MUSIC MAD

Captain Francis O’Neill

and

Traditional Irish Music

An Exhibition from the Captain Francis O’Neill Collection of Irish Music
March, 1990 -- August, 1990
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Compiled by Laura Sue Fuderer

Cover of 8, O'Neill's Music of Ireland.
Introduction

Any serious lover of Irish folk music will recognize in Francis O'Neill the compiler of *The Music of Ireland* (1903) and *The Dance Music of Ireland* (1907), two of the largest compilations of such music ever published. From 1903 to 1922 O'Neill published five compilations of Irish folk music and two books about the subject. In 1931 O'Neill donated his library of 1500 volumes relating to Ireland to the University of Notre Dame. This library was recently brought together in the Department of Special Collections of the Theodore M. Hesburgh Library, and the section on music was designated "The Captain Francis O'Neill Collection of Irish Music."

Born in County Cork in 1849, Francis O'Neill embarked on an extraordinary career. As a boy "intended for the Irish Christian Brothers," he ran away to sea in 1865 and was shipwrecked for some weeks in the Pacific. By 1873 he had made his way to Chicago where he joined the police force and eventually became General Superintendent. His passion for collecting songs as well as books on Irish music led his critics to charge that "during his tenure of office, the Chicago Police Force contained an unusually high proportion of Irish musicians," according to one biographical sketch.¹

In September of 1931 Captain O'Neill offered his 1500-volume collection of Hiberniana to the University of Notre Dame. In his letter to President Charles O'Donnell he wrote, "The Collection of Hibernicana[sic], and especially musical matters is said to have no equal on this side of the Atlantic." Father O'Donnell wasted no time accepting the unconditional gift and replied to O'Neill:

Your name will be enrolled forever among those benefactors who receive a daily remembrance in our Community prayers and Masses, and generations of Irish students and lovers of Ireland will bless you for making accessible to them this valuable addition

to our Irish Collection at Notre Dame.\footnote{Charles L. O’Donnell, letter to Francis O’Neill, October 2, 1931, Modern Manuscripts Collection, Department of Special Collections, Theodore M. Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame.}

Six decades later enthusiastic users of the O’Neill Collection can testify that the President’s words were prophetic.

The music section of O’Neill’s library numbered 123 titles. His own works are in this exhibit as well as collections by predecessors such as Edward Bunting, George Petrie, and Thomas Moore and those of several contemporaries. That O’Neill drew liberally on many collections for his own compilations is shown by numerous checkmarks and notations in blue and black pencil throughout the copies. Also on display is one of two manuscript notebooks of songs copied on location in Ireland in the 1830s and ’40s.

O’Neill’s passion for Irish music never waned, but his faith in its future did. In a seven-page typewritten letter to Rev. Seamus O’Floinn (not on exhibit) dated Oct. 15, 1918, he wrote:

Yes, Dear Kindred Soul, I am mad, or rather was for a score of years and paid the penalty too in more ways than one, not the least being reflections on my dignity for associating with a class of musicians which so many of our countrymen and co-religionists affected to despise. I’m not crazy enough however to entertain the chimerical hope that the Irish will ever accomplish anything of enduring value by their sporadic attempts at reviving an interest in the preservation of traditional Irish music in the face of both racial and national indifference. Such is the mercurial temperament of our people, that Irish Revivals whether musical, literary, or linguistic ever and always subsided like a bonfire conflagration.\footnote{Francis O’Neill, letter to Seamus O’Floinn, October 15, 1918, Modern Manuscripts Collection, Department of Special Collections, Theodore M. Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame.}

The section of the exhibit on Irish music in performance may have restored O’Neill’s faith. Photographs of past Irish musicians are complemented by record jackets of modern recordings and photographs depicting recent festivals of folk music in Ireland. The final section of the exhibit displays recent acquisitions of sheet music, song collections, and reprints. This section represents Hesburgh Library’s commitment to continue developing what was already an outstanding collection on Irish music.

