

# Tabhair mo ghrá go Connemara

Amhránaíocht ar an sean-nós ó Cho. na Gaillimhe

## Bring my love to Connemara

Sean-nós singing from Co. Galway



THE LIVING TRADITION

A recent and important release on the Veteran label featuring the sean-nós singing of several key singers from around Co. Galway.

by Éamonn Ó Bróithe and John Howson

This collection of songs was recorded in Galway by Terry Yarnell during the early 1970s. Born in 1939 in east London, his father, also Terry, was married to Nora (née Coote) who was of Irish ancestry. Terry attended a Catholic school with lots of Irish pupils including his best friend, whose house he often visited, and as he remembered, "There was Irish music playing all of the time." Still in east London, Terry met his wife Mary who was born in Cork city, through her brother. Terry was a member of a skiffle group in the late 1950s, and from there he followed the common route to traditional folk music. He visited folk clubs, particularly one in Ilford, east London, but most of the music at that time was American influenced.

It was a BBC radio programme presented by English singer and folklorist A.L Lloyd, *The Folk Music Virtuoso*, that was possibly a turning point for Terry. During the programme, which featured music from all corners of the world, Lloyd played a recording of *Úna Bhán (Lament For Úna Bhán)* by a singer from Carna in Co. Galway, Seán Jeaic mac Dhonncha. Terry felt the singing was beautiful with an almost primitive feel.

Terry started performing in folk clubs, with guitar and later five string banjo accompaniment. He sang mainly English songs, although his style was being

influenced by Irish sean-nós singing. Then he joined the London based study group known as the Critics under the leadership of Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. They were very aware that the Irish traditional music scene was still vibrant while MacColl described the English one as moribund. At this time, Galway singer Joe Heaney was a regular participant at MacColl and Seeger's Singers' Club in London.

It was suggested that a recording field trip to Connemara should be undertaken by someone from the Critics group with the possibility of producing an LP record. It was arranged that Terry would be accompanied by flute player Gabe O'Sullivan, originally from Headford, Co. Galway, and that they should conduct a two-week sortie. Gabe was living in London and was very active in the London Irish music scene and, even more importantly, he had a portfolio of contacts in the west of Ireland. So off they went - Gabe had made the contacts beforehand and in 1970 they made the first field trip and recorded Seán 'ac Dhonncha, Cáit Uí Chonluain and the Keane family.

Terry's memory of this first recording trip to the west of Ireland was that the way of life was still very markedly rural. Mary, Terry's wife, vividly recollected the women in Spiddal wearing Connemara shawls on Sundays to go to church. The use of donkeys

impressed upon their memories and other aspects of a lifestyle that contrasted with their own experience as Londoners.

The 1960s and 1970s however was a period of great economic and social change for Connemara and County Galway. The singers whom the Yarnells met were from the first generation of Irish people since independence and had lived through decades of economic stagnation and continuing emigration, when social networks in rural areas tended to be very localised. Innovations such as the car and the television were bringing Irish-speaking communities into a much more complex involvement with the broader English-speaking world in Ireland and elsewhere that was to provide a profound challenge to the maintenance of Irish as a vernacular. The appreciation and social function of traditional song was similarly challenged by changes in fashions, tastes and modes of entertainment. In contrast, the work of broadcasters, the Oireachtas festival and the publication of recordings by Gael-Linn did much to promote the prestige of the art at a national level, and the work of Seán Ó Riada and others was about to usher in an era of renewed interest in Irish traditional music in Ireland and abroad.

Gabe only accompanied the Yarnells on this first trip, but Terry and Mary were making their own

contacts and continued to visit the area on holiday on numerous other occasions. At least that was the official family reason; Terry always had his tape recorder with him!

The particular contacts they made included Pat Phádraic Tom Ó Conghaile and Tom Pháidín Tom Ó Coisdealbha (or as Terry would know him - Tom Costello). Terry got on with him very well and remembered him as a lovely gentle man, who often regretted that he couldn't remember songs. He'd sing them during the day then in the evening when he met up with Terry he couldn't recall what he'd sung. Terry and a group of friends tried to help by giving Tom a small portable cassette recorder, although he was never sure if Tom got the hang of using it.

