

Inishowen uncovered: further strands of the Donegal fiddle tradition

Liz Doherty

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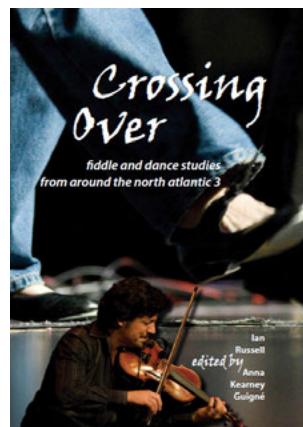
Crossing Over

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 3

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Inishowen uncovered: further strands of the Donegal fiddle tradition

LIZ DOHERTY

Caomhín MacAoidh, in his book *Between the Jigs and the Reels*, which introduces County Donegal and its music, refers to Inishowen as ‘the most easily identified cultural catchment in [the county] [...] Being a peninsula, only its southern extent needs marking. This is usually taken along an east-west line passing through Newtowncunningham and Derry.’¹ The Inishowen peninsula comprises the most northerly part of Ireland, stretching some 26 miles in length and in breadth, and covering in total an area of approximately 309 sq miles. To the east side is Lough Foyle and to the west is Lough Swilly, known locally as the Lake of Shadows. The heart of Inishowen is dominated by mountains, with most of the population congregating in various towns near the coastline. Current population figures, based on the 2006 Census of Ireland, are in the region of 32,000.

County Donegal was one of the last counties of Ireland to be established by the English administration in the sixteenth century. It consisted basically of two territories, Inis Eoghain and Tír Chonaill. Inis Eoghain, which literally translates as the Island of Eoghan, although known locally as ‘O’Doghertye’s country’, included the portion of the city and county of Derry which lay on the west bank of the River Foyle. Tír Chonaill, or the ‘countrye of O’Donnell’, comprised all of what remained of the present county of Donegal.² These two regions have followed separate political paths for most of their history, with Inishowen looking southwards and eastwards towards Tyrone and Derry rather than westwards towards Tír Chonaill. This historical fact is reflected in the current ecclesiastical divisions under which Inishowen forms part of the diocese of Derry (despite the fact that politically Inishowen and Derry have been constituents of two separately defined jurisdictions since the early twentieth century), while the rest of the county is in the diocese of Raphoe.

Reviving regional styles

The current visibility and popularity of the ‘Donegal fiddle style’ is testimony to the success of a very well-planned and well-executed revival, initiated by a small body of dedicated and informed music activists in the mid-1980s, in an effort to stall

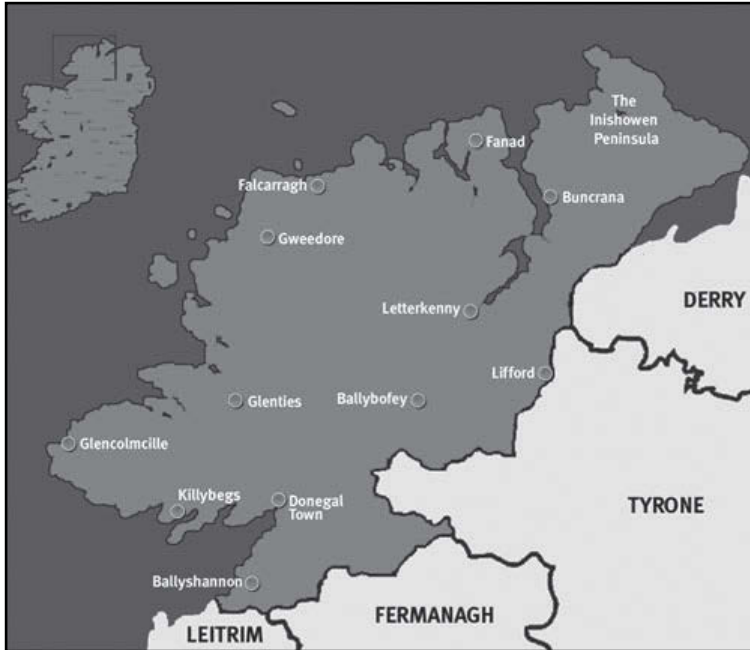


Figure 1 Map of Donegal

what appeared to be the inevitable decline of a local style and repertoire that had dwindled to become the domain of only a few players, many of them of an advanced age. In Donegal, as in the rest of Ireland, local repertoires and musical dialects had gradually disappeared as, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the musical life of the country was propelled towards a more homogeneous style and repertoire. This move was encouraged and supported by a variety of factors which impacted both from external sources (for example, recordings and publications from the Irish community in the USA) and internal sources (for example, the advent of radio, rural-urban migration, and the establishment and practices of the organization Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann which was founded in 1951, and which promoted a revival in Irish traditional music through competitions, national gatherings, and the formalization of the transmission process). This movement accelerated through the 1960s and 1970s and assumed a mantle of ‘cultural imperialism’³ as ‘the renaissance of indigenous Irish performance culture, the electronic media and nationalist cultural movements elevated the performance genres of Clare and Sligo into canonical and authenticating archives of Irish musical identity.’⁴ Whereas prior to this, Irish traditional music comprised what appeared to be a myriad of local and regional styles and tunes, constructed around the music of a number of key individuals, an ‘Irish’ style and repertoire began to emerge as people chose to ignore their local sounds and players in their quest for the popular ‘standards’ and ‘hits’.

