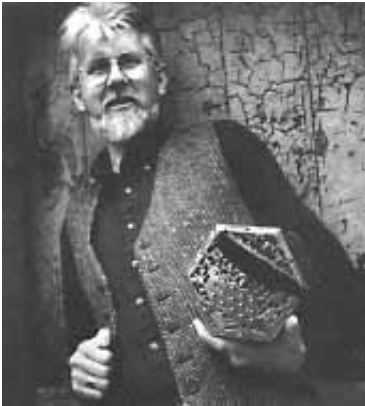

Out of the West

By Raymond Hughes



My father purchased an old Hohner accordion from a neighbour in Ballygriffey and decided that Frank Custy in Toonagh had a fitting alternative to my lack of talent on the hurling field.

So begins the magnificent tale of one man's musical journey continuing four generations of Clare concertina players.

With several All-Ireland championships to his credit, Gearóid Ó hAllmhurain has finally released a solo album, entitled Traditional Music from Clare and Beyond. Acclaimed as one of the finest concertina recordings of all time by some critics, it is so much more than simply concertina. Joined by three of County Clares legendary fiddlers, Paddy Canny, Peter O'Loughlin and Martin Hayes, as well as Belfast harper Janet Harbison, sean-nós dancer Patrick O'Dea from Seafield, Inis Oírr flute player Mícheál Ó hAlmhain, and several other special guests, there is the makings of an entire céilí band on this recording. This delightful recording was released in Ireland and North America this summer.

In the 1980s, Gearóid made his first forays into Amerikay as manager and piper of Dísirt Tola. This extraordinary band of young talent created their own cooperative recording produced in Windmill Lane Studios in Dublin. Touring England and New England, the band consisted of Sharon, Mary, and Garry Shannon, and a rake of young Clare and Dublin musicians. To this day, that album remains a most sought after collection but is as rare as hen's teeth. Then for many years, Gearóid disappeared from the professional music arena in exchange for his academic pursuits.

My first calling will always be teaching. Whether I am teaching university students, giving lectures about the impact of the Great Famine on our music, seminars on Irish Language, or music lessons, my heart is in the classroom.

A popular teacher indeed, Gearóid can be found on syllabi from San Francisco Bay Area university forums and North American [Comhaltas](#) conventions to national music camps like the Catskills' Irish Arts Week in upstate New York and the Swannanoa Gathering in North Carolina.

A fine [uilleann](#) piper, what brought you back to the Concertina we asked.

As a child at my grandmother's knee, I learned a few tunes off on the concertina but left it aside to explore the whistle, accordion and finally the uilleann pipes. Ironically, it was Peter O'Loughlin's brother Sean, who brought me back around. We were at Sean Reid's funeral in June 1978 and Sean O'Loughlin persuaded me to try a few tunes on a Jeffries concertina which he had brought from England. That instrument became my constant companion and it remains with me to this day.

Gearóid's good fortune led him to the Clare concertina master, Paddy Murphy. Mentor to countless young players, Paddy Murphy commanded tremendous respect from the 1950s down through the 80s for his technical facilities, his collection of tunes and innovative style. To his students, he also offered tremendous wisdom and insights.

Through the longtime friendship which developed between these two men, an event of extraordinary impact on the popularity of Irish music in Europe occurred. In 1991, to the surprise of all, Paddy Murphy decided he would join Paddy Canny and Peter O'Loughlin on a musical invasion of France. 'Craving for authenticity,' as Gearóid describes in his liner notes, 'the French audiences lauded them with resounding tributes'. This festival at Ris Orangis outside Paris in May 1991 created an ongoing exchange between Clare and France.

Shortly afterwards, Gearóid left France to teach at St Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia. Astounded by the richness of Cape Breton music, he hoped once again to bring over these musical masters to Atlantic Canada, but Clare lost Paddy Murphy that same year. The 'Beyond' in the album title, refers to the bonds forged in the musical oasis of Cape Breton and sessions in the company of such fiddlers as Buddy MacMaster, Stan Chapman, Dave MacIssac and Dougie McDonald.

KILFENORA [CÉILÍ](#) BAND

In 1991, Gearóid joined John Lynch to return the Kilfenora Céilí Band - the oldest dance band in Ireland - to national competition. With a new generation of Kilfenora musicians together to carry on the proud tradition of their parents, grandparents and cousins, the band reached the All-Ireland [Fleadh](#) Cheoil Céilí Band finals during their first year together. When he recalls the pride of triumphantly placing the 1993 All-Ireland Champions' Dal gCais Shield into the hands of Jerry Lynch, smoke from the victory fire in the village square almost gets in your eye.

After the first win, Gearóid left for America where he is now on the faculty of the University of San Francisco. With Timmy Collins of West Limerick succeeding him on concertina, the band went on to complete their second historic three in a row ('93, '94, '95), achieving an all-time national record of seven All-Ireland titles.

According to O hAllmhuráin, there is a major renaissance in the popularity of the small hexagonal instrument. Based in San Francisco, he now has twelve concertina students including two who fly in from Arizona and Chicago for monthly lessons. The classes at the Catskills are growing with students coming not just from the east coast, but the deep south and Canada as well. Listening to old recordings of Paddy Murphy, Noel Hill, and Chris Droney, they compare notes on the Internet. This is a new world of modern technology preserving an ancient tradition and it is thriving.

We were home last summer to release the album and had the session of a lifetime. Gerdie Commane of Kilnamona and myself went back to meet Molly Carty, 102 years old of Lissroe, Kilmaley, who was an old school friend of my grandmother. We were joined by a young 12 year old girl who is learning the concertina from Molly! Those are the moments I miss most living across on the Pacific coast.

If this is a solo album, why are there so many musicians joining you?

When I started, I had a dream of making a recording which would honour my grandmother, Paddy Murphy and the many musical masters of Clare. As we proceeded, Peter O'Loughlin and Paddy Canny

agreed to join me on a few tracks. It picked up momentum from there on. It is both a celebration of the old musicians as well as the old music. So, why not?

I was delighted with the wonderful afternoon we all spent in Matt Purcell's Harmony Row Studios. I felt honoured to be in such company. Much more than a recording session, we had a few hours of mighty story telling, reminiscing and [craic](#) - and a few tunes. I am especially indebted to Paddy whose sensitive and subtle music inspired hundreds of young fiddlers and concertina players and others all over the traditional music world. Just before the album was completed, Martin Hayes came over to the house to listen to the final mix. We were so committed to honouring these old masters that we obsessed for hours to assure the quality and authenticity of the pure Clare sound.

Reviewers consistently praise its brightness - pure and traditional in an age of overproduced, heavily orchestrated, high-velocity recordings. This is definitely not a film soundtrack. Reminiscent of bog turf, saved hay, and pots of tea on long winter nights, its texture and authenticity is rooted many generations before Riverdance. Music from the land and an earthen people.

Scheduled for release in 1998, Gearóid's next project is a book based on his extensive doctorate research conducted among hundreds of County Clare musicians. With twenty fascinating pages in just the album liner notes, we are looking forward to the rest of the story.

Geardid o hAllmhuráin: Traditional Music from Clare and Beyond is available from Celtic Crossings, and independent recording label based in San Francisco and in stores throughout Ireland.

Celtic Crossings' address is: www.CelticCrossings.com

Raymond Hughes is Editor and Publisher of the San Francisco Gael monthly newspaper which brings news, views and features of Irish immigrants and Irish-Americans throughout the western United States.

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