During his further trips, particularly one in 1972, he recorded Tom Pháidín Tom, Pádraic Ó Conghaile and Colm Ó Caoidheáin (Colm Keane). He also recorded mainly instrumental music further south in Co. Clare.

Terry has created a remarkable body of recorded performances which, without his insight, might never have been heard. These are now safely deposited in the British Library Sound Archive, and several are in this noteworthy collection of songs from seven important singers.

## Seán 'ac Dhonncha (Johnny Joe Pheaitín – 1919-1996)



Photo: Pádraig Mac Donnchadha

Seán was born in An Aird Thiar, Carna. The son of a fisherman, he had three brothers and seven sisters. He married Bríd Ní Eidhin in 1956 and they had five children. He spent most of his working life as a primary school teacher,

teaching in County Cavan from 1947 and later spending 25 years as principal of Ahascragh national school in East Galway.

Music and singing were always in the family and his mother

influenced him greatly. He earned a reputation as one of Ireland's finest traditional singers, and had a wide repertoire of songs in both Irish and English. He won the Oireachtas Sean-Nós Competition in 1953 and was awarded the 'Gradam Shean-Nós Cois Life' in 1995. He was the first singer to be recorded by Gael Linn on their series of 78rpm recordings in 1957: these recordings are now available on *Seoltaí Séide* (Gael Linn CEFCD184). Other recordings include *An Aill Bháin - The White Rock* (Claddagh CC9) and *An Spailpín Fánach* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta CICD006), plus tracks on various compilations including, *Grand Airs Of Connemara* (Topic 12T177), *More Grand Airs Of Connemara* (Topic 12T202) and *Amhráin Ar An Sean-Nós* (RTÉ CD 185).

Seán opens the collection on this Veteran CD by singing *Mná Bán' Deas' Bhaile Locha Riach* (*The Fair Lasses Of Loughrea*). Several different versions of this love song are found in Connemara in the Irish language and are known by different titles (*Neill Bhán, Mná Bána Bhaile Locha Riach*). A neighbour of Seán 'ac Dhonncha, Dara Bán Mac Donnchadha, recorded a very fine version in

1999 (Cló Iar-Chonnacht CICD140 *Rogha Amhrán*). The references to Loughrea, Portumna and the Shannon, however, would suggest that the song might have originated in the east of County Galway. One story tells that the lovers' plan to marry was opposed by the girl's family and that the young couple eloped. Her family pursued them and the poet made good his escape by swimming the Shannon river, leaving his beloved behind. He emigrated to America and in his chagrin he vowed to marry the first woman he encountered there and so wound up marrying a 'street woman'.

Seán sings a 'macaronic' version of the song, a version that is in both the Irish and English languages. Macaronic songs seem to have gained currency during the 19th century as knowledge of the English language became more widespread. The publishing of macaronic songs on broadsheets seems to have played an important role in their dissemination and indeed a macaronic version of this song, similar to Seán's version, was published in Dublin in the 19th century: *A Much Admired Song Called The Loughrea Lasses*.

## Pádraic Ó Conghaile (Pat Phádraic Tom – 1922-2010)

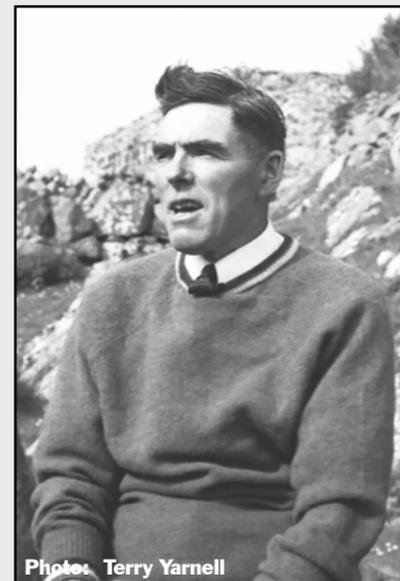


Photo: Terry Yarnell

Pat was born in Leitir Péic, An Spidéal. He married Máire Ní Mhaoilchiaráin in 1959 and they had six children. He worked as a farmer and always enjoyed meeting people and telling

