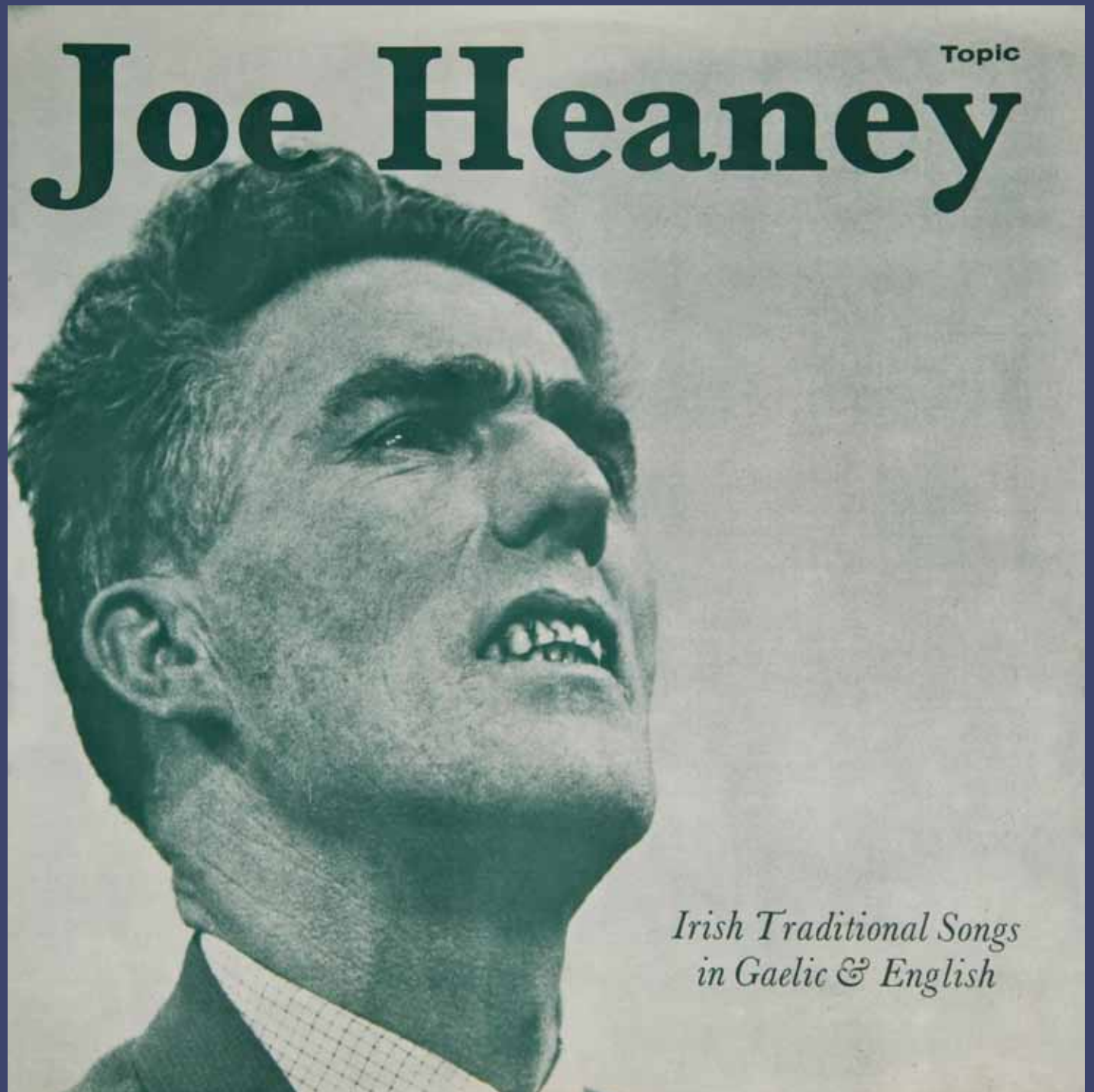


TSDL091

**JOE HEANEY
IRISH TRADITIONAL
SONGS IN GAELIC &
ENGLISH**



TSDL091

- 1 THE ROCKS OF BAWN
- 2 ONE MORNING IN JUNE
- 3 CASADH AN t-SUGAIN *The Twisting of the Rope*
- 4 THE WIFE OF THE BOLD TENANT FARMER
- 5 THE TREES THEY GROW TALL
- 6 PEIGIN IS PEADAR *Peggy and Peter*
- 7 CUNNLA
- 8 CAOINEADH NA TRI MHUIRE *The Lament of the Three Marys*
- 9 AN TIGHEARNA RANDAL *Lord Randal*
- 10 BEAN AN LEANNA *The Woman with the Beer*
- 11 JOHN MITCHEL