This movement, however, is in intermittent reverse mode as we speak – in certain areas, considerable emphasis is being placed on re-asserting the local ‘blas’⁵

or musical accent to the extent that, in some instances, 'regional peculiarities [have] come to be celebrated as more authentic than a generic Irish style.'⁶ Niall Keegan proposes that:

regional style has become the premier method amongst the community around traditional Irish music for the stylistic categorization of a performance and performer. The use of the words of regional style both affirms the 'traditionality' of the performance and thus performer [...] The use of such terminology places the performance both geographically and diachronically, in the context of a local social continuum in stark contrast with the reality of mass mediated music which, through the processes of secondary orality and visibility, decontextualises and depersonalizes performance [...] Regional style is perhaps so important in the imagination of many traditional musicians because of its exclusivity.⁷

Dowling highlights the reality of traditional music practice in Ireland where the core of the tradition is represented through the idiolect (individual style) with a collective of these similar idiolects from across a wider community or region being defined as a dialect.

Authenticity in traditional music is tied to the identification of an individual player with an ensemble of characteristics – the nature of embellishment, tempo, syncopation, instrumentation and repertoire – which are themselves attached to counties or small inter-county regions. Most musicians are aware that regional styles are in fact derived from the characteristics of a dominant virtuoso who serves as a prototype for the region with which they are identified. But the identification is with the region, not the musician. As a result, one of the most powerful structuring myths of Irish traditional music is that it exists as a collection of regional styles.⁸

Typically, pre the 'cultural imperialism' movement of the twentieth-century, musicians 'cultivated a solo art, periodically enriched by interchanges within a tight network of other local musician-neighbours.'⁹ Feldman suggests that:

[the] older generation of fiddlers were the last to receive the tradition of regional dance music directly from their musical and genealogical forbearers as eminently local knowledge and, by and large, with minimal influence from the mass media. Though they did have a strong sense of preserving a national cultural inheritance they also took ironic pride in their regional musical identity [...] they recalled and accessed different niches of the Irish cultural archive that had been forgotton by the rest of the country. This was a magnification of the virtuoso ethic in Irish traditional music performance. Just as each fiddler was assessed by his ability to mark the music with his own personality and technique, local regions were noted for their distinctive take on Irish music, that is, for the tunes, tune variants, and playing styles that

could be found there and nowhere else. The national shape of Irish music since the late nineteenth century, if not earlier, has been the regional mutation and variation of a shared aesthetic ground.¹⁰

The re-asserting of regional styles within the traditional music idiom in recent times has not been without its own issues. Sean Corcoran comments that ‘concepts of regionalism in music are often linked to related concepts of “isolation”, “remoteness” and the survival of the pre-modern,’¹¹ and notes that ‘Allen Feldman, collecting fiddle music in Donegal in the late 1970s, saw “islands of musical tradition” kept going “by a few isolated, ageing men” battling hopelessly against the “inevitable historical occurrence” of modernization.’¹² At a more global level, Alan Lomax, in his ambitious attempt to define stylistic regions of music, song, and dance with statistical precision for the entire globe (Cantometrics), found that broad generalizations seem to work quite well from a distance but that, close-up, most local styles are far from homogeneous.¹³

It is valid to accept that when it comes to Irish traditional music the concept of local and regional labels has been embraced as a tool to classify repertoire and style generated and transmitted by influential individuals in specific geographic constituencies. While these regional styles (and so, by extension, individual styles) were increasingly submerged throughout the course of the twentieth century in favour of a more homogenous ‘Irish’ sound, in recent times, and in areas where sufficient links to older musical practices have been maintained – places such as Fermanagh, Oriel, and Sliabh Luachra, for example – dynamic efforts have been instigated to re-assert these musical dialects (and idiolects) through a series of local revivals.

The work of Cairdeas na bhFidilí

The ‘revival’ in County Donegal of a local style and repertoire was the first of these movements to be initiated successfully. Here, a multi-pronged approach was adopted. The transmission of the tradition was core – a number of (typically older) exponents of the local traditions were encouraged to come out of their kitchens to play and to pass on the tunes and styles to the younger generations. This was supported by an active programme of documentation through research, recording and publication. The voluntary organization which spearheaded this activity was Cairdeas na bhFidilí; having recently celebrated its twenty-fifth year it continues to thrive and excel in its delivery of its remit:

To strengthen Donegal fiddle music at its roots,
To improve standards of fiddle playing,
To promote participation in all aspects of Donegal fiddle music, and
To encourage the transmission of the Donegal style and repertoire.