stories. He became interested in traditional songs from singing at weddings and oícheanta airneáin (social nights) in his youth. He took part in the Oireachtas na Gaeilge sean-nós singing

competitions for the first time in 1954, after winning a local sean-nós competition. He won second place in Comórtas na bhFear (the men's competition) in 1955 and he was awarded first place in 1956. Later he taught sean-nós singing to young children in an Gaelacadamh in An Spidéal from 1980 until 1992.

There were only two previous published recordings of his singing: on *Tógfaidh Mé Mo Sheolta* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta CIC088) and *Pat Phádraic Tom* (a CD released privately by his family in 2013).

Pat sings four songs on the CD, one of which is *Eochaill (Youghal)*. The noble swain describes in the first person how he wandered out early on a sunny morning through the woods or the countryside. He chances to meet a country girl herding, picking rushes or engaged in some other rustic chore. He briefly describes her beauty. A conversation ensues in which the poet attempts to seduce the girl. In this case she is beguiled by his promise of marriage and economic security, and when he subsequently abandons her, she laments her shame and social ostracisation.

Such is the general plot of the 12th century French *Pastourelle* which seems to have been introduced into Ireland by the French-speaking Anglo-Normans. Many of these themes can be found in English-language song however it is in the Irish-language tradition one finds the original themes and motifs of the medieval French tradition most faithfully adhered to.

This song is well known in the south where it is assumed that the Eochaill (literally Yew Wood) in question is the town of Youghal in County Cork. Pat however maintained that the Eochaill in question could well be a place of that name on the Aran Islands. However, the young woman is looking for the way to Cappoquin in County Waterford which would seem to locate it in the South East.

In an Ulster version (*Maidin Fhómhair*) the girl is making for Feochoill near Forkhill in County Armagh. Edward Bunting published the melody of the Ulster song in his first collection in 1796 (*A General Collection Of The Ancient Irish Music*) and a version of it was recorded by Conall Ó Domhnaill (Cló Iar-Chonnacht CICD045, *Ó Glúin Go Glúin*).

**Cáit Uí Chonluain**  
(Ní Choisdealbha / Kate Sheáin Tom – 1886-1973)



Photo: Terry Yarnell

Cáit was from Baile an tSagairt, An Spidéal and was a cousin of Tom Pháidín Tom. She married Micheál Ó Conluain, an Irish-language teacher from Mullingar, and they had 10 children. Over the years, many people wishing to learn Irish came to stay in their house. Micheál was also very musical and played violin, piccolo and piano. In the early 1930s Cáit was taken to University College, Galway and recorded on phonograph. Over the ensuing years many RTE radio producers and presenters visited her including Pádraigh Ó Raghallaigh, Ciarán Mac Mathúna and Pádraig Dolan, and recordings of her from the archives are still often played on RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta.

During Seamus Ennis's collecting trips in the 1940s, he collected material from her daughter Gráinne, and her son Feistí gained considerable fame as a tin whistle player, particularly for his playing of slow airs. He was recorded by Topic Records whilst living in England in the 1960s: *Grand Airs Of Connemara* (Topic

12T177) and *More Grand Airs Of Connemara* (Topic 12T202). The only recording available of Cáit's singing is one track on *Amhráin Ar An Sean-Nós* (RTÉ CD185).

Here Cáit sings *Saighdiúirín Singil* (*A Private*). We frequently find in the Gaelic oral tradition networks of verses that are metrically and thematically compatible, appearing in various combinations as love songs or versions of love songs. In this case we find songs known by names such as *Siobhán Ní Dhuibhir*, *Táilliúir An Mhagaidh*, *Siobhán Ní Ghaora* and *Saighdiúirín Singil*. In the version that Bríd Uí Chonluain sings, the young poet explains that he was discharged from the army, is destitute and that he parted company with his beloved on the Curragh of Kildare. The poet's offer of marriage, conditional on a dowry of cattle, is apparently rejected with contempt. Militia were trained on the great plain of the Curragh during the Napoleonic Wars and soldiers have been permanently stationed there since the Crimean War in the 1850s.

