

Clare Music goes to Oxford



Dr Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin.



For the first time since it was founded in 1478, Oxford

University Press,

the world's most prestigious academic publisher, has issued its first single authored book and companion website on Irish traditional music. Given that Oxford publishes six thousand books in forty different languages every year, Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin's *Flowing Tides: History and Memory in an Irish Soundscape* gives Irish music lovers worldwide a major reason to celebrate.

Dr Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin began his writing career with an eyewitness account of Joe Cooley's funeral, written for the *Clare Champion* in 1973. Over the next forty years he amassed a treasure trove of field recordings, historic photographs and documentary evidence. In *Flowing Tides* he draws upon these rare sources to trace the stories of musicians and to place their lives and testimonies at the centre of Irish cultural history. The result is a rich exposé of a soundscape that underwent radical change from the Napoleonic Wars to the Great Famine, from the birth of the nation state to the meteoric rise – and fall – of the Celtic Tiger.

It's about time!

Reflecting on the key themes of his book, which is dedicated to Clare master, Peadar O'Loughlin, Ó hAllmhuráin claims that 'Irish music in general, and Clare music specifically, are intrinsically linked and interwoven in time and space. 'When God made time, he made plenty of it' was once a justification for the slow and more relaxed way of experiencing life, family, friends, faith and music. Growing up in Clare in the 1960s, we followed a musical year that shaped our days, weeks and years. Now we speak of Twitter moments, and we measure time in terms of airline and internet speed.'

The notion of time in Ireland has always oscillated between old world cyclical time and chronological time that was often imposed by the external world of politics and economics. Ó hAllmhuráin describes the latter as 'cultural flows'. Each new wave of invaders, mariners, missionaries, military bands, returning soldiers, immigrants and refugees flowing in added its own cultural imprint to native folkways and life styles. In turn, Ireland's own culture flowed out to the world beyond.

Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin is a familiar name in the Comhaltas world. A native of Ennis, he has musical roots in

Ground-breaking new book from Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin

Kilmaley, Lissycasey and Dysart. His father, Francie, was a prominent member of Comhaltas in Clare and a key force in the creation of Cois na hAbhna, CCÉ's regional archive and performance centre in Ennis. Over the years, Gearóid won five All-Ireland titles, first with St Flannan's College Céilí Band in 1971, and later senior concertina, two slow air titles on uilleann pipes and, finally, in 1993, as a member of the legendary Kilfenora Céilí Band. He served as an adjudicator at feadhanna in Ireland and the US and worked for a brief period in the archive at Cultúrlann na hÉireann before emigrating to France in 1985. His career has since taken him to California, Nova Scotia, Missouri and Quebec. He holds the prestigious Johnson Chair in Quebec and Canadian Irish Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, one of the only endowed bilingual chairs of Irish Studies in the world.

The musical ebbs and flows of our own people

Describing the years of research that went into this book, Ó hAllmhuráin notes: '*Flowing Tides* focuses on the musical ebbs and flows of our own people. We send our culture, language, music and dance traditions out into the world with each wave of emigrants who leave our shores. Simultaneously, we absorb the influences of each immigrant group that comes flowing in with the tide. More than just a tune name, *Flowing Tides* is a metaphor for Irish experience

going back to the beginning of historical time on the island – long before Irish independence – back as far as Neolithic times, to the Celts, Vikings and Normans, the Tudors, Elizabethans and Stuarts, to the Penal Era, Napoleonic times, and the Great Famine that dispersed Irish people to the far corners of the world.

These micro-stories of Irish musical time are told through the voices of the men and women I interviewed over forty years. The larger narrative in the book creates historical context and links Irish music history to major global events like the impact of recording technology and the commodification of traditional culture that marked the closing decades of the last century, especially the Celtic Tiger. The book gives a voice to musicians who were written out of history and reinforced by an extensive index.

It particularly highlights the contribution of women of all social classes to our musical heritage and restores that legacy within the broader narrative of Irish cultural history.'

Women in the ranks

Emphasising the role of women in Irish traditional music, Ó hAllmhuráin says: 'I sincerely hope that someone will write a serious dissertation on the women behind the roster of male musicians who fill our history books. Who filled the dance halls, played music in the homes, travelled across the hills and bogs to country house dances, and made sure fathers and sons shared family traditions? I was fortunate to interview women concertina players aged five to fifty, many of whom never played music outside their own homes.

