



## Traditional Song Forum Meeting, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2010,

held at the Helen Roe Theatre of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland  
63 Merrion Square, Dublin

### Meeting Report

Chair: Martin Graebe

We were pleased at the turnout for this, the first meeting of the Traditional Song Forum to be held outside the UK. There were 33 members and guests at the afternoon session.

TSF Members present included: Martin Graebe (Chair), Shan Graebe, Vic Gammon, Sheila Gammon, Malcolm Taylor, Jim Carroll, Pat McKenzie, John Moulden, Lewis Jones, Jane Jones, Dave Eyre, Pete Wood, Joyce Dickinson, , Sonja Meier, Anne Lamb, Ian Spring, and Máire Ní Bhaoill.

Speakers and other guests included: Nicholas Carolan, Virginia Leyden, Len Graham, Maurice Leyden, David Dennehy, Therese McIntyre, Paddy Daley, and Tony McGaley, as well as a number of others not identified.

A number of people, though, had expressed their disappointment at not being able to be present – including the Chair, Steve Roud, who had to drop out at the last minute

After a welcome by our host, Nicholas Carolan, the Chair outlined the programme for the weekend, and confirmed the London meeting for 26 Feb, 2011, this will be a continuation of the popular 'Broadsides' meeting held last year. The Autumn meeting will probably be held in Sheffield.

We then had a brief session of Individuals' reports, mostly from Irish members and guests. The exception was:

#### **Malcolm Taylor**

Malcolm, well known as the librarian of VWML, and now a Director of EFDSS, reported on current plans to increase the folksong collections on the EFDSS site. The tremendous success of the "Take 6" initiative (1500 hits a day; the British Library had considered it to be a "benchmark" for such projects; it was particularly encouraging to note the increased interest of younger people in original source material now that it was easily accessible) had increased the confidence and experience of all concerned such that funding from the Heritage Lottery fund should be feasible for the expansion. Collections to be added would be from both VWML and other libraries, whose agreement to this had already been obtained. The project had been given the provisional "Full English". Assuming it would be successful, a great deal of voluntary help would be needed.

To queries from members, he mentioned that with the photos of Sharp's Appalachian singers from America, descendants were now seeking information for their family

genealogies. The same was happening with kids from Somerset finding their great-grandads' photographs on the site that had never been seen by the families. Quote: "The EFDSS was now an organisation that says 'YES!'" The Chair picked up this point, saying that among many young people now, "Folk music was cool".

The remaining reports came from Irish colleagues.

### **John Moulden**

He was currently digitising a unique family collection of ballad books. Sam Henry papers. Zimmerman collection of Orange songs (despite being something of a political hot potato!). There was still a tremendous amount of material waiting to be dealt with.

### **Jim Carroll**

Continues to work with Pat Mackenzie on publishing their own collections of traditional material. Their (extensive) material on travellers was now done, and would go into an archive. There was an increased interest from youngsters in their area, West Clare, though more music than song. Singing weekends are happening and while attendance is not high, the standard is very good. For the last 4-5 years, a Miltown Malbay heritage archive has been built up, and a website was being set up.

### **Len Graham**

Involved in lots of projects, especially in primary and secondary schools, and to some extent in undergraduate programmes. Joe Holmes' songs now digitised, now looking for funds to put them online. Also putting together songs particularly for young people.

### **Máire Ní Bhaoil**

There had been little awareness of TSF in Ireland, but the Irish might now set up something similar. Childrens' songs – the schools are not providing it. Community the keyword, depressed areas. Malcolm Taylor commented that teachers no longer sing to the kids. It's gone. Need to teach the teachers. Also, his website had video of children from different parts of country, and other kids were picking up on that..

### **Shan Graebe**

Picking up MT's training of teachers' theme, Sing up project, government money to promote this. Very successful, with staff choirs springing up. Singup has website. <http://www.singup.org/>

### **Therese McIntyre**

PhD student at NUI Galway, "Folk memory and historical fact" concentrating on representational heroes in song, and the legitimisation of songs as historical source material. Whilst in Ireland there was a lot funding for research into traditional music, there was very little for song. She goes into schools to play songs to the kids and get their responses, a practice derided by her peer group at Galway. Even in traditional sessions singers were not welcome, unlike in the past. Singing was confined to small groups such as TSF and the Goilin weekends, with little dissemination, so that a generational gap was opening up in oral transmission. Discussion ensued with differing opinions on this. The singing circles in various parts of Ireland, were attracting youngsters, as were many English festivals.