Recorded by Bill Leader

Photograph by Brian Shuel

A. L. Lloyd writes:

Joe Heaney was born in 1920 in the parish of Carna, Co. Galway, an isolated district of bog and stones that at first sight evokes a landscape of the moon. It is an area fantastically rich in folklore, if little else. The sparse population lives by farming and fishing. It is an entirely Gaelic-speaking area. Like his neighbours, Joe Heaney learnt his English in the little village school, but he never used it much until he left Carna for good "because there's only enough for one person to make a living out of those small farms", and "I don't think I was ever cut out to be a fisherman either". Since then, most of his living has come from working as a building labourer.

Most of Joe Heaney's songs have come to him from his father, but he died while Joe was still a youngster, taking with him many songs that his son had not the chance to acquire. Many of the pieces in Joe Heaney's repertory are classical baroque pieces of Gaelic musical folklore, long-lined, ornamented, grave compositions such as *The Lament of the Three Marys*, of a kind that are heard in few corners of Ireland nowadays. Heaney has a theory about why the Carna district is such a reservoir of grand Gaelic song. He suggests that during the famine time of the nineteenth century, many poor people from other parts would stray into the area, looking for a bite to eat. Carna folk being fishermen, they were well-fed

TSDL091

and had fish to spare for the hungry folk from the inland. The strangers would stop in each village in the area for a night or two, and the whole village would gather to hear what songs they had brought with them. Besides items from the local repertory, Heaney has many other songs learnt since he left Carna. “But,” he says, “I’ll tell you the truth, I never got a song out of a book. It’s all picked up on my way along.”

He says the first time he ever sang was at the Feis Ceoil in 1939. “I never opened my mouth before that. Even as a child I was never asked to sing. But at the Feis, somebody told me to go and sing a song. The first and second prize winners were to go to the Oireachtas in Dublin that year, the great gathering of people from every county, Gaelic-speaking. Well, I won that competition, and I went to the Oireachtas, and I’ve been at the Oireachtas every year since 1946.”

Whether he is singing in Irish or English, Heaney is a remarkably discreet singer, not given to dramatic or comic effect, with an uneventful surface to his songs, but a world of secrets underneath. Outside a few settlements in his native West, it would be hard to find his equal.

THE ROCKS OF BAWN: In 1652, Oliver Cromwell ‘subdued’ Ireland, a process that often recurred in history before and since. Many Catholic landholders were dispossessed and forced to take their families and belongings beyond the Shannon, to the hard country of Connaught. While English and Scottish Protestant newcomers settled on the lush vacated farms, the dispossessed Irish hacked out a thin living among the ‘rocks, bogs, salt water and seaweed’ of the barren west coast. In the ensuing centuries, to many a farmhand even the British Army offered better prospects than the stony plough-defying soil of Mayo, Galway and Clare. The lament of the Connaught ploughman has become one of the most popular of all Irish folk songs, seemingly within the last few years. The older folk music collections of Petrie and P. W. Joyce do not include *The Rocks of Bawn*, and even O Lochlainn’s *Irish Street Ballads* (1939), though it presents the words, does not attach to them the hexatonic tune that has now become so familiar.

ONE MORNING IN JUNE: It’s usually said that, after withstanding many assaults, the old Gaelic civilization was finally brought down in ruins by the Cromwellian Settlement. But the English language had been establishing itself in Ireland many years before that, and by the eighteenth century English-language songs were strongly asserting their popularity, first in the towns, later in the countryside. However, ‘islands’ of

TSDL091

Gaelic song remained, chiefly in the west, and here and there an intermediate kind of song flourished, with alternate lines of English and Irish poetry, notably in the Deisi territory of Waterford, where the present piece comes from.