Irish women were never stronger than during the War of Independence when they hid IRA men in their homes and defied the Black and Tans at great personal risk. Sadly, many of their stories have been erased from history, or were simply never given a place in

the official chronicles. A classic example is the erasure of Cumann na mBan member, Elizabeth O'Farrell from the surrender scene of the 1916 Rising. Seen standing next to Pádraig Pearse in the original photos, she has been eliminated from the image in many recent publications – even in work by some key media figures. I'm happy to report that *Flowing Tides* restores some of these female voices, particularly the voices of women music makers in Clare whose lives were seriously affected by the War of Independence.

More recently, Irish women musicians are coming into their own professionally. Consider these examples: the present generation features the strongest group of women pipers ever. RTÉ's Áine Hensey and Clare FM's Joan Hanrahan broadcast to Irish music fans all over the world. The award-winning Kilfenora Céilí Band now features six women in their line-up, a five-fold increase since Kitty Linnane's time, showing that work-life balance now empowers women to escape from the hearth and the kitchen in style. These positive changes reflect the *Flowing Tides* of our culture. These trends are also clearly visible on this side of the Atlantic, where Irish women performers continue to reach new heights. Impressively, Helen Gannon continues at the helm of Comhaltas in North America. A visionary who by sheer personal fortitude, talent and charm planted Irish music and dance roots deep in the heartland of America. Her good work is everywhere to behold, from the hundreds of young performers who come through her St Louis Irish Arts Schjool to the trail of All-Ireland champions – concertina players among them – who travel back and forth to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann every year.'

In the company of music makers

Flowing Tides cuts across a wide swathe of cultural history, from the French quadrille tradition which inspired Irish set dancing to the epic laments of the Great Famine, Fenian songs to fife-and-drum bands, the jazz and dance hall days of the Roarin' Twenties, river commerce to the origin of the Fleadh Cheoil, the legacies of Seán Reid and Willie Clancy to the



Clare masters Peadar O'Loughlin (to whom *Flowing Tides* is dedicated), Paddy Canny (fiddle) and Paddy Murphy (concertina) rehearsing for their 1990 concert tour in France (Photo: Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin).

global impact of *Riverdance*, the rivalries of the Kilfenora and Tulla to the evolution of competitive performance and, of course, the commodification of Doolin as a mecca of music tourism. Supported by critical theory made accessible to the general reader, *Flowing Tides* is a fascinating journey through time in the company of musicians, dance masters, cultural and political visionaries, and tradition bearers.

Flowing Tides challenges conventional wisdom on many thorny issues, not least myopic discourse on tradition and innovation. Ó hAllmhuráin warns of the growing disconnect between music and dance performance, and the waning of shared roots and origins. Critical of currents trends in Irish dancing, Ó hAllmhuráin notes that 'Irish dancers now perform to rock music – not actual jigs or reels! Or, indeed, without music at all! While these theatrics are entertaining, there is a major sea change unfolding around us and we need to be aware of

this. There is also a steep rise in tunes vaguely titled 'Gan Ainm' or simply stripped of their regional or published names, as musical memory gives way to musical amnesia. We need to remember, our past shapes our future not the reverse.'

Other currents are equally intriguing, not least because of their impact on Irish soundscapes. In promoting and marketing Irish heritage tourism, Fáilte Ireland, for example, now targets foreign marching bands and choral groups as 'motivated cultural tourists.' More than eight million tourists will visit Ireland this year, doubling the native population. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann is expected to attract 400,000 people to Clare in August, quadrupling the population of the county. As an 8 billion euro industry, clearly Irish tourism exerts a powerful tidal pull of its own.

Book launch at the Fleadh down in Ennis

Flowing Tides: History and Memory in an Irish Soundscape, published by Oxford University Press, will be released in the US in July and in Ireland and the European mainland in August. Visitors to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Ennis will be able to purchase a copy at Glór on 17 August, when the Clare Tracin'Ensemble – featuring Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, Tim Collins, Joan Hanrahan, Geraldine Cotter and others – will present a special concert on Clare's musical diaspora. Early visitors to the Fleadh are invited to attend the official launch in the Old Ground Hotel oin Thursday 11 August (8-10 pm).