

Review

Flowing Tides. History & Memory in an Irish Soundscape

Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin

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Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin's *Flowing Tides: History and Memory in an Irish Soundscape* is a unique addition to Irish musical scholarship bringing together a vast array of sources viewed through a multi-disciplinary prism by someone with an intimate knowledge of the music and musicians. It looks at the radical changes that have taken place over the past two centuries, how they have impacted on County Clare and its music and how they brought somewhere so geographically peripheral right to the centre of any discourse on Irish music. While referencing the disciplines of cultural history, ethnomusicology, memory studies, and media ecology, Ó hAllmhuráin puts the words of the musicians themselves at the heart of this account. Throughout the book we get a strong sense of the author's affinity for the music of his home-place as well as the academic rigour and the years of research that it represents. On top of all that it's a really enjoyable read.

In the introductory chapter, entitled "L'entrée: Clare and its Soundscape" Ó hAllmhuráin stakes out his intention to go beyond the "simplistic binaries" of Irish music history: "high art versus low art, Irish *sean nós* songs versus English-language ballads, cosmopolitan trends versus rural fringe traditions, diasporic soundscapes versus those in the homeland" (1). Much writing on traditional music in Ireland ignores the often complex influences that impinge on the musicians themselves and thus go on to affect their soundscapes but throughout this book Ó hAllmhuráin makes a strong case for the importance of these "global cultural flows" and their impact in Clare. While he, rightly, argues for the existence and persistence of five "dialectic zones [in Co. Clare] ... each characterized by distinctive rhythms, repertoires, music histories, and cultural memories" I'd like to have seen some detail on what the actual musical differences between these might be and indeed between these "micromusics" of Clare and the rest of the island.

Chapter 1, "Recentring the Musical Periphery" provides a thorough account of the collecting, documenting and archiving of music in Clare from George Petrie and Eugene O'Curry in the 1820s, through folklorists such as Séamus Ó Duillearga, anthropologists Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball in the 1930s, collectors such as Séamus Ennis, Ciarán Mac Mathúna and Breandán Breathnach in the 1950s and 60s, through the arrival of ethnomusicologists in the 1970s to musician-scholars such as Tim Collins, Garry Shannon, Geraldine Cotter and Joan Hanrahan in more recent years. In a section entitled "Shifting Cartographies of Place and Mobility", the author argues for the importance of spatiality and mobility over arguments about tradition versus innovation or nationalism versus revisionism. Drawing on the writing of music critic Josh Kun he considers Clare as a rhizomic "audiotopia": "a sonic contact zone where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other" (33). He also references here the work on global cultural flows by Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai who proposes "five fluid intersecting landscapes: ethnoscapas, technoscapas, mediascapas, ideoscapas and

financescapes” (35). While describing the “transition from music as an everyday practice to music as a commodity” he makes the first of several references in the book to “music moguls” and asserts that “the career and aesthetic goals of younger performers today are shaped by music moguls and oligarchs” (44) – although he doesn’t let us know who they might be.

With the exception of Chapter 4, the book moves chronologically through the history and processes of change in Clare’s soundscape. In each chapter he begins by outlining major historical events in Ireland and beyond and goes on to talk about how these intersect with the musical life of Co. Clare. Chapter 2, “Napoleon to Parnell: Before and After the Famine” deals with Clare’s changing soundscape during the nineteenth century. Despite the poverty and destitution wrought by famine in the early and middle part of the century, this period sees various developments that shaped what we now see as Irish traditional music: the introduction of quadrilles from mainland Europe; the shift from Irish to English language song; technological developments in the construction of uilleann pipes and the introduction of the concertina; musical literacy and the development of marching bands. The inward and outward movements of tourism and emigration are other features which are pervasive right up to the present day.

Chapter 3, “Fifers, Tans, and Jazzers: Soundscape in Transition”, brings us into the twentieth century and the beginnings of the Irish Free State. Technological changes again speed up the rate of change, from steam trains to cars, rural electrification, gramophone players, radio and the arrival of the first plane at Shannon Airport in 1939. The excitement of the fight for independence is followed by the descent of the heavy-hand of the Catholic hierarchy and the ascent of a conservative ruling class. The most significant outcome of this, in terms of the soundscape, is identified as the introduction of the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935 which “became a moral prophylactic for fanatical priests determined to police their congregations” (110) and the subsequent “transition from country house to village hall dislodged music and dance from the private to the public domain. The resulting paradigm shift reinforced the need for céilí bands, which quickly took over from solo players and small ensembles that played for house dances” (113). The influence of Seamus Clandillon in the early days of radio station 2RN was also an important influence on the céilí bands which were to become such an intrinsic part of the Clare musical scene.