Its fiddle week in Glencolumbcille in south-west Donegal – one of the few summer schools in Ireland devoted to a single instrument – is a key event on the traditional music calendar as is its annual Fiddlers Meeting in Glenties each October. Cairdeas is also responsible for an ongoing body of publications in print and recorded media, a comprehensive list of which is available from their website.¹⁴ The early work of Cairdeas na bhFidléirí coincided with various other traditional music-related initiatives in County Donegal. Allen Feldman and Eamonn O'Doherty's book, *The Northern Fiddler*, published in 1979, had as its focus a number of fiddle players from Counties Donegal and Tyrone and was an attempt 'to revalidate regional music for both the younger generations of Donegal and Tyrone and for the wider public sphere of Irish traditional music players and audiences.'¹⁵ It strove to achieve this through documenting the repertoire, social history of the music and its associated folklore, along with biographical detail of the featured musicians. At another level, the band Altan, with its focus on the instrumental and song traditions of north-west Donegal, was formed in the mid-1980s and existed in parallel with Cairdeas, promoting and creating access to the repertoire of one specific region of the county at local, national and at international levels. In 1994, Scoil Gheimhridh Frankie Kennedy (the Frankie Kennedy School) was established in Gaoth Dobhair, in memory of the Altan founder and flute player and to continue his huge contribution to Irish music, especially to the music and song of County Donegal. Within a period of little more than a decade, Donegal and its vibrant music tradition was suddenly catapulted into the limelight through a diverse and exciting number of independent projects that had, as their primary goals, preserving and/or promoting various aspects of specific local traditions.

The problem with labels

In dealing with regional styles, 'the obvious problem lies in the dichotomy between the perception of style and the reality of performance'.¹⁶ Certainly, within the Irish tradition, it is much more common for musicians to align themselves with a regional style than to be seen directly emulating a particular individual. Regional labels have also proved useful as a tool with which to drive home the ideologies of groups or organizations with a noble cause such as preservation or revival of traditional music. Anderson and Gale note:

During times of conflict, when a group feels threatened, cultural production processes which are normally submerged from view and operate at a deep level, rise closer to the surface. At such times people highlight cultural assumptions in order to frame arguments against their 'adversaries' in a process of foregrounding.¹⁷

This conscious approach, defined as 'foregrounding', was introduced in the context of the Cape Breton fiddle tradition in eastern Canada when, in the 1990s, Scottish fiddle music enthusiasts, led by such figures as Alasdair Fraser and Hamish

Moore (albeit independently) engaged in a very active crusade to re-introduce the music of Cape Breton Island to Scotland. Cape Breton music has its roots in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and has maintained strong links with that tradition since its relocation to the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the quest to bring this music back home, the enthusiasts wholeheartedly proclaimed the authenticity of the Cape Breton sound and its unbroken link with the past – blatantly choosing to ignore the many new features which had shaped the music in its new home over the course of the twentieth century and created what was undeniably a distinctive Cape Breton voice.¹⁸

The process of foregrounding is also in evidence in the revival of the ‘Donegal style’, where the generic label of Donegal was adopted to refer to what was indeed the music of only a small geographic portion of the county. The reality, of course, is that ‘quite often, a particular performance happens to get collected or transcribed first, possibly because [...] particular regions had been declared geographical centers of cultural authenticity.’¹⁹ Again, this is not peculiar to the Donegal situation. In Shetland, as Peter Cooke notes, the late Tom Anderson

preserved much that would have been lost and aroused interest especially among youngsters [...] He concentrated on one style, a good style, but there were other styles that were just as good, and these have been smothered and remained undeveloped.²⁰

In the case of Feldman and O’Doherty, the ‘Donegal’ they concentrated on includes the region from Glenties southwards towards Kilcar and Glencolmbcille; with Cairdeas na bhFidléirí, ‘Donegal’ encompasses primarily the same geographic areas. That activities should focus in this particular part of the county is no surprise; this region certainly had the greatest proliferation of fiddlers including great players such as Con Cassidy (1909–1994), Francie and Mickey ‘Dearg’ Byrne (1903–1987; 1899–1980), James Byrne (1946–2008) and John Doherty (1895–1980) – probably the most influential of the local fiddlers. Doherty, a travelling fiddler and tinsmith, was certainly one of the most accessible of the local musicians, having been recorded by Alan Lomax in 1951, Peter Kennedy in 1953 and by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1957, as well as by RTE on several occasions.

Certainly, the need to assert the value of the music being played in the county was evident in response to the ‘legion of commentators who wrote it off with great authority.’²¹ Indeed, right across Donegal, a rich music tradition was in place – in no way was there a situation where a tradition had to be created or ‘invented.’²² ‘Donegal’ as a label was convenient and instantly recognisable. It was, however, in this particular context, a misnomer; by rights it needed to be qualified; but, of course, to do so would have immediately given the impression of diluting the cause – of almost apologizing for it. And so, the ‘Donegal style’, as a label supposedly encapsulating all of the fiddle playing in the county, has stayed and remained unchallenged.

A positive outcome of any mission of foregrounding is that, once the groundwork has been done, the position can relax and gradually a more realistic picture can emerge. The fact is that Donegal, in its vastness, accommodated a number of more localized styles other than those in the south-west extremities of the county. Other regions more recently acknowledged for their rich and unique fiddle traditions are the north-west, the north, Inishowen, the east, central Donegal, and the south and south west.²³ It has been suggested that in Donegal, 'the notion of the greater beauty and enrichment through diversity was inherently understood.'²⁴ While this was perhaps not evident in the first twenty years of the revival period, it is certainly more accepted these days, although the diversity has not yet been fully explored. This leads me to the core issue of my paper, which is to uncover another strand – indeed, another multi-faceted strand – of the fiddle music tradition of County Donegal, that of the Inishowen peninsula in the north-eastern reaches of the county. An exploratory survey of the musical practices and practitioners of this area will serve to underline the points made concerning the inherent weaknesses in a blanket label which, although technically accurate – in that Inishowen is, most definitely, situated geographically within County Donegal – does not fully encompass the richness and diversity of musical style and repertoire that exists in reality.