Special thanks for their assistance is due to Kenny’s Bookshops & Galleries (Galway, Ireland) and to Rita Erskine, Lou Jordan, and Brian Smyth (University of Notre Dame).

Appreciation is also extended to the Bord Fáilte (Irish Tourist Board) and Seamus O’Neill (Galway, Ireland); to the Chicago Historical Society; and to Sonja Jordan, Lenora Ledwon, Robert Miller, Educational Media, and the University Archives (Notre Dame).
IN 1903 CAPTAIN FRANCIS O’NEILL, Superintendent of Police in Chicago, published a book titled, O’Neill’s Music of Ireland. This book along with five other collections, published at his own expense, embodied his passion for the collection and preservation of Irish folk music. It also ensured his place among the great collectors of Irish music in Ireland as well as in the United States. In 1931 Captain O’Neill offered his extraordinary library of Hiberniana to the University of Notre Dame. The books on Irish music have recently been brought together again to form the Captain Francis O’Neill Collection of Irish Music, constituting one of the finest collections on Irish music in the world.

1. [Photograph of James O’Neill]

James O’Neill (no relation) collaborated with Captain O’Neill to produce the two most famous of the collections of Irish music. The Captain said of James: ...his versatility in reducing to musical notation the playing, whistling, singing and humming of others, was truly phenomenal. None from the North Country possessed such a store of Ulster melodies as he, and it was chiefly because of his skill and unselfishness that the initial step in our joint work was undertaken.

2. [Photograph of Selena O’Neill]

Selena O’Neill was the Captain’s niece. She collaborated with him to produce three collections of Irish music. In his autobiography he wrote:

Pre-eminent among [a young generation of Irish-American musicians] is Miss Selena A. O’Neill, a prize-winner at the Chicago Musical College. A violinist of phenomenal talent, she is equally proficient as a pianist, and ... such is her instinctive grasp of the peculiarities and swing of all varieties of Irish music, that her astonishing ability in playing the most difficult dance music in perfect time and thrilling spirit has attracted wide-spread attention.

3. [Photograph of Captain O’Neill]

Captain O’Neill, an accomplished flutist, is in the top row, fourth from the left.

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I. The Donation

4. [Letter from Francis O’Neill to President Charles L. O’Donnell, Sept. 18,
"HAVING PASSED THE 83RD MILESTONE ON THE WAY TO ETERNITY," O'Neill wrote to President Charles L. O'Donnell, C.S.C., "I am disposed to carry out a long-considered intention." That intention was to deposit his library of 1500 volumes in safe keeping. The correspondence shows that the collection was offered in September of 1931 and by October it was on campus in the care of Librarian Paul Byrne.

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II. O'Neill's Collections


Still the biggest collection of Irish music ever published, O'Neill's Music of Ireland together with his The Dance Music of Ireland (1907) are regarded as a landmark in traditional Irish music. When folk musicians ask, "Is it in The Book?" they are referring to one of O'Neill's two major collections. O'Neill wrote in the introduction:

The desire to preserve for posterity, the many fine airs and dance tunes unconsciously memorized from the sweet voice of a cheerful mother, who sang and lilted at her spinning wheel or while engaged at her household duties, in the farmhouse, on the banks of the river Ilen, in west Cork, where the writer spent the first years of his life, originated the comprehensive collection of unharmonized Irish music, which the writer has been patiently and laboriously compiling for years.

The work has been criticized on various grounds, such as dubious crediting of composers, the inclusion of newly composed tunes (by definition neither "folk" nor "traditional"), and questionable notation. Not the least disturbing was the fact that O'Neill never learned to read music. Sergeant James O'Neill noted down in pencil "the playing, singing, liling, whistling or humming of the contributor." All tunes "considered worthy of preservation" were then copied in ink. Finding at least half the tunes in Chicago, O'Neill wrote:

In the metropolis of the west, one thousand miles beyond the broad Atlantic, Ireland's sons and daughters from every one of her thirty-two counties can be found, and they have brought with them treasures of song and dance music, never noted down by the great collectors, Petrie, Bunting and Joyce.

