

# A Wild Bees' Nest

Paddy Tunney

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- 1 The Rollicking Boys Around Tandaragee
- 2 The Colleen Rue
- 3 The Flower of Sweet Strabane
- 4 The Waterford Boys
- 5 Easter Snow
- 6 I Once Had a True Love
- 7 Sheela Nee Eyre
- 8 When a Man's in Love
- 9 The Banks of Dunmore
- 10 Bonny Tavern Green
- 11 Castlehyde

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TOPIC

## A Wild Bees' Nest

Irish Traditional Ballads

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# Paddy Tunney



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Paddy Tunney is a walking anthology of folk-song. He comes from the land around Lower Lough Eire where County Fermanagh borders on Donegal, and in his home, on a hill above the Lough, any lover of Irish manners and traditions could be entertained royally for weeks on end. His mother, Brigid Tunney, one of Ireland's greatest folksingers, is the main source of his repertoire, but before he left home at all, Paddy had added to his stock all that was to be gathered from his neighbours for miles around.

His first great break from home came when he was required to spend some years in H.M. Prison, Belfast, for 'subversive activities'. He used this leisure time for the study of Ireland's history and language. He has since made a name for himself as poet, journalist and broadcaster, as Ireland's champion lilter, an expert dancer and one of Ireland's most entertaining talkers. As he says himself, he is 'Irish to the marrow, a dedicated hater of pop and cant and shamrockery, a lover of old ways and rare songs and raving poetry.'

It you are a student of folk culture you should treat this disc of Paddy Tunney's songs as a lover of poetry treats an Anthology of Verse. By all means, play and replay the songs that please you most but try to find out why the other ones have been recorded. Paddy has always a good reason for singing what he sings.

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### THE ROLLICKING BOYS AROUND TANDARAGEE

Writing in 1586, the Elizabethan critic William Webbe says about songs of this type: 'neither is there any time or stroke which may be sung or played on instruments which has not some poetical ditties framed according to the numbers thereof, some to *Trenchmore*, to *Galliards*, to *Pavines*, to *Jigs* to *Brawls*, to all manner of tunes which every fiddler knows better than myself.' These fiddle-tunes were used in Ireland for many types of song, but most remarkably for the expression of local pride. The index to O'Neill's *Dance Music of Ireland* abounds in tunes celebrating *The Boys of Ballinfad*, of *Coonamore of Ballysodare* and *Cappoquin* and *Ballinchalla* and *Portaferry* and other places, north, south, east and west. It was almost inevitable that a jolly family like the Tunneys should have a few good jig-songs of this type on their tongues. The song Paddy sings here contains, among other less worthy items, references to the literary and political idols of nineteenth century Ireland. The Tandaragee referred to in the song is in the Irishowen Peninsula of Donegal.

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### THE COLLEEN RUE (AN CAILIN RUA) THE RED-HAIRED GIRL

For a long time at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Irish boys and girls were taught, illegally, by travelling schoolmasters. These men carried on as best they could, in an unfamiliar language, the traditions of the native schools of classical learning. The songs they made abound in Gaelic assonances and are full of words of learned length and thundering sound'. They were eagerly listened to and proudly transmitted to subsequent generations by their hearers, who had an inherited reverence for *an man leinn*, the man of learning -

'And still they gazed and still the wonder grew,  
How one small head could carry all he knew.'

Joyce in his *'Irish Folk Music and Song'* has an interesting article on these Hedge-schoolmasters and their compositions. He prints *The Colleen Rue* to a tune entirely different to that sung here by Paddy. Paddy found the tune in his native Fermanagh but it is really a version of the famous Cork tune *The Groves of Blarney*. If you are interested in rhythmical changes you should compare Paddy's tune with *The Last Rose of Summer* which also sprung in a tortured way from *The Groves of Blarney*.

### THE FLOWER OF SWEET STRABANE

There is one idea that underlies song after song in Ulster - the idea that the poets own lovely locality has produced the fairest woman in all Ireland. Sometimes she is *The Rose of Moneymore*, sometimes *The Maid of Ballydoo* or *The Flower of Magherally*, Paddy sings of lovely Martha whose coldness sends a lovelorn poet away from Sweet Strabane to exile in America. The tune is Re Mode, pentatonic.

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### THE WATERFORD BOYS

This song would be called a 'comic' by the older generation of country singers. The social conditions which gave rise to it, and others of its kind, have now passed away, and it is doubtful if our younger singers would now find it even mildly funny. In words and music it is obviously related to the jig-song on the first track. It is more than likely that it originated during the last century among Irish migrant labourers in Britain.

### EASTER SNOW

This beautiful song is properly called *Estersnowe*, which is the name of a little townland on the banks of the Shannon in County Roscommon. The melody is known in many variants to singers and instrumentalists all over the country. In County Antrim (*Sam Henry Collection Vol.1 No.66.*) It is called Wester Snow.