**Rita Keane (1923-2009)**  
**Sarah Keane (1918-2010)**



Photo: Terry Yarnell

her aunts that she absorbed her first songs. Dolores subsequently gained worldwide recognition both as a solo singer and with the band Dé Danann.

During the late 1960s, the broadcaster Ciarán Mac Mathúna made a series of programs for Raidió Teilifís Éireann which featured his recordings of Sarah and Rita. This eventually led to them making the seminal album, *Once I Loved* (Claddagh CC4CD). This was followed in 1985 by a family album, *Muintir Chatháin* (Gael Linn CEFCD107) and in 1996 a second album of Rita and Sarah, *At The Setting Of The Sun* (Demon FIENDCD771). They gained national, and later international acclaim, and in 2006 Rita and Sarah received the TG4 Gradam Saoil, Lifetime Achievement Award for traditional song.

Amongst the songs they sing here is *There Was A Maid In Her Father's Garden* (Roud 264 / Laws N42). This is simple folk song about a sailor returning from sea after seven years to find that his true love doesn't recognise him

until he produces his half of a broken token. It is based on an old story of a half ring story which can be found throughout European balladry. The broken token element seems to have been lost in Rita and Sarah's version, but the young lady is nonetheless reacquainted with her long-lost sweetheart, who proposes marriage.

The song often appears as *The Young And Single Sailor* and has been extremely popular in recent oral tradition. There are 570 entries in the Roud Folk Song Index and these are mostly 19th century Broadside or from sources in North America. The song was widespread in Ireland, with one of the finest performances being from West Cork singer Elizabeth Cronin. In *Sam Henry's Songs Of The People* (Univ. of Georgia Press 1990) there are over 20 alternative names for the song. In England, versions were collected by all the major 20th century folk song collectors including Sharp, Butterworth, Vaughan Williams, Kidson, Baring-Gould, Gardiner, Alfred Williams and in Scotland, Greig-Duncan.

The Keane sisters were from the townland of Carragh, Caheristrane in north County Galway. The daughters of Matt Keane and his wife May (née Costello), they grew up in a musical household with their six brothers and sisters. May was an assiduous collector of traditional songs and tunes, and passed

on her passion to her children. In the 1930s, Rita and Sarah played accordion and fiddle with the family (Keane's) Céilí Band, which continued until the 1980s. They were the paternal aunts of renowned singers, Seán, Matt and Dolores Keane. Dolores came to live with Rita and Sarah when she was four years old and it was from

**Tomás Ó Coisdealbha**  
(Tom Pháidín Tom / Tom Costello – 1894-1979)



Photo: Terry Yarnell

Tomás was born in Baile an tSagairt, Spiddal and his family were small farmers. He never married, but lived in the cottage where he had been born, and worked the family farm. He was a cousin of the singer Cáit Uí Chonluain. His father, Pádraic Ó Coisdealbha, who was born in 1834, played the flute mainly at

home, although he was known to have been invited to play at 'the big house', the Bunbury family summer residence in An Spidéal. Tom's songs didn't come from his parents but many came from his cousins in Maigh Cuilinn, while others were learned from the wireless and from magazines such as Ireland's Own.

There is little of Tomás's singing available apart from tracks on *A Story I'm Just About To Tell* (Topic TSCD658) and the Dé Danann LP *The Mist Covered Mountain* (Gael Linn CEF 087). An LP record was released of his singing by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 1977 but is unfortunately no longer available.

One of the songs Tomás sings on this recording is *Hynes And Bold Dermody*. This song concerns a murder committed during the 'Land War' near the village of Craughwell in south County Galway and the trial of two men for the crime. Craughwell was one of the most disturbed areas in the country during the agitation for land reform that began with the foundation of the Land League in 1879. The area experienced considerable strife, including intimidation, destruction of property and even murder.

