“Those Wild and Beautiful Strains”: Irish Folksong Collections, the Sound of a Nation, and Home–Rule Politics, 1867–1921

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Introduction

Thesis: The growth of political nationalism in Ireland during the late 19th century went hand in hand with an increasing interest in Irish folklore, literature, and antiquarianism. The collection of folk music became one of the leading institutions of cultural nationalism during the years of Home–Rule politics.

Historiography of Irish nationalism and Home Rule politics

Historiography of music in Ireland

The collections

Edward Bunting’s 1796 collection, Ancient Irish Music, stands as the first in a long line of important 19th–century compendiums. Though many of the tunes in Bunting’s collection were transcribed from memory, he drew attention, in the process, to the Belfast Harp Society. Several of the tunes performed at the 1792 festival appear in Bunting’s volume. Bunting published two additional books in 1809 and later in 1840. In the meantime, though, some new faces hit the Irish folksong–collecting scene. P. O’Farrell, Patrick Weston Joyce, William Forde, Henry Hudson, and John Edward Pigot published volumes of Irish instrumental and vocal music in the early through mid 19th century.

George Petrie’s work, though, stands as the most significant contribution to the understanding of Irish folk music since Edward Bunting. While serving as an officer in
both the Royal Irish Academy and Royal Hibernian Academy, the Dublin–born Petrie published review articles on Irish music for the *Dublin Examiner* and *The Dublin Penny Journal*, as well as articles on ancient Irish instruments in *The Irish Penny Journal* and *The Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*. As a collector of folksongs, Petrie obtained and edited over 2100 Irish melodies over his lifetime. The antiquarian bard contributed many of his tunes to Thomas Moore’s *Selection of Irish Melodies*, which was published serially in 1808, Francis Smollet Holden’s collection, and to the second and third volumes of Edward Bunting’s tomes of Irish music. In the 1840’s, in the midst of the devastating effects of the Irish famine, Petrie founded and headed the Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland, an organization which stimulated the publication of Petrie’s own volume, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (1855).

The antiquarian echoed the effects of the Famine in the preface to his collection. In doing so, Petrie single–handedly synthesized Irish nationalism with folk music. He opines, “[t]he calamities, which, in the year 1846–7, had struck down and well–nigh annihilated the Irish remnant of the Great Celtic Family.”\(^1\) The tunes in *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, therefore, stand as artifacts of a bygone era. Furthermore, his juxtaposition of the words “Irish” and “Celtic” reflects a nationalistic reading of Irish history, akin to that of Matthew Arnold and the Celtic Revival.\(^2\)

Although Petrie died in 1866, his legacy as a seminal collector of Irish folk music influenced subsequent generations of scholars and musicians alike. In 1882, for example,

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\(^1\) George Petrie, *Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin: Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland, 1855), xii.

Petrie’s daughter published a posthumous second volume to her father’s initial collection. Since over 1500 folksongs remained unpublished, however, the task of publishing and editing Petrie’s entire collection was indeed a daunting one.

In the early 1900’s, the Irish–born British composer Charles Villiers Stanford grasped at such an opportunity. As a youngster growing up in Dublin, like George Petrie, Stanford was intimately familiar with the melodies in the song catcher’s 1855 publication. He published Petrie’s remaining manuscripts in a three–volume compendium entitled *The Complete Petrie Collection of Irish Music* in 1905.

While he preserved the musical relics of Ireland’s past as an editor, Stanford exploited Irish folk music as a composer. For example, he adapted several of Petrie’s folksongs in several nationalistic works, such as his *Irish Symphony* of 1887 and the six *Irish Rhapsodies* of 1902–1923. The latter works, in particular, were vehicles for Stanford’s political views concerning Home Rule politics. The composer conducted the first two of his *Irish Rhapsodies* at the British–Canadian Festival Concert and at the Royal Society of Musicians at Queen’s Hall in 1906. By then, he had carved out a personal niche as the representative of Irish music in the United Kingdom. A conservative Unionist, Stanford specifically chose folksongs from Ulster as a basis for his “Irish” pieces. The above–mentioned symphonic works are testaments of his political leanings in musical notation.

**Next steps:** Draw in arguments that will support my thesis. I want to show how Petrie’s linking of music and nationalism transformed into a potent political vehicle in the 1880s,
90s, and early decades of the 20th century, even if the collections themselves do not appear that way at first glance.  

[Patrick Weston Joyce]

After receiving his education from Trinity College (he earned a BA in 1861 and an MA in 1864), Patrick Weston Joyce served as principal of the National Education Commission’s training college in Dublin. Joyce also established himself as a leading Irish scholar in the late 19th century. He published over thirty books on education, literature, history, and antiquarianism in Ireland, served on the council of the Royal Irish Academy from 1884 to 1895, and was a member of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland from 1865 until his death in 1914.

Although his interest in music stemmed from his childhood, Joyce did not pursue the scholarly study of music until he moved to Dublin in the early 1850s. There, he met George Petrie and familiarized himself with the antiquarian bard’s own manuscripts as well as Bunting’s and Moore’s published collections of Irish tunes. Through Petrie’s example and suggestions, Joyce embarked on a quest to collect and transcribe music from his native Limmerick. Joyce adopted two of Petrie’s “scientific” methods: 1) he wrote all music that he could recall from personal memory, and 2) he traveled and notated the

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songs he thought worthy of transcription and remembrance. Much of what Joyce found (or imagined), was subsequently published in both Petrie’s *Ancient Music of Ireland* and Stanford’s *Complete Petrie Collection*. Joyce published the remainder of his work in 1872, a single–volume enterprise bearing the Petrie–esque title, *Ancient Music of Ireland*.

Four years after Stanford published his edition, Patrick Weston Joyce printed his final volume of Irish melodies, *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs*, which comprises at least 840 additional tunes not found in either Petrie’s or Stanford’s editions. Walking in Petrie’s footsteps, Joyce provides the following assessment in the preface:

> We have a well–sustained and fairly continuous history of Irish Music from the earliest period of historical record and tradition; and of course the art of musical composition must have been cultivated from the very beginning. That the practice of composition continued down to a late period we know from our historical and biographical records. In my opinion it began to decline in the eighteenth century; flickered on fitfully into the beginning of the next; and finally became extinguished in 1847, the year of the great famine. But although the composers became extinct, or ceased composing, a very large part of their work—as we have seen—still remains.

[Discuss folk–music collecting and antiquarianism as reflections of Irish scholar’s nostalgia for old Ireland. History and the writing of history became politicized.]

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5 Joyce, *Old Irish Folk Music*, xxii.