In Chapter 4, “Hearth and Clachan: The Musical Year in Rural Clare” Ó hAllmhuráin shifts from chronological time to cyclical time in a fascinating and deeply researched look at the folklore associated with the agricultural and religious events of the year and how they relate to music. Traditions relating to weddings, fairies, magic, festivals, sports and *dinnsheanchas* are delved into here and I particularly enjoyed Junior Crehan’s telling of a story that connects Garrett Barry playing a hornpipe back to Diarmuid and Gráinne and the Fianna.

Chapter 5, “Out of Isolation: The Fleadh Down in Ennis” covers three main areas, the growth of a piping tradition in Clare; the importance of céilí bands to the area; and the formation of Comhaltas and the first Fleadh Cheoil in Ennis in 1956. The impact of outsiders like Sean Reid and Johnny Doran and their influence on Miltown Malbay’s Willie Clancy was to have long-reaching effects. Céilí bands have

undoubtedly held a central place in Clare musical traditions and Ó hAllmhuráin emphasises here their close community ties, likening them to parish sports teams and comparing their geographical situations to that of the *clachan* clusters of pre-Famine times. I'd like to have heard more about what effect this emphasis on the céilí band had on the music being played in the county and while he talks about the influence of competition on the formation of bands he doesn't discuss how this impacted on the music produced.

The years from the most recent revival period of Irish traditional music up to the boom-times of the Celtic Tiger are examined in Chapter 6, "Autobahn to Doolin. Soundscape as a Cultural Commodity". Again this chapter covers very broad territory and while dealing in the main with the accelerated commodification of the music it also looks at changes in the transmission of the music and particularly at the teaching of Frank Custy and the birth of the Willie Clancy Summer School. It would appear that this is really the period in which Clare's reputation as the Mecca of traditional music was sealed. However neglected Clare may have been in the earlier days of Irish broadcasting, this was more than made up for by the work of the likes of Tony MacMahon and Ciarán MacMathúna in the 1970s and 1980s. Their promotion of the Russell Brothers, and particularly Micho, propelled the small village of Doolin into the spotlight and ultimately sealed its fate as "the world capital of traditional music" (202). Clare was also at the forefront of cultural tourism in this period with its Medieval banquets and "'traditional' Irish villages, 'traditional' holiday cottages (thatched, of course), and 'traditional' pubs and shops" (195).

The final chapter, "The Tiger. Reappraising Global Clare" brings us up to the present day and looks at the increased internationalisation of Irish music, both through inward migration and through the global spread of the internet. "Transnational music moguls" (218) make another appearance here, although he goes on to describe Irish cultural impact on the rest of the world rather than the damage inflicted by these faceless foreigners. The Irish Music Rights Organisation (IMRO) is also pejoratively described as being based on "existing English models" (218) whereas in reality it was taking into Irish hands the collection of royalties that were previously being paid to an English organisation. While "sustainable careers as professional musicians" were an "illusion" he gives no evidence that they were being "touted" by the "new educational infrastructure" (222). Ó hAllmhuráin appears to indulge here in some of the "simplistic binaries" that he decried at the beginning of the book – anonymity as opposed to international superstardom (223) – and little credit is given to the hordes of young musicians in Clare who are actually keeping this music alive, albeit in a very different society to that of the 1950s. While the fact that the writer has a greater love and knowledge of the music he grew up with is understandable, I feel that a fairer appraisal of the current soundscape of Clare could have been made.

The book finishes with "L'épilogue. Remembering and Forgetting" which focuses on the "fault lines between musical remembering and musical forgetting" (241) and particularly on the loss of the Irish language and neglect of *sean nós* song in the county. I would wonder did the emphasis on céilí bands throughout Clare since the 1940s and 50s have any negative effect and should this share some of the blame for the demise of the styles of more unique musicians like Micho Russell and Patrick Kelly? Throughout the book I would have liked to get more of a sense of the music

itself and to what extent it differs from the rest of the country – did these global flows affect the rest of Ireland in the same way or was Clare in a more unique situation? Ó hAllmhuráin ends the book on a positive note stating that:

“regardless of how they encounter new global flows or the infinite *now* of mass consumer culture, traditional musicians in Clare seem destined to embrace the future with music that remains firmly anchored in the past – in the sounds of their ancestors, their ever-present musical ghosts” (249).

The photos in the book and on the accompanying website along with their in-depth captions add another valuable dimension to this study. This is a book that will appeal to scholars and musicians alike and is a worthy monument to Clare’s great traditional music heritage.

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