are awake
They, the lords and masters
Have threatened vast disasters
On those who dare to face them, who dare their laws to break.

Chorus

Today we bid them know
That on all the winds that blow
The people move in multitudes to proclaim their sov'ran will.
Away with sordid strife
We have made a pact with life
Never more, throughout the ages will we torture, maim or kill.

Chorus

We refuse— refuse to serve
We will falter not nor swerve
The thrilling word is spoken; it floats from sea to sea
The world that is to come
When the battle drum is dumb
Beautiful, strong and free, shall acclaim our victory.

Chorus

—Charlotte Despard (1844-1939)

After all those songs about war, fighting, tragedy and murder, perhaps this list should end on a slightly more positive note. This song is included in Leslie H. Daiken's *Good-bye Twilight: Songs of the Struggle in Ireland* (1936) and was written by Charlotte Despard who, according to Daiken, "presented me with broadsheet copies of these songs, at a mass meeting", when Despard would have been in her late eighties. The daughter of an Irish naval commander, she did not grow up in poverty, but after the death of her husband in 1890 she dedicated the rest of her life to helping those less fortunate. In London she established soup kitchens, welfare shops and youth clubs, and campaigned to reform the Poor Law system. She was involved in an impressive number of organisations including: the Irish Women's Franchise League, the Women's Freedom League, the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism, the Women's Tax Resistance League and was vice-president of the London Vegetarian Society. The World Congress mentioned in the subheading of 'Anti-War Song' refers to the World Congress Against Imperial War, a peace gathering organised by German Communist Willi Münzenberg to discuss anti-facism and anti-imperialism in light of growing support for the Nazi party and the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Despard moved permanently to Ireland in 1921, where she joined Sinn Féin and took up residence with Maud Gonne MacBride. Her political involvement carried on until her death aged 95. She is buried in the Republican plot in Glasnevin Cemetery.

Notes

1. Kristeva, Julia, quoted in Gerardine Meaney, (2012), *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation*, p. 43.
2. Quinn, Antoinette, (2002), *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol 5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, p. 895.
3. Munnelly, Tom, (2014), *The Singing Will Never Be Done: Collected Essays and Lectures, 1990–2007*, chapter entitled 'Work and occupation related songs'.
4. Leyden, Maurice, personal correspondence (2014).
5. Quinn, Antoinette, (2002), *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol 5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, p. 896
6. *ibid.*, p. 897.
7. Collins, James, (1913), *Life in Old Dublin*, p. 79.
8. O'Regan, Danae, (1999), 'Anna and Fanny Parnell', *History Ireland*, Vol 7, Issue 1.
9. Parnell, Fanny, (1879), *Thehovels of Ireland*, p. 9 (quoting Charles Forbes René de Montalembert in *The Monks of the West*)

Image credits:

Worker in Flax Mill, p. 8

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/ni1960s/11720.shtml>

Kittie's Toys Sheet Music, p. 13

<http://digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vudl%3A141373>

Betsy Gray's gun, p. 24

http://lisburn.com/books/betsey_gray/images/betsy-gray10.jpg

In memoriam Fanny Parnell, p. 30

<http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000220848>

List of Authors

Blackwood, Helen Selina (Lady Dufferin) (1807-1867)
Browne, Frances (1816-1879)
Carbery, Ethna (1866-1902)
Cavanagh MacDowell, Maeve (1878-c1956)
Despard, Charlotte, (1844-1939)
Downing, Ellen Mary (1828-1869)
Elgee, Jane Francesca (Lady Wilde) (1821-1896)
Forrester, Ellen (1828-1883)
Furlong, Alice (1866-1946)
Kavanagh, Rose (1860-1891)
Kelly, 'Eva' Mary Anne (1826-1910)
Large, Dorothy M. (1891-?)
Letts, Winifred M. (1882-1972)
Milligan, Alice (1865-1953)
Mitchell, Susan (1866-1926)
Mulholland, Rosa (1841-1921)
Munster, Mary C. F. 'Tiny' (1835-1892)
Needham, Alicia Adélaide (1863-1945)
O'Brien, Attie (1840-1883)
O'Brien, Charlotte Grace (1845-1909)
O'Donovan Rossa, Mary Jane (1845-1916)
O'Leary, Ellen (1831-1889)
O'Neill, Moira (1865-1955)
Owenson, Sidney (Lady Morgan) (1776-1859)
Parnell, Fanny (1848-1882)
Rhys, Grace (1865-1929)
Sigerson, Dora (1866-1918)
Tynan, Katherine (1859-1931)
Young, Ella (1867-1956)