I should note at this point that I am a fiddle player, born and bred in Inishowen who is, to a certain extent, peripheral to the fold – in Donegal at least – of 'Donegal fiddlers'. While for me it is very simple: I am a fiddle player from Donegal who is interested in and influenced by Scottish and Cape Breton as well as Irish styles. Others over the years have made quite complicated work of trying to categorize me and my music, but that is a discussion for another day. For this paper, the 'Inishowen' section is informed by years of personal contact with many of the players mentioned along with dedicated fieldwork conducted in 2003–2005 while compiling a biography of one of the local master fiddlers.



Figure 2 Map of Inishowen

An overview of traditional music in Inishowen

In south-west Donegal they say that, in the past, every house had a fiddle. In Inishowen too, the fiddle was popular, although maybe not quite as much so as elsewhere in the county. Indeed, at certain times, instruments such as the melodeon were actually more commonly found than the fiddle. There was also quite a body of flute and piccolo players in certain pockets of the region and marching bands were a regular feature. Inishowen was also known for having a vibrant song tradition which included a caoining²⁵ tradition and an English-language ballad tradition. The latter, which continues to thrive, has been well documented by Jimmy McBride²⁶ among others and is celebrated annually at the Inishowen Singers' Circle weekend festival.

Music-making happened in peoples' homes or barns and little or no excuse was needed to get a musical occasion underway. Charles McGlinchey, born in 1861, and whose memoirs were collected and published by Patrick Kavanagh in *The Last of the Name*, recalls:

The people long ago had gatherings for a night's scutching or cloving of lint. There would be twenty or thirty at a gathering. They did the work in the barn or some outhouse, and other times in the kitchen. They had a dance after the work was done. Someone would be got to play the fiddle, or two or three women would lilt. They had gatherings too for making quilts.²⁷

Later, such occasions were referred to simply as 'Big Nights'. The word would get out locally and people would walk for miles to wherever the music and dancing was taking place. 'The Big Night would go on until seven o'clock in the morning and then they would all go to Mass [in the morning].'²⁸ The gathering of the harvest would be a popular time for a Big Night. Weddings were another great opportunity for music and celebration. 'Bottling nights' – where everyone would bring a bottle to share – took place to celebrate the return from honeymoon of the newly-weds (from exotic locations such as Moville, on the far side of the peninsula). In those locations where the Big Night would be taking place, the road to the house was always lit with bonfires or battles. Heatherberry Sunday in July was another occasion for music-making, where girls and boys would meet at the spring well (Suil-A Tobar) near the top of Slieve Snaght. Weekly fairs and special events, such as the Gooseberry Fair in Buncrana (held in late July), were also popular times for music and dancing.

For the Big Nights, all the furniture (or what small amounts they had) was cleared out of the house to make room for the dancing. Planks of wood were set up along the wall to provide seating. One fiddler recalled an old door being set over the bed in the kitchen to create a stage for him – and to keep him out of harm's way for when the dancing became overly enthusiastic. The music would generally be provided by a solitary melodeon or fiddle; it was at least the 1920s before there is documented evidence of two or more players performing together. The dances popular in the area included the 'Lancers', 'Highlands', 'Four-Hand Reel', 'Military

Two-Step', 'Barn Dance', 'Haymakers' Jig', 'Lannigan's Ball', 'Maggie Pickins', 'Shoe the Donkey', the 'Polka Round' (a 2-hand dance similar to what the Fletts had identified in Scotland c.1844 and described as a circle dance),²⁹ the 'Pin Polka'³⁰ and the 'Cripple Dance'.³¹ Other dances included old-fashioned waltzes termed 'Versovienna' and 'Veleta'. The dances would have been interspersed with solo items such as songs (ballads), recitations and step-dances (generally hornpipes performed by the men). Right up until the mid-twentieth century there is nothing to suggest that the fiddle or melodeon was played for anything other than to dance to. Ceili Bands became popular from the 1950s onwards with the Crana Ceili Band and the Clonmany Ceili Band being two of the best known in the area. Competitions, such as the annual Carndonagh Feis, also became important platforms for music-making as the century progressed.