CASADH AN t-SUGAIN *The Twisting of the Rope*: A favourite song wherever Gaelic is spoken. The story concerns a travelling musician who lodges in a farm house and is much taken by the farmer's pretty daughter. The old mother determines to get rid of the presumptuous traveller and enlists his help in twisting a straw rope. She places herself so that, as he twists, the traveller will back away from her and go through the cottage door. As soon as he is through the door, she slams it in his face. The story formed the subject of the first Gaelic play performed in Dublin, written by Douglas Hyde. Tom Moore used a version of the tune for his song, *How dear to me the hour when daylight dies*.

THE WIFE OF THE BOLD TENANT FARMER: In the late 1870s, Irish tenant farmers found themselves caught between bad harvests at home and a fall in grain prices abroad. Their security of tenure depended on prompt payment of rents, and when they had no money, eviction notices fell on the Irish countryside like snowflakes. To protect the tenant farmers, Michael Davitt, with Parnell's help, formed

the Land League in 1879, and the Land War began, with riots at evictions, assaults on land-grabbers, and the development of the technique of boycott against rackrent landlords. (The very word 'boycott' comes from this time. Captain Boycott was estate agent for Lord Erne. When he served ejection notices on his tenants, the Land League declared him under a ban. His domestic and farm-hands left him, shopkeepers refused to serve him, his mail had to be delivered by the police.) In 1882, Parnell and the League were victorious. The affair belongs to the history books, but this, the liveliest of the Land League ballads, still survives as living testimony of rowdy times in the past. The ballad received a new lease of life some twenty five years ago, when the old country entertainer, John Griffin, successfully recorded it on a Regal Zonophone record that is still cherished in many an Irish parlour. Subsequent versions nearly all derive from Griffin, as does this one. The Irish expression at the end of the song: *Agus fágaimid siúd mar atá sé*, may be rendered as: 'And the less said, the better'

THE TREES THEY GROW TALL: The ballad first came to notice in Scotland, being printed in Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* in 1792 and, in different form, in Maidment's *North Countrie Garland* (1824). Later it turned out to be also extremely common among English country singers, to tunes distinct from the

TSDL091

Scottish ones. Fairly recently, a number of Irish versions have come to light from areas as separated as Tipperary and Newry, Co. Down. Heaney's text is close to the Newry one, but his melody is different, being one of those common in Scotland. Some commentators have tried to establish that the ballad relates to a real happening, the marriage of the juvenile Lord Craigton to a gentlewoman several years his senior, in 1631. The grounds for this theory are slender. In Fletcher's play, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1634), the gaoler's daughter sings a snatch of the ballad.

PEIGIN IS PEADAR: Several long Gaelic songs have come into being as versified forms of prose folk tales. The present song is one of these. It tells of a poor man Peadar, six months married, whose wife tells him she is expecting a child and he must earn money for it. He hires himself to a farmer some distance away for seven years, and again seven years, and seven years more. Finally, he leaves the farmer's service to return to his wife. The farmer persuades him to accept these words of advice in lieu of his wages: 'Never take a short cut, whatever the road'; 'Never sleep in the house of an old man married to a young wife,' and 'Never do at night what you may regret in the morning.' The farmer's wife gives him a cake, enjoining him not to cut it till he reaches home. On the first night he is tempted to take a short cut,

but turns back. Later he discovers that the short road is a haunt of robbers. On the second night he is invited to stay in the house of an old man with a young wife, but instead he sleeps in the barn. He sees the woman murder her husband, and knows he would have been a victim too. On the third night he reaches home, to find his wife in bed with a bearded young man. He is about to kill the young man with the hatchet, but remembering the farmer's advice, he stays his hand. The wife explains that this is his own son, the baby she was carrying, now a grown man of twenty-one. Peadar cuts his cake and finds therein his twenty-one years' wages. The extract sung by Joe Heaney includes the husband's return home and his conversation with his wife about the son he had almost killed.