To a contemporary critic who denigrated the value of music collected by an emigre, O'Neill replied heutedly:

More and better Irish music can be heard in dozens of American cities than in Cork or even in Dublin. Why? Because it is encouraged, appreciated and paid for, and because the musician's calling is in no way suggestive of mendicancy.

It is precisely for this eclecticism that one musicologist, writing in 1986, lauded O'Neill's collection. Another wrote a decade earlier that despite criticism by academicians, traditional musicians were delighted with the work, and O'Neill should be judged, not as an antiquarian or scholar, but as an enthusiast and a traditional player himself.


The O'Neill's compiled The Dance Music of Ireland to meet the demand expressed by enthusiastic users of O'Neill's Music of Ireland. Captain O'Neill explained that the compilation includes selections from the earlier work as well as tunes collected since it was published. Justifiably proud of his collecting, he observed that a thousand dance tunes were "an amount many times more than were supposed to be in existence altogether." He wrote in the introduction:

A reawakened interest in our national music, especially the jigs, reels, hornpipes, long dances, etc., of the old days has been happily aroused by the Gaelic revival and its apostle, Dr. Douglas Hyde, and the desire, I may say the demand, for them has become insistent and continuous.

O'Neill lost all five of his sons at young ages. He commemorated one of them in this book as follows:

Dedicated to the memory of
My beloved Son
Rogers F. O'Neill
The first member of the
Irish Music Club
of Chicago
Who was called by
The Great Leader
to join
The Heavenly Choir


O'Neill had definite opinions about the performance of dance music and about the harmonization of folk music. He expressed these opinions in "A Word of Advice" opposite the title page of this book.


In his autobiography, *Irish Folk Music: A Fascinating Hobby*, published in 1910, O'Neill wrote:

I had discovered some rare and forgotten Irish melodies in a lately acquired volume of manuscript music formerly owned by H. Hudson of Stephens Green Dublin. The handwriting, much of which was in Irish script, was neat but almost microscopic and the notes and remarks showed that the 130 tunes contained therein had been collected prior to the year 1840.

The notebook is labeled Vol. 3 and the songs in the contents list are numbered 243 to 370; apparently O'Neill never owned the first two volumes. The titles in Gaelic and English, words in English, dates, sources, and circumstances are identified for many of the melodies. For example, next to number 365 is the note, "played at Ballyvre gate on St. John's Eve 1829 by the Smyth's Apprentice on a Violin with a Bow made by himself." The dates range from 1829 to 1847. The blue and black pencil marks appear in many of O'Neill's books. Their correlation with songs in his published collections along with the inscription here of the initials, "S O N" (Selena O'Neill?), suggest that they were made by one of the O'Neills, if not the Captain himself.

"337. Balla na mona Ohro (No 78 from F.M. Bell) Mrs. Foley.
I am a rich farmer tho' sad is my fate
I'm deeply in love with a farm that's neat
It is my whole study both early and late
For to find a just method to purchase the state
called Ballinamona-Ohro Ballinamona-Ohro called Ballinamona-Ohro A pretty black girl for me."

Speak low, speak low, the Banshee is crying
Hark! Hark! to the Echo "she's dying!" She's dying!
What shadow fits dark'ning the face of the water
Tis the Swan of the lake, Tis the Geraldine's daughter.
Hush! Hush! Have you heard what the Banshee said,
Oh list to the Echo "she's dead"-she's dead-
No shadow now dims the _______ (face of the water)
gone, gone is the wrath of the _______ [Geraldine's daughter]"

"339. The Maid of Sweet Gurteen. by W. E. Hudson taken down from
singing of a little Girl Nassau St. 6 O'Clock P.M. 9th December 1840."

1840'" [Note the blue pencil marks and initials, S O N, and see song number 85 in
O'Neill's Irish Music: 400 Choice Selections..., arranged by Selena O'Neill].