While scholars such as Nic Suibhne³² and MacAoidh³³ have conducted research into the music traditions in Inishowen throughout the twentieth century, little is widely known about local players active before this. Recent research carried out has yielded a number of names from this era – interestingly several of them female – and providing evidence that various instruments were played, including fiddle, pipes, melodeon, and harp. Tom Gordon, from around the Moville area in the eastern part of the peninsula, for instance, played the pipes in the late 1800s; Dan O'Doherty from Cluainte played the harp; early fiddlers of note included Neil McColgan, a formidable player, referred to by McGlinchey as the best in his day. He was a blind fiddler from Ballyliffen who made his living playing music on the boat from Derry to Moville and on the Scotch boats (boats travelling between Derry and Scotland). Coming from a musical family, McColgan was also a noted singer and would play the fiddle to accompany his own songs.³⁴ Another blind fiddler was Paddy 'the Slithers' McDonald from Moville who played at the quayside where the Scotch boats landed in Derry. Honoria Galwey (1830–1924), daughter of the Rector in Moville, who documented music from fiddlers and pipers in the area, collected the tune 'The Pigeon on the Gate' from Paddy 'the Slithers' in 1849. She passed her music collection on to Sir Charles Stanford, Alfred Percival Graves, and Plunkett Greene in London and some of her work was published in a collection *Old Irish Croonauns and Other Tunes* by Boosey and Company (1910).³⁵ Billy Andy Porter was another fiddler from Gaddyduff. A popular fiddler for Big Nights, he also used to play the fiddle along with the local choir when Fr William O'Donnell was the curate in the parish between 1841 and 1868.

Pat Mulhern

A primary link between the older tradition in Inishowen and the music which is thriving there today is a fiddler by the name of Pat Mulhern who lived in Fallask some miles outside Buncrana town. He was born on St Patrick's Day, 1900 and died in 1997. Pat learned to play the fiddle by listening to local players around the area such as Paddy 'the Slithers' McDonald, Johnny Graham, James McLaughlin (his uncle), Neil and Pat McKinney, Johnnie O'Donnell, and Jimmy Durnian. In his early days

he played a lot for dancers, firstly in houses (his own parents' home was a popular ceilidh house) and later in halls along with other fiddlers and accordion players such as Joe McLaughlin from the nearby townland of Ballmagan. As traditional dancing and Big Nights gradually died out in the 1950s and 1960s, his repertoire became increasingly a listening one. He gained some national recognition as an accomplished player and was afforded the opportunity to perform on national radio from both the Dublin and Athlone transmitters and for the BBC in Belfast. Pat was hugely interested in Scottish music; indeed, he had visited the Stirling area on a number of occasions but, interestingly, did not meet any Scottish fiddlers.

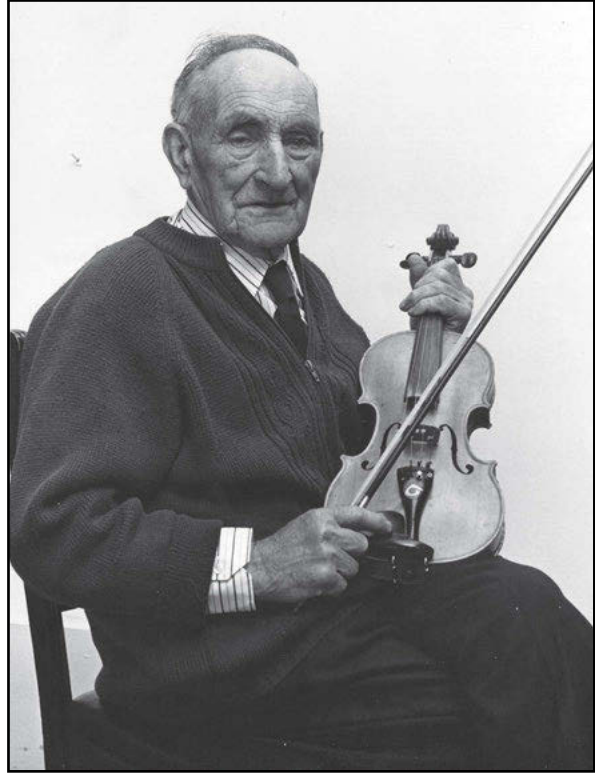


Figure 3 Pat Mulhern

He would, however, learn tunes from listening to musicians such as accordionist, Jimmy Shand, on the radio; Scottish music was available in three half-hour slots on the radio weekly, whereas Irish music was much more elusive on air. He was also interested in printed collections and avidly studied a range of books from the O'Neill's collections to classical violin tutors. In his later years, he became aware of the music of the Sligo greats, Michael Coleman and Paddy Killoran, whose music would have also had some influence on him.

Pat was known for his extensive and varied repertoire derived from a range of sources, both aural and literate. Equally, his style was regarded as being quite distinctive. His command of the instrument was noteworthy as was his ability to move into the higher positions with the greatest of ease:

Pat had a very staccato style and he had great rhythm; he had a great swing with his tunes. He wouldn't have used a lot of ornamentation [...] and he bowed quite a lot. There was great cadence in his music and it was never in a hurry.³⁶

In his description of Pat's playing style, Dinny McLaughlin, a former pupil, highlights one of the characteristics of his sound which was notably different from that of fiddle players in other parts of Donegal. This concerns the spaces between the notes – what McLaughlin refers to as 'cadence' – and which lends itself to a style that is quite sparse, lyrical and with a 'swing' to it that shows marked contrasts between the accented and non-accented notes of a phrase.