CUNNLA: Ireland is notorious for stern censorship and prudery. Nevertheless, the Connemara countryside is not without its unbuttoned songs. *Cunnla* is one of the favourite light dance-type songs of Western Galway. There are various versions, some saucier than others. The usual run of the song is: Who's down there tapping at my window? It's myself, says Cunnla. O Cunnla, my love, don't come any nearer. It's proper I should, says Cunnla. Who's down there at my bed foot? It's myself, says Cunnla. O Cunnla, my love, don't come any nearer. It's proper I should, says Cunnla. Who's that drawing the blanket

TSDL091

off me? It's myself, says Cunnla. Oh Cunnla, my love, don't come any nearer. It's proper I should, says Cunnla. Etc., etc. A version of the tune (deprived of its words) appears in *The Complete Petrie Collection* which, surprisingly enough, establishes the melody as a distant relative of *Greensleeves*.

CAOINEADH NA TRI MHUIRE *The Lament of the Three Marys*. Ireland is a land without hymns or carols (in the Irish language, that is). The reason is, because under the Penal Laws that came into force from 1692 onwards, at a time when Irish was still the main language of the nation, corporate acts of worship were forbidden, and the Catholic Church turned into an underground organization. Nevertheless, Gaelic-speaking authors made fine sacred songs, and poor country folk kept alive the impressive religious folk ballads, many of them of great antiquity. Some of these songs owe their survival to the fact that the singers believed that in performing them they were certain of a special welcome in Paradise. One such song is *The Lament of the Three Marys*, a variant of the famous *Caoine na Maighdine*. As Joe Heaney sings it, Mary is looking for her Son on Good Friday, and Peter points Him out as He bears the Cross. 'Is that the son I carried nine months?' she says. 'Son, your mouth and nose is bleeding.' The Jews lifted her high on their shoulders and threw her down on the

stones of the road. They raised Jesus on the cross, and He spoke to Mary: 'Mother, don't be sorrowful. The woman who is to cry for me has yet to be born.' But the three Marys (the Virgin, Mary of Cleophas and Mary Magdalene) wept at the foot of the cross.

AN TIGHEARNA RANDAL *Lord Randal*. This widely known ballad may have begun its life in Italy, for part of it is quoted on a broadside leaflet printed in Verona in 1629, and many versions are still to be found in Italy. It doesn't seem to have appeared in England before the end of the eighteenth century, but since then it has shown itself in many different forms, as a folk ballad, a game song, a lullaby and a city street rhyme. It is possible that the name of Randal appears more or less accidentally, as a left-over from a medieval ballad about a popular (thirteenth century?) hero, Randal, Earl of Chester, whose 'rhyme' is mentioned in *Piers Plowman* alongside that of 'Robinhode'. It seems to have come to Ireland as an English language song, and only later been translated into Gaelic. Many sets of Lord Randal have been reported from Ireland since Francis J. Child published a version obtained from a girl in Kerry in 1868. The tune is a grand ornate version of the familiar melody sometimes called *Dives and Lazarus*, or *The Star of the County Down*.

TSDL091

BEAN AN LEANNA *The Woman with the Beer*. The Irish are noted as a poetical and affectionate people, and since the beginning of the eighteenth century much of their affection and poetry has been lavished on drink, whether on Spanish wine, or the mountain dew called whiskey, or the poor folk's head buzzing ale called *lionn Marta* or March beer. The Spirit of Drink was envisaged in some songs as a dark, slender boy, who followed the singer all over Ireland across valley and hill, and once attached, would never leave him. In the present song, a man arrives at a woman's house and demands ale. He tells her how drink has brought him down, so that the shoes are worn off his feet, and still he praises the faithfulness of the *Buachaill caol dubh*, the 'dark slender boy'

JOHN MITCHEL: John Mitchel (1815 – 1875) was the son of a Protestant minister of Co. Derry. He was a bold fighter against landlordism and British rule who, in his newspaper, *the United Irishman*, used to give weekly lessons in street fighting. On the eve of the Irish rising of 1848, Mitchel was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation. The ballad was presumably composed then or shortly after. Heaney sings it to the same melody as *The Rocks of Bawn*.

A.L.Lloyd

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TSDL091

fine fellow; *lingel*, shoemakers thread; *mumpit wi' mirds*, lulled with flattery; *blads*, large portions; *flyting*, scolding.

MACLEAN'S WELCOME

This song of greeting sets forth in flowery terms the Highland delights prepared for Prince Charles Edward Stuart's coming by a clan chieftain.

In spite of the dubious part played by a Maclean prior to the rising of 1715, the Clan Maclean regiment fought bravely in the front line at the disastrous Battle of Culloden and sustained grievous losses.