### **Discussion**

There followed a discussion around education including the business of getting funding for a range of such projects; kids pick up on games very fast if exposed to them; people don't

naturally sing any more, particularly teachers; there was a call for more strategic government initiatives-“we are all doing bits of stuff separately.” Librarians often had no idea of what they had in their archives. Funding bodies liked something tangible to support, like old buildings, and found it difficult to understand the “heritage value” of songs and singing. There were examples of positive initiatives from Belfast and Devon.

### **Irish Traditional Music Archive**

Nicholas Carolan gave a presentation on the history and work of the Irish Traditional Music Archive. This was followed by a visit to the Archive at 73, Merrion Square where we were shown not only the library and search facilities but also some of the archives and studios not usually open to the public. We were all very impressed with the facilities and by the work being done at ITMA. A very important archive, manned by very good (and welcoming) people. To find out more about the organisation visit their website [www.itma.ie](http://www.itma.ie).

### **Warp and Weft: A common heritage in song**

We were joined by more guests for the afternoon session of papers which looked at aspects of song in Ireland and links with English song.

#### ***Maurice Leyden - ‘Weavers, Bleachers, Millies and May Day.’***

Maurice talked about his work on the songs of the weaving industry in Northern Ireland, focusing on the groups of workers mentioned in the title – the weavers, the bleachers and the ‘millies’ (the people that worked in the mills) – over three hundred years. The talk was studded with useful and interesting information that added greatly to our knowledge of the industry, of the songs associated with it, and of the people themselves. And Maurice sang a number of examples to illustrate the talk – beautifully!

#### ***Virginia Blankenhorn: ‘Singing in Ireland - a Seamless Garment’***

Virginia has been working for the last year as a Post-Doc working on grants to construct a website on Joe Heaney and the Sean Nos singing. She looked at the background of singing in the Irish language and its steady retreat into areas of the West of Ireland. Joe Heaney was a bilingual performer who learnt the majority of his songs orally and Virginia gave us a lot of information about the ways in which he learned his songs and the songs themselves. The website that she has been working on can be found at [www.joeheaney.org](http://www.joeheaney.org).

#### ***Len Graham: ‘Joe Holmes – an Ulsterman and his songs’***

Len spoke a little about his own history as a singer as an introduction to talking about his meeting Joe Holmes, of Killyramer, Co. Antrim, in his late teens and their subsequent times together. Len has recently published a book - *Joe Holmes: Here I am Amongst* with some biographical details and a selection of Joe’s songs. He played a number of songs by Joe Holmes and also a short video of him interviewing Joe and then Joe singing ‘The Dark Eyed Gypsy’.

#### ***John Moulden: ‘A Divided Unity’***

John talked about the way in which English songs were introduced into Ireland through the printed medium in the C17th and C18th and that, at this stage, the traffic was exclusively from England to Ireland. As the degree of acculturation increased then there were more songs created in Ireland, and the number passing back to England increased. Overall,

Britain and Ireland hold about 30% of their songs in common. John produced a number of other interesting statistics to support his view, before going on to talk in detail about two songs 'Fanny Blair' and 'The Amazon'.

At the conclusion of the presentations, the speakers successfully fielded a good selection of questions from the audience.

If anyone wants to hear recordings of the papers presented, then please contact the TSF Secretary who can provide copies as MP3 files on a CD at cost.

### **Goilin Singers Club Events**

Many TSF members participated in the weekly Goilin Traditional Singers club session on Friday, and in the extra session on the Saturday evening. Both sessions were splendid all round, in particular the wealth of comical Dublin songs which were new to most TSF members. The "Singing walk" around the Liberties of Dublin that was arranged by the Goilin Club on Sunday morning was fascinating,

### **Thanks**

Thank you to Nicholas Carolan and Maeve Gebruers for hosting the visit and for the tour of ITMAs facilities. We are also grateful to Jerry O'Reilly and his colleagues for their splendid support for what was a really useful and enjoyable weekend.

*These notes were prepared by Peter Wood with some additions by Martin Graebe.*