Figure 4 Seamus Grant

Seamus Grant

Further north in the peninsula another prominent fiddle player was Seamus Grant (1934–2005). His mother played the fiddle and his father played the single row melodeon; both were heavily involved in music-making in the parish of Clonmany. Seamus played at house dances from the age of fifteen until these began to die out in the 1950s. He was a founder member of the Clonmany Ceili Band which was popular until around 1970. Like Pat, Seamus would have been influenced both by the local style and by music he heard from Scotland on the radio,

through recordings and from printed collections. William C. Honeyman's book, *The Young Violinist and Duet Book*, for example, was a favourite, as was the music of James Scott Skinner. His wife's father, White Dan, a noted fiddler, singer and dancer was a great source of tunes for him. White Dan had gone to Scotland every harvest and Seamus recalls that 'part of his baggage was a hundredweight bag with the bow of his fiddle sticking out of the top of it.'³⁷ He also recalls travelling musicians such as McGinley, Gallagher, and McDonald visiting the area, and notes that the famous Doherty fiddlers were chased out, not for their fiddling, but for sheep stealing.³⁸

Seamus had a repertoire that consisted of both dance tunes and listening tunes. Nic Suibhne, in her 1989 dissertation, provides an interesting comparison between his repertoire and that of Francie Mooney of Gaoth Dobhair. As part of his store of dance tunes Seamus played lancers, schottishes, hornpipes, polkas, and various named dances such as 'Maggie Pickins', 'Shoe the Donkey' and 'Kitty O'Connor'. His 'listening tunes' included highlands, strathspeys, airs, marches, jigs, and reels. A CD of Seamus's music is due to be released in 2010 and the tunes included demonstrate just how eclectic a repertoire he amassed. Standard Irish jigs and reels sit comfortably alongside hornpipes, waltzes, barn dances, polkas, airs and exhibition tunes, strathspeys and highlands sourced from Inishowen to Canada to

Scotland and to Shetland. An avid collector of music, Seamus had an impressive collection of books and tapes, both commercial and home-made. I recall one visit with Seamus where he was being introduced to Cape Breton piano player, Ryan MacNeil.³⁹ In anticipation of the visit, Seamus had dug out a collection of VHS recordings he had made from various television programmes over the years and featuring some of his favourite Canadian players and tunes – all of which he had added to his repertoire. As it turned out, the players in question were Ryan's own siblings, members of the well-known Cape Breton group, the Barra MacNeils. With an instant bond – and a common repertoire – Ryan went on to provide the piano accompaniment for Seamus in the recording of his only commercial CD, which he recorded just weeks before his death.

Seamus's style is quite rhythmic and dotted, similar in some respects to that of Pat Mulhern, yet quite distinctive in its strength of tone. A lyrical player, he has quite a measured touch to his phrases and this space between the notes is further emphasized through a clarity of the melodic line which is uncluttered by (although not entirely devoid of) left-hand ornamentation.

Dinny McLaughlin

Dinny McLaughlin was born in 1935 in Shandrum, near Buncrana and is considered these days as the great master of fiddling in Inishowen (see Figure 5). Taught by Pat Mulhern, Dinny went on to devote his own life to the teaching of both music and dance, and the continuity and vitality of the tradition around the peninsula is testimony to his huge success in this area. In terms of his style and repertoire, Dinny brings yet another dimension to the local tradition. This again underlines the reality that a regional style, when examined more closely, disintegrates into a set of unique individual sounds. Dinny's influences ranged from Pat Mulhern who taught him, to other local fiddlers he was exposed to while growing up, and to commercial recordings of fiddlers from Michael Coleman

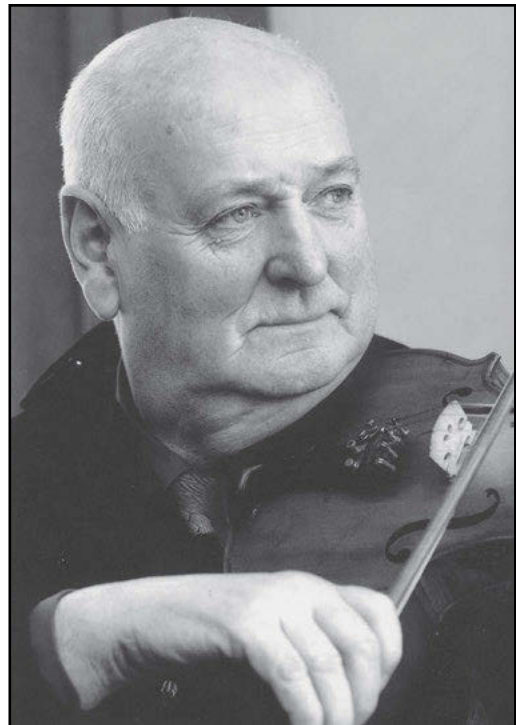


Figure 5 Dinny McLaughlin

and James Morrison to Andy McGann and Sean Maguire, whose flamboyant style made a huge impression on him. In terms of repertoire and style, Dinny has little in common with the so-called 'Donegal style', although technically he is, absolutely,

a Donegal fiddler by virtue of geographic positioning. His repertoire consists of standard Irish tune types (mainly jigs, reels, hornpipes, airs, waltzes, and planxties) and his own compositions, of which there are approximately fifty, consisting of jigs, reels, hornpipes, airs, waltzes, and planxties (see Figure 6). In terms of style, Dinny has what could be described as a smooth, lyrical yet rhythmic sound. He uses a combination of single bow strokes and slurs with an emphasis on the up-bow in places (in marked contrast to the more equal division of accent between up- and



Figure 6 'The Inishowen Waltz', composed by Dinny McLaughlin

down-bows favoured by players such as John Doherty). He uses a range of left- and right-hand ornaments – especially the roll, single grace note and bowed treble – although none of these excessively. Notably, Dinny's personality is wholly reflected in his playing which might be subdued and reflective one minute and bursting with exuberance and flamboyance the next.

