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.
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.

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.

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

Source of information in this booklet: The Life and Times of Captain Francis O’Neill by Nora Cremin
published in Journal Volume One of BH&AS