In 1909 a secret society of agitators directed its attention to a 13-acre farm in Templemartin. Lord Clanrickarde rented the farm to a widow Mary Ryan who had returned from America with her two sons. The society felt, however, that the land should have been redistributed and they attempted to intimidate Mrs. Ryan off the farm; shots were fired, hay

set on fire and boundary walls levelled. On the morning of 22nd January 1909, two workmen, Malone and Coady, were repairing a boundary wall on the farm protected by an RIC constable Martin Goldrick. The workmen were fired upon and both were seriously injured. Goldrick pursued the fleeing assailants with his revolver drawn, when one of the fleeing men turned and shot him dead. Five local men were arrested and two of them, Thomas Hynes and Michael Dermody, were brought to trial which lasted several months. The main prosecution witness was a migrant farm labourer from Ros Muc, Bartley Naughton, who claimed to have witnessed the incident from a nearby railway bridge. It was widely believed, and asserted in the song, that Naughton was bribed by the police. His evidence however was dismissed by the judge and the two men were released in May 1910 and returned to a hero's welcome.

Another song about this incident was written by Susan Mitchell, who was involved in the Republican movement. It was published in the radical women's journal *Bean na h-Éireann*, c.1919 and later included in Colm O Lochlainn's *More Irish Street Ballads* (Dublin, 1965).

**Colm Ó Caoidheáin**  
(Colm Keane - 1893-1975)

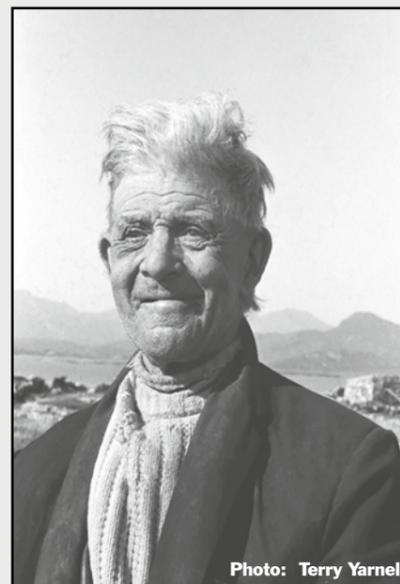


Photo: Terry Yarnell

Colm was from Glinsce, a few miles northwest of Carna. His father Máirtín was from Glinsce and his mother Máire was from

the island of Inis Ní. Colm was their eldest child. He made his living as a fisherman and farmer and married Bairbre Pheaits from

An Aird Mhóir in 1939. He was second cousin to the renowned sean-nós singer Seosamh Ó hÉanaí (Joe Heaney) and Joe was said to be very proud of his relationship to Colm because of his prodigious repertoire.

In the 1940s, Séamus Ennis collected over 200 songs, tunes, and items of folklore from him while working for the Irish Folklore Commission and later Séamus recorded additional material for the BBC. Surprisingly there is little of Colm's singing available, with only two tracks on *Ireland - World Library Of Folk And Primitive Music, Volume II* (Rounder CD1742), and a single track on *Amhráin Ar An Sean-Nós* (RTÉ CD185).

As part of this collection, Colm sings *Brid Thomáis Mhurchadha*. Here, the young man both addresses and describes his beloved in most extravagant terms and asserts his love for her above all other young women. Séamus Ennis informed us that Bríd, the object of the poet's affections, was

a sister of Colm Ó Caoidheáin's great grandfather. Other singers from Iorras Aithneach that have recorded this song include Seán 'ac Dhonnacha (Gael-Linn CEFCD 184, *Seolta Séidte*) and Josie Sheáin Jeaic Mac Donncha (Cinq Planètes CP 03426, *Bruach na Carra Léith*).

The complete 22-track collection contains many more songs from these fine singers, and is a great tribute to the collecting work of Terry Yarnell as well as to the singers and songs he encountered on his travels in Co. Galway.

Words here taken with kind permission from the sleeve notes of :

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Available from [www.veteran.co.uk](http://www.veteran.co.uk)