Dinny has been responsible for passing the tradition on to the next generation of players from around Inishowen, many of whom have gone on to forge international reputations as fiddle players. Interestingly, in the spirit of what the Inishowen tradition is all about, all of these players have quite distinct and individual musical

voices. While the basics were instilled in all of these players, so too was the sense of self and of self discovery that is as – or indeed more – important to traditional music than is confirming to a norm, be it a local, regional or national style. Nowhere was this celebration of diversity at a local level more evident than at the Ar Ais Arís Traditional Arts Festivals, held in Bunrana in 2006, 2007, and 2008. From Dinny McLaughlin to P. V. O'Donnell to Ciaran Tourish, the uniqueness of each local fiddler was apparent. The Inishowen Music Project, which has been in existence for a decade and which was established in order to maintain, develop and promote the music traditions in the area, employs Roisin McGrory as its primary fiddle teacher. Roisin, a former pupil of Dinny McLaughlin, was also mentored by James Byrne from Glencolumcille as part of Cairdeas na bhFidléirí's programme of activities; today the tunes and styles she brings to her numerous students are representative of both Inishowen and south-west Donegal. Fintan Vallely has made the observation that, as musicians, each of us ends up with 'the style reflective of the variety of paths by which we came upon our music'.⁴⁰ For generations of musicians in Inishowen this has indeed been the reality.

Conclusion

A survey of the Inishowen style demonstrates the inherent weaknesses of the concept of regional styles when examined from the inside out, that is taking an analysis of the repertoire and style of a number of individual players from a select geographical region as the starting point. In terms of the so-called 'Donegal style', it is clear that the label does not embrace the totality of fiddle practices in the region. Furthermore, a simple re-addressing of the boundaries is not even an option; simply ensuring that Inishowen be added into the mix does not eliminate the issue. For what we have seen in Inishowen is the reality that, even in a specific and contained geographic region, often the individual voice is what emerges as the strongest feature. The notion of regional style is defined by a shared space and musical experience with the result being a mosaic of individual re-interpretations of those commonalities rather than a unified and homogenous sound; a celebration of personal diversities rather than the creation of another defined strand of the Irish tradition.

Notes

¹ Caoimhín MacAoidh, *Between the Jigs and the Reels: The Donegal Fiddle Tradition* (Ireland: Drumlin Publications, 1994), p. 184.

² From the early historical period the county of Donegal was dominated by two branches of the Uí Néill dynasty, Cinéal Eoghain, 'the kindred of Eoghan' and Cinéal Conaill, 'the kindred of Conall'. Both Eoghan and Conall were sons of 'Niall of the nine hostages' (Naoighiallach), ancestor of the Uí Néill, who was reputedly king of Tara in the fourth century. These two principal branches were first mentioned in the Annals of Ulster in 563. Cinéal Eoghain established their headquarters at Aileach in Inishowen expanding into Derry and Tyrone from the mid-sixth century. From the tenth century, the wider territory became known as Tír Eoghain – the land of Eoghan. The name of the original territory, Inis Eoghain (the island of Eoghan), is first recorded in the eighth century. Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig, 'Placenames and

Early Settlement in County Donegal' in *Donegal: History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County*, ed. by William Nolan, Liam Roynane, & Mairead Dunlevy (Dublin: Geography Publications, [1995]), p. 150.

³ Caoimhín MacAoidh, 'Donegal: A Voice in the Wilderness or the Voice of Reason?' in *The Local Accent: Selected Proceedings from BLAS, The Local Accent Conference*, ed. by T. Smith, M. Ó Súilleabháin (Folk Music Society of Ireland and Irish World Music Centre, Ireland, 1997), pp. 67–72 (p. 68).

⁴ Allen Feldman, 'Music of the Border: The Northern Fiddler Project, Media Provenance and the Nationalization of Irish Music', in *Radharc*, 3 (2002), 97–122 (p.105).

⁵ 'Blas' is the Irish Gaelic word for taste, flavour and accent.

⁶ Martin Dowling, 'Rambling in the Field of Modern Identity: Some Speculations on Irish Traditional Music', *Radharc*, 5–7 (2004–2006), 107–34 (p. 129).

⁷ Niall Keegan, 'The Verbal Context of Regional Style in Traditional Irish Music' in *The Local Accent*, ed. by Smith & Ó Súilleabháin, pp. 116–22 (p. 121).

⁸ Dowling, p. 130.

⁹ Feldman, 'Music of the Border', p. 105.

¹⁰ Feldman, 'Music of the Border', p. 99.