"343. The Humours of Castle Lyons from Simon Sullivan (Piper
Glen ville[sic])."

"344. The Rose in full Bloom. from Same."
[Note the initials, S O N, and see song number 328 in Waifs and Strays..., arranged by Selena O'Neill.]

"345. Sung by a poor Woman at an Officer's Funeral in Cork (No 79 from
F. M. Bell. Margaret Foley. (Air not Irish)
March March again, He'll no more march again,
our shelter is in the arms of death,
He will never never march again
He'll no more march again,
March march again, He'll no more march again
our shelter is in the arms of death
He will never never march again."

for Piano or Violin: Airs, Jigs, Reels, Hornpipes, Long Dances Etc., Most of
them Rare; Many of them Unpublished. Collected and edited by Capt. Francis
O'Neill (Retired Gen. Supt. of Police); arranged by Selena O'Neill, Bach. Mus.
Enlarged edition. Chicago: Lyon & Healy, [1915?].

In O'Neill's words from the introduction, this volume includes:
selections from the airs, marches and dance tunes obtained
from Irish musicians, manuscripts, rare old printed collections,
and other sources through a fortunate combination of
circumstances, not likely to be repeated...

He continues:
A desire to enlarge the opportunities for the study of the
simple folk music of an ancient race, and to accommodate the
many who want harmonized selections from O'Neill's Music of
Ireland and the Dance Music of Ireland prompted the
publication of this series.

Although the selections in this work are not credited, O'Neill later wrote that
one of the contributing sources was a manuscript notebook that had lately come
into his possession. Owned if not written by one H. Hudson of Dublin, the notebook is on display here. See song number 85, "Erin's Lovely Home," and compare it to song number 340 in the Hudson manuscript; they are almost identical note for note.


Publishing this work at age 73, O'Neill observed in the introduction:
As a sixth and final contribution to the cherished cause of perpetuating Gaelic musical tradition, the compilation of this work—unique in many respects—was undertaken in the sunset years of a long and adventurous life, and at a time when the difficulties of publication were most discouraging.
Throughout his life O'Neill promoted Irish music as the best, oldest, and most appealing music of any nationality. Here he wrote:
The folk music of Ireland, admittedly richer and more varied than that of any nation, has not only survived the vicissitudes of her tragic history, but has in reality been enriched by countless variants...The psychologist may understand why the rhythm or swing of an Irish or Scotch reel, or other Gaelic dance tune, so vitally affects the average audience, which listens unmoved to the strains of much more pretentious compositions.
Note that number 328, "The Rose in Full Bloom," credited the H. Hudson manuscript (on display here) and Hudson's source, "Sullivan a famous piper." Compare this song to Hudson's number 344.

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III. Major Predecessors


The handwritten notes on the flyleaves and throughout the volumes appear to be O'Neill's.


And with: The Favorite Opera Dances for the Year 1789 Performed at the Kings Theatre Hay Market, Composed, Selected, & Adapted for the Piano-Forte, Flute or Violin, by L. Mazzinghi. London: Longman & Broadcap [n.d.].

And with: Eighteen Preludes or Fugues for the Organ or Harpsichord Proper for Interludes to Psalm Tunes and Benificial for Young Beginners to Learn the Art of Composing Fuges. London: S. Thompson [n.d.].


IV. Irish Folk Music in Performance

"I WAS MUSIC MAD but the fever has subsided considerably. In fact I’m cured," O’Neill wrote to Rev. Seamus O’Flaithin in 1917. O’Neill was an ardent but discriminating listener, player, and collector of Irish music. In later years he became disillusioned with the failure of his acolytes in both countries to value the variety of tunes and to support excellence in the performance of Irish music. This case displays performers of Irish music both past and present. The pictures of recent amateur music festivals and the recordings of folk music in Ireland reflect a resurgence that may have revived the Captain’s faith were he alive today.