It is a love song of the *pastourelle* type, presented in lines that are essentially Gaelic in their assonantal construction and double rhymes:

At twilight in the morning, as I roved out *upon the dew*  
With my morning cloak around me, intending all my *flocks to view*  
I spied a pretty fair maid, she was a charming *beauty bright*  
And I took her for Diana, or the evening star that *rules the night*

An instrumental version of the tune is in *Stanford-Petrie* (No. 1123) with two Gaelic titles *Sneahta Casga* (a literal translation of Easter Snow) and *Disear Nuadham* which is the original Gaelic name of the district now called Estersnowe (Joyce: *Irish Names of Places*) Paddy got both words and music from his mother.

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### I ONCE HAD A TRUE LOVE

This song should be immediately recognisable as the matrix of Padraic Colum's well-known *She Moved Thro' the Fair*. Paddy Tunney collected both words and music from Barney McGarvey of Termon, Donegal, in September 1960. I myself heard a version of it in 1954 from Robert Cinnamon on the shores of Lough Neagh in County Antrim. Robert's first verse ran -

'I'm in deep love with my love,  
What will I do?  
For the more that I loved her  
The prouder she grew;  
The more that I loved her  
I found no relief  
As she went thro' the fair  
With her gear and her geese.'

Padraic Colum's sophisticated adaptation of this song has been arranged by Herbert Hughes in *Irish Country Songs*. Those interested in folk poetry will recognise the touch of the 'improver' in Colum's lines:

'And then she went homeward, with one star awake,  
As the swan in the evening moves over the lake.'

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### SHEELA NEE EYRE (SILE NI GHAIHERE)

In form and expression this schoolmaster's song is an imitation of the Gaelic *Aisling* or Vision Poem. In the Gaelic Vision Poems of the eighteenth century the poet always tells how in some rural setting, he unexpectedly meets a maiden of heavenly beauty. He asks her who she can possibly be and identifies her with the most famous beauties of classical antiquity, but she reveals herself as Ireland - under some allegorical name like *Roisin Dubh* or *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. In this song her name is given as *Sile Ni Ghaidhre*. The poet promises under pain of direst classical punishments that he will devote his life and wealth to her service. A tune for this song is set in Co. Derry is given in *Stanford-Petrie* (1548). Paddy got his tune (Doh Mode, pentatonic) from an old neighbour, William Monaghan, of Garveny, Co. Fermanagh.

### WHEN A MAN'S IN LOVE

This is a very good example of the night visit type of folksong. The form dates back in history to the days of the Troubadours in Provence. Two young people meet secretly at night because the girl's parents disapprove of their love for each other. The two eventually free themselves from 'courtship's cares' by eloping to Far Columbia's shore. The tune is in the Soh Mode. (See also *Sam Henry Collection Vol.1 No.211*) A version of the tune is printed also in *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*.

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### THE BANKS OF DUNMORE

Paddy would describe this as a religious song. It tells of the love of a wealthy young protestant Ulsterman for a poor Irish Catholic girl. The two come to an agreement about religious matters after a rather naive exchange of views. The song must be understood in relation to the social background of Ulster life since 1798. It is the folk-expression of the Catholic faith of the ordinary people against the principles of the Reformation held by their political masters. The tune is interesting as being the complete version of the half-tune printed in Herbert Hughes' *Irish Country Songs* as *The Lover's Curse*. The words are from Donegal where there are at least five townlands called Dunmore.

### BONNY TAVERN GREEN

This lovely song is in the spirit of the medieval songs of courtly love, which persisted in Europe throughout Elizabethan times and finally became part of the folk song deposit of Britain and Ireland. Songs like *I Attempt from Love's Sickness to Fly* have their folk counterparts in songs like *Tavern Green*

'O Love it is a killing thing,  
Have you ever felt the pain?'

Paddy thinks this song has been brought over by Irish labourers to Donegal from Scotland. Certainly some of its verses are well-known in Scots folksong. The tune is *Me Mode*, Hexatonic.

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### CASTLEHYDE

This song is from the Fermoy district in County Cork. The words are the work of a poet steeped in Gaelic tradition. They are said to have been composed in honour of a certain Mr. Hyde, one of the landed gentry who had built himself a large Castle near Fermoy. The poet, hoping for patronage, praised the beauties of Hyde's Estate, but he was turned away unrewarded.

His chagrin at this ill-mannered treatment is effectively expressed in the last line of the song - a line naturally not included in the first draft!

Students of Gaelic metrics will be interested in the recurring assonances in the verse:

'The grand improvements they would *amuse* you,  
The *trees* are *drooping* with fruit all *kind*  
The *bees* *perfuming* the *fields* with *music*  
Which *yields* more *beauty* to Castlehyde.'

The air, of which Paddy gave a typically Tunney version, is to be found in Joyce's *Old Irish Folk Music and Song*.

A Wild  
Bees' Nest

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