



The Man Who Saved Irish Music

Francis O'Neill





The Cultural history of West Cork and indeed all of Ireland is hugely indebted to one Bantry man - Francis O'Neill

Francis O'Neill was born in 1849 towards the end of the Great Famine in Ireland. His father, John O'Neill, owned a comfortable farm in Tralibane, four miles east of Bantry. His mother, Kit O'Mahony, was a daughter of O'Mahony Mór, The Cianach Mór, whose home near Castledonovan was always open to musicians. Born and brought up in such a home, amid an environment of traditional music and song, it was to be expected that his mother would memorise much of the folk music of Munster and naturally transmit it orally by her lilting and singing to her children. Francis, therefore, inherited a keen ear, a retentive memory and an intense love of the haunting melodies of their race. Similarly gifted was his father, who sang the old songs in his accustomed chair beside the fire for his pleasure or for the entertainment of the neighbours who were always welcome in his home. His sisters, too, made their contribution. At the time, the glens and valleys of south-west Cork were storehouses of musical treasures. Pipers, fluters and fiddlers were far from scarce and between "Patterns" (open-air dances) at the crossroads in the summer and dances in the farmhouses in the winter nights, the traditional tunes and songs were kept alive and in circulation.

Early days in Bantry

The O'Neill farmhouse was regularly the scene of farmhouse dancing, with local piper, Peter Hagarty – known as *An Píobaire Bán* – who also held a Pattern at Colomane Cross. As the young Francis lay in bed, half asleep/half awake, the music hummed in his ears for hours, and he still remembered some of the tunes even fifty years later. Another piper, Cormac Murphy, established a Pattern at Tralibane Bridge. Young Francis would often be found seated behind the pipers at Colomane Cross or Tralibane Bridge. A fiddler named Timothy Dowling, who also played the flute, taught Francis how to play the flute.

Marriage

Francis O'Neill left West Cork in 1865, at the age of sixteen. He found work as a cabin boy on board a ship leaving Cork and later served on the ship, the *Minnehaha*, which was wrecked in the Pacific on Baker's Island and provisions were severely rationed. Eventually rescued, they went on to San Francisco.

Francis became a school teacher in Edina, Knox County, Missouri. In this semi-rural community it was the custom to have dances in the winter evenings and once again O'Neill's favourite position was to be seated behind the musicians, picking up tunes. He married Miss Anna Rogers, a native of Co Clare in 1870. She shared his interest in traditional Irish music and song. They had ten children, five daughters and five sons.

Collecting Songs

One more move brought O'Neill to Chicago in 1871. Residence in a large cosmopolitan city like Chicago afforded opportunities in various lines of investigation and study, not possible in other localities. Within the city limits, exiles from all over Ireland's thirty-two counties could be found. Every new arrival having musical taste or talent was welcomed - to the mutual advantage of all concerned. New tunes were learned and memorised by Francis O'Neill and added to his collection

He joined the Metropolitan Police Force in Chicago 1873 and was stationed in Deering Street station, which was particularly fortunate as it was largely an Irish community. Traditional musicians and singers were delightfully numerous, thus broadening the field of opportunity for indulging in his fascinating hobby of collecting songs and traditional tunes.

From Patrolman Patrick O'Mahony, commonly known as 'Big Pat' from West Clare, he learned rare tunes, double jigs, 'Out on the Ocean', 'The Fisherman's Widow', etc., and 'Bantry Bay', one of the most delightful traditional hornpipes in existence.

O'Neill's life as a policeman in Chicago had its own influence on Irish music. Francis served as a Patrolman, Captain and finally as a Chief Superintendent. It is easy to see how he came to be called "Captain Francis" and 'Chief O'Neill'. An amazing number of musicians joined the police force in Chicago. Pipers, fiddlers and flute players from every county in Ireland were regular visitors to the Chief's home in Popular Avenue.

Contact was made with a James O'Neill, a fiddler, from Co. Down who had a vast store of Ulster Music. He also had the ability to write music - any tunes, whether hummed, whistled, lilted or played. So, the idea of a manuscript collection of tunes was born.