Bibliography

- BLAKE, Dinny, (1852), *The Sprig of Skillelah : A Collection of the Most Humorous and Popular Irish Songs*
- BOURKE, Angela [Ed.], (2002), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol 5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*
- BREATHNACH, Pádraig], (1922), *Songs of the Gael*
- CARBERRY, Ethna [Anna MacManus], (1902), *The Four Winds of Eirinn*
- COLLINS, James, (1913), *Life in Old Dublin*
- DAIKEN, Leslie H., (1936), *Goodbye, Twilight: Songs of the Struggle in Ireland*
- DALLAS, Karl, (1974), *One Hundred Songs of Toil*
- DAVIS, Leith, (2006), *Music, Postcolonialism & Gender*
- DEVEREUX, Denis, (1898), *Songs and Ballads of '98*
- DEVINE, Francis (2003), *Songs for Union Maids: A Selection of Songs for Women Trade Unionists*
- DUFFERIN, Lady [Helen Selina Blackwood], (1895), *A Selection of the Songs of Lady Dufferin (Countess of Gifford)*
- FISHER, William Arms [Ed.], (2003), *Sixty Irish Songs for High Voice*
- FITZGIBBON, Marie & MULCAHY, Michael, (1982), *The Voice of the People: Songs and History of Ireland*
- FLEISCHMANN, Aloys, (1998), *Sources of Irish Traditional Music c. 1600-1855. Volume II*
- FORRESTER, Ellen (1869), *Songs of the Rising Nation: And Other Poems*
- FOYLE, Naomi, (2012), 'The Ballad as Site of Rebellion' in *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond*
- HAMMOND, David, (1978), *Songs of Belfast*
- HARTE, Frank, (1978), *Songs of Dublin*
- HAYES, Edward, (1855), *The Ballads of Ireland*
- HEALY, James N., (1967), *The Mercier Book of Old Irish Streets Ballads*

HENDERSON, Kathy [w/Frankie Armstrong & Sandra Kerr], (1979), *My Song is My Own: 100 Women's Songs*

HENRY, Sam, (1990), *Songs of the People*

KENNEDY, Peter, (1975), *Folksongs of Britain and Ireland*

LARGE, Dorothy M., (1926), *Songs of Slieve Bloom*

MCCALL, PJ, (1911), *Irish Fireside Songs*

MCCALL, PJ, (no date), *Irish Country Songs and Street Ballads, Vol 6*

MESSINGER, Betty, (1978), *Picking up the Linen Threads: A Study in Industrial Folklore*

MOYLAN, Terry, (2000), *The Age of Revolution: 1776 to 1815 in the Irish Song Tradition*

MUNNELLY, Tom, (2014), *The Singing Will Never Be Done: Collected Essays and Lectures, 1990–2007*

O'BOYLE, Carmel [Ed.], (1986), *The Irish Woman's Songbook*

O'KELLY, John Joseph (1905), *Gill's Irish Reciter*

O'LOCHLAINN, Colm, (1939), *Irish Street Ballads*

O'NEILL, Moira, (1906), *Songs of the Glens of Antrim*

OWENSON, Sidney, (1805), *Twelve Original Hibernian Melodies*

PALMER, Roy, (2010), *Working Songs*

QUINN, Antoinette (2002), 'Ireland/Herland: Women and Literary Nationalism 1854-1916' in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol 5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*

SHIELDS, Hugh, (1995), *Narrative Singing in Ireland*

SILVERMAN, Jerry, (1971), *The Liberated Woman's Songbook*

SPARLING, Halliday, (1887), *Irish Minstrelsy: Being a Selection of Irish Songs, Lyrics, and Ballads, Original and Translated*

STAUNTON, P.V., (1933), *Our Broadsheet Ballads: Ballads of the Penal Days*

Acknowledgements

I wish to sincerely thank the following people for their assistance in the preparation of this booklet: Liz Austin, Francy Devine, Maurice Leyden, Cormac MacDiarmada, Niamh Moriarty, Ann Riordan, Howth Singing Circle and the staff of the Irish Traditional Music Archive.

Ruth Clinton, 2015