WILL YE NO COME BACK AGAIN?

This is by far the most popular Jacobite song sung in Scotland today. It is used as a parting song for all occasions.

merl, nightingale; *lav'rock*, lark.

Recording by Bill Leader

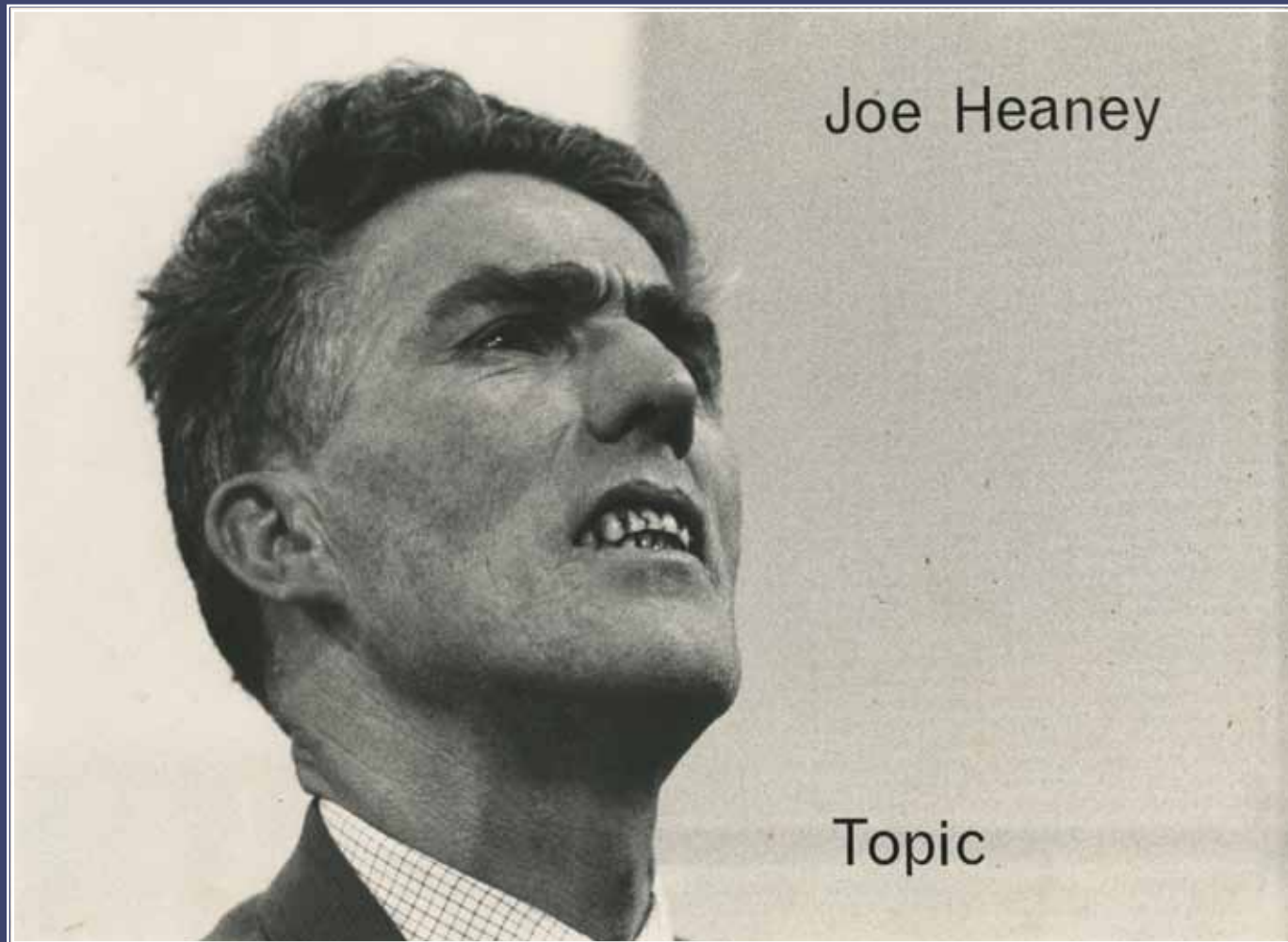
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TSDL091

Irish
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