¹¹ Sean Corcoran, 'Concepts of Regionalism in Irish Traditional Music' in *The Local Accent*, ed. by Smith & Ó Súilleabháin, pp. 25–30 (p. 27).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Corcoran, p. 28.

¹⁴ See www.donegalfiddlemusic.ie [accessed 1 February 2010].

¹⁵ Feldman, 'Music of the Border', p. 112.

¹⁶ Keegan, 'The Verbal Context' in *The Local Accent*, ed. by Smith & Ó Súilleabháin (1997), pp. 116–22 (p. 116).

¹⁷ Kay Anderson and Fay Gale, *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire; [New York]: Wiley/Halstead, 1992), p. 38.

¹⁸ A distinctive piano accompaniment plus new compositions from Cape Breton composers contributed to creating a new voice in Scottish music that was uniquely Cape Breton. Elizabeth Doherty, 'The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Style c.1928–1995' (PhD dissertation, University of Limerick, 1996), p. 318.

¹⁹ Feldman, 'Music of the Border', p. 110.

²⁰ Peter Cooke, 'Cultural Greyout or Survival of the Species? – "The Threat"', in *The Local Accent*, ed. by Smith & Ó Súilleabháin (1997), pp. 9–24 (p. 18).

²¹ MacAoidh, 'Donegal' in *The Local Accent*, ed. by Smith & Ó Súilleabháin (1997), pp. 67–72 (p. 68).

²² Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²³ MacAoidh, *Between the Jigs and the Reels*, p. 5.

²⁴ MacAoidh, 'Donegal' in *The Local Accent*, ed. by Smith & Ó Súilleabháin (1997), pp. 67–72 (p. 68).

²⁵ Caoining took place at wakes and involved the singing of a lament over the body of the deceased. In Inishowen the caoining was performed by relatives of the deceased and as each of these arrived he/she stood over the corpse and chanted praise of the dead and sorrow at the death. Damhnait Nic Suibhne, 'The Donegal Fiddle Tradition: An Ethnographic Perspective' in *Donegal*, ed. by Nolan, Roynane, & Dunlevy, pp. 713–42 (p. 729).

²⁶ Jimmy McBride, *The Flower of Dunaff Hill and more Traditional Songs Sung in Inishowen* (Buncrana: Crana, 1988) and Jimmy McBride and Jim McFarland, *My Parents Reared Me Tenderly and Other Traditional Songs Sung in Inishowen* (Buncrana: Doherty, 1985).

²⁷ Charles McGlinchey, *The Last of the Name* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1986), p. 37.

²⁸ Liz Doherty, *Dinny McLaughlin: A Life of Music, Song and Dance in Inishowen* (County Donegal: Druid Publications, 2005), p. 20.

²⁹ J. F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 5.

³⁰ 'It was done by a number of people [...] any number of people could dance it [...] couples. It was done in a circle around the floor and there was one extra person standing in the middle of the ring, and when the music stopped they all changed partners and it was up to the odd man out to grab a partner. But there was chaos during the change over. The tune that they played for that was called the "pin polka"'. Seamus Grant, in Damhnait Nic Suibhne, 'Links Between Donegal and Scottish Fiddling' (undergraduate thesis, University College, Cork, 1989), [unpaginated].

³¹ 'This was a popular dance at the "Big Nights" in Inis Eoghain and involved what we could call sitting on what we would call our "hunkers" [...] that's in a squatting position and keep time to music [...] It was performed by two men and was competitive. The tune played in Inis Eoghain for it is a local version of the well known reel "The Swallow's Tail."' See Seamus Grant, in Suibhne, 'Links Between Donegal and Scottish Fiddling', [unpaginated].

³² Nic Suibhne, 'Links Between Donegal and Scottish'; Nic Suibhne, 'The Donegal Fiddle Tradition', in Donegal, eds Nolan, Roynane, & Dunlevy, pp. 713–42.

³³ MacAoidh, 'Between the Jigs and the Reels'; 'Donegal: A Voice in the Wilderness or the Voice of Reason?' in *The Local Accent*, eds Smith & Ó Súilleabháin, pp. 67–72.

³⁴ McGlinchey, pp. 137–38.

³⁵ Tunes found in the Galwey collection include: 'Hudy Macan's Galoppe', 'The Pigeon on the Gate', 'Shaun Mac-a-Vicar', 'Easter Snow', and 'Rocking the Cradle'.

³⁶ Liz Doherty, *Dinny McLaughlin*, p. 28.

³⁷ Nic Suibhne, 'Links Between Donegal and Scottish Fiddling', [unpaginated].

³⁸ Nic Suibhne, 'Links Between Donegal and Scottish Fiddling', [unpaginated].

³⁹ Ryan MacNeil is a talented piano player from Sydney Mines, Cape Breton, who is a member of the renowned group, the Barra MacNeils, alongside his siblings Sheumas, Kyle, Stuart, Lucy, and Boyd. Ryan is a long-time friend of the author and has performed and recorded with her. He was in the Inishowen area rehearsing for a series of gigs when he was introduced to Seamus Grant.

⁴⁰ Fintan Vallely, 'The Migrant, the Tourist, the Voyeur, the Leprechaun', in *The Local Accent*, ed. by Smith and Ó Súilleabháin, pp. 107–15 (p. 107).