In this book O’Neill (b. 1849-d.1936) recounts his life story from his boyhood in County Cork through astonishing adventures on the high seas as a sailor to the excitement of being a Chicago policeman for 32 years until he retired as Chief in 1905. He also recounts the history of Irish folk music and of the collecting of it, including his own efforts. Of the library later given to Notre Dame he writes:

The acquisition of a library of antiquarian musical works chiefly devoted to Irish music through Cork and London book agencies enriches us with an almost embarrassing wealth of excellent Irish airs and tunes so completely forgotten or unknown in this generation that none of even the old members of the 'Irish Music Club' had any knowledge of them.

23. Another copy of *Irish Folk Music* presented by O’Neill to President Cavanaugh in 1910, 21 years before he offered his library to President O’Donnell.

Despite the sternness of his portrait, O’Neill could write with passion and with humor. The chapter on humorous incidents tells of the day he heard the wild humor of his own assassination. He writes, "This was news to me, but I didn’t believe it."

24. O’Neill, Francis. *Irish Minstrels and Musicians, with Numerous Dissertations on Related Subjects*. Chicago: The Regan Printing House, 1913. O’Neill wrote that he published this book (at considerable expense to himself) "to immortalize the forgotten though deserving Minstrels and Musicians of Ireland." Chapters cover harpers, pipers, fiddlers, dances, and the history of traditional Irish music. Calling it a precious heritage, he observed: Irish music has been admired wherever its melting strains have been heard, and it has been said that the Irishman’s whole life is set to song. Profusely illustrated, the volume provides rare portraits and histories of individuals. This title, O’Neill’s autobiography, and *The Music of Ireland* are still cited as authorities in sources such as *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*.

25. The Record Sleeves

Four of the record sleeves on display here cite O’Neill as the source of one or more melodies in the recording. The sleeves are "The Liffey Banks," "Kevin Conniff - The Week Before Easter," "The Piperings of Willie Clancy," and "O’Riada’s Farewell." The sleeves were lent to us by Seamus O’Neill of Gael Linn, Dublin, and are not part of the collections at Notre Dame. However, over 100 uncataloged cassettes of Irish folk music are available for your listening in the Renner Family Learning Center on the second floor.

26. [A poster and eight photographs of performances of folk music in Ireland; from Bord Failte (Irish Tourist Board).]

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V. Other Collections


Frequently cited by O’Neill in *Irish Folk Music*.


Inscribed "To Capt. Francis O'Neill[sic] / From John Thomson / June 24th 1914." In O’Neill’s hand (?): "Caledonian Club / 7th Ave New York City"

30. *The Irish Song Book with Original Irish Airs Edited with an Introduction*
31. *A Selection of Scotch, English, Irish & Foreign Airs Properly Adapted for the German Flute, Violin, or Fife.* [n.p.]: G. Goulding [1782?–1797]. 5 v. in 1. (Vol. 2 missing.)


40. *One Hundred Irish Airs Arranged for the Piano Forte.* N.Y.: P. M. Haverty [1858-59].
Contains 1st, 2d and 3d series, and consists of 300 Irish airs.


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VI. Recent Acquisitions

SHEET MUSIC:

42. [Title in Gaelic meaning: Marching Tunes: Brian Boru's March; Remember Ireland; The Return from Fingal; Clare's Dragoons.] Arranged for piano by Jozef Cuypers. Dublin: Government Publications Office [n.d.].

43. [Title in Gaelic meaning: Six Old Irish Minuets.] Arranged for piano by Ernan de Regge. Dublin: Government Publications Office [n.d.].

44. [Title in Gaelic meaning: Dance Music.] Arranged for the piano by Liam de Noraid. Dublin: Government Publications Office [n.d.].


BOOKS:


55. *Ballads from the Jails and Streets of Ireland.* [Compiled and edited by Martin Shannon.] Dublin: Red Hand Books, [1966].
Title page of 8, O'Neill's Music of Ireland.