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Publishing Music

James O'Neill became a member of the police force, and he undertook the collection of tunes with Francis O'Neill. More musicians and helpers arrived on the scene, all Irish born. And the work of collecting went on in their spare time. Francis O'Neill and James O'Neill (no relation) undertook all the work of playing the tunes, choosing versions and variants, transcribing into classified books and proof-reading. Francis O'Neill bore the expense of publishing the *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*.

This volume marks the first step in a departure from a completely oral tradition, particularly in dance music. This departure had two aspects, first in naming the tunes, second in the actual content of the printed tune. When a tune had a known name, he used it. When a tune had no name, it was given the name of the person from whom

he had obtained the tune, as 'McFadden's Reel', or it was associated with a place, like "Tralibane Bridge". The book had another effect, in it changed the traditional method of learning tunes. It also became a sort of "Bible" to musicians. No longer was it necessary to pester older musicians to repeat a tune, or to follow a strolling musician all over a fair, or to employ any of the many tricks used to add to one's store of music.

O'Neill's Dance Music of Ireland, edited by Captain Francis O'Neill and arranged by James O'Neill, and containing 1,001 tunes, was published in 1907 and still the collecting went on. James O'Neill searched one half of Chicago, Edward Cronin the other half, while Francis O'Neill searched old publications. In this way, 200 further tunes were collected.

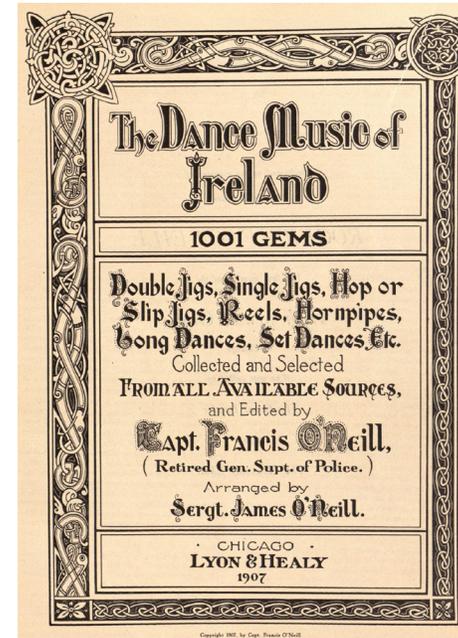


photo: Roaringwater Journal

Irish Folk Music (A Fascinating Hobby), by Captain Francis O'Neill, was published in 1910 in Chicago. The work is largely autobiographical. It tells how he met the musicians, the tunes they swapped, the stories of the tunes and of the duplication and diversity of titles.

Irish Minstrels and Musicians, including numerous dissertations on related subjects by Captain O'Neill, was published in Chicago in 1913. 'Dedicated to the venerated memory of my parents...,' this book is an attempt to rescue from oblivion the names of our musicians, harpers, pipers, flute players and fiddlers.

In 1906, after an absence of 41 years Francis returned to Ireland. In a six-week tour he visited Clare, attended the Munster Feis in Cork and attended a reception in the Mansion House in Dublin. Francis O'Neill died in 1936, but his memory is still very much alive.

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Each year, the Francis O'Neill Branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the Cork Pipers Club would make pilgrimage to Tralibane Bridge adjacent to the birthplace of Francis O'Neill, and hold a "Pattern" there.

In October 1995, the Captain Francis O'Neill Memorial Company Ltd. was set up in O'Neill's home parish of Caheragh. The members of this group work on a voluntary basis, and initially had a plaque erected at Tralibane Bridge, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the birth of Captain Francis O'Neill.

Later a site was acquired from kind

neighbours, and now a life-size Rynhart bronze memorial statue, depicting Captain Francis O'Neill playing a flute, stands in Tralibane, overlooking Tralibane Valley. A Commemorative Wall plus other facilities were then provided. Many open-air traditional and céilí dances are held at the site with the renewed interest now in the locality on O'Neill's work. More recently, a festival in his honour is held annually in Bantry, in conjunction with the Bantry branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and Bantry Development & Tourism Association.

A book by Nicholas Carolan about O'Neill is aptly titled '*A Harvest Saved*'

Captain Francis O'Neill by Jeanne Rynhart
photograph by Seamus Larkin





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Clár Éire Ildánach
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2017–2022

Front cover image: Francis O'Neill
photo <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/image/oneill-francis>

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