

# Ulster Ballad Singer Mrs. Sarah Makem

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A thriving little market town full of tailors and nailers and linen workers - that was Keady, Co. Armagh, Ireland, in the year 1900 when Sarah Makem was born there. Her mother, who worked at the linen, as all her family did later, was one of the Singing Greenes of Keady, a family famous for its music for generations. Her father's name was Tommy Boyle. He was a plumber and tinsmith and was a quiet hard-working man who spent his spare time making hunting horns and bird cages, free of charge, for any of the boys around the town who needed them. Sarah learned most of her songs from her mother and her reasons for learning them are best told in her own words:

"When I was young we used to have dances in the street to the music of a mouth organ, or if the mouth organ wasn't available then someone had to lilt. Well, at these street dances anyone was likely to be asked for a song, so I always tried to have one or two ready and I kept learning as many as I could from my mother singing around the house. Aye, and a good few away out in Derrynoose." It was in Derrynoose among 'the Long Hills of Keady' (that's a reel tune) that Sarah met Peter Makem, whom she later married. Peter was a scutcher (flax-beater) at the time and a great man for the music of the fiddle. They had five children, Jack, Peggy, Mona, Nancy and Tommy. "When the children were growing up" says Mrs. Makem "they all learned songs from my singing, just as I learned them from my own mother. Our kitchen was full of music. What with some of them learning the fiddle and bag-pipes and drums and tin-whistles and being involved in Céili bands the place was always jumping. Nowadays it hasn't changed much, for Peter and I have twenty-seven grandchildren."

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It is now some sixteen or seventeen years since I first met Mrs. Makem. Since then, her voice has been heard all over the English-speaking world on Radio Programmes and on gramophone records, in lecture halls and on College Campuses, but never until now have we had a complete disc of her singing alone. It is as representative as possible of the varied repertoire that Sarah Makem has made her very own.

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**Farewell My Love. Remember Me.**

Emigration songs are common enough in Ireland, but too many of them are written to a stereotyped nostalgic pattern, full of references to beloved scenery and beautiful maidens left lamenting. This fragment recorded by Mrs Makem has all the simplicity of diction that comes from a full heart, and only in the last line do we discover that the emigrant is setting out from Ireland.

Sarah's melody is used quite often for songs of farewell in much the same way as the air "The Pretty Lasses of Loughrea" was used all over the country for lamentations or execution songs, (see Joyce's *Old Irish Folk Music and Song*, pp 219-211). The two best-known printed versions of Sarah's air are "Fare you well, sweet Cootehill Town" (Joyce, *O.I.F.M.S.*, p 192) and "The Parting Glass" (*Irish Street Ballads*, p 69). But until such time as a system of notation is invented to record the true intervals of a folksinger's interpretation, Sarah Makem's version of this air must remain for study on disc or tape.

**The Banks of Red Roses.**

In contrast to the light and airy theme of "The Banks of Red Roses" (*Irish Street Ballads*, No. 8), Mrs. Makem's song is a dark story of seduction and premeditated murder, on the lines of "The Cruel Ship Carpenter", with which it should be compared. (*English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians*, Vol. 1., pp 317-327). See also *E.F.S. Journal* Vol. II., p 254. The tune is Doh Mode Hexatonic.

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**It was in the Month of January.**

This is Sarah Makem's greatest contribution to the annals of folksong. Here she treats with great sincerity of feeling one of the oldest themes in traditional song - the story of a young girl betrayed and abandoned by her wealthy lover and cast by cruel parents into the snow. It concludes with the usual warning: (See Joyce, *O.I.F.M.S.* p 210):

"Come all you pretty fair maids,  
a warning take by me,  
And never try to build your nest  
on top of a high tree,  
For the leaves they will all wither,  
and the branches all decay,  
And the beauties of a false young man,  
will all soon fade away".

Herbert Hughes prints a fragmentary version of this song, called "The Fanaid Grove", in *Irish Country Songs*, Vol. I. I know of no other folk song composed to the same melody - a beautiful example of a modified Soh Mode.

**Robert Burns and His Highland Mary.**

The songs of Robert Burns never came into the general repertoire of folksingers in Ireland or in Scotland. But strangely enough the sentimental nineteenth century "ballad" here sung by Mrs Makem had a wide distribution in Britain and America. It may well be that the love-history of Robbie himself had more appeal for ordinary people than any of his adapted folk songs.

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### **The Factory Girl**

In this song the poetry of eighteenth century Gaelic Ireland joins hands with the love songs of the industrial revolution. The verse has faint reminiscences of the stereotyped Gaelic "Aisling" (vision poetry) - the poet, as he walks out in the early morning, sees a maiden "more fairer than Venus", with lily-white skin and rose-red cheeks, a Goddess in form and feature But here the Goddess is on her way to a factory, a poor girl not ashamed of her poverty nor afraid to resist the advances of a young gallant. To me the factory bell in this song seems to toll the knell of the "maypole" type of folk song. The air in the Soh Mode is particularly attractive and is related to "The Unspoken Farewell" (*Gems of Melody*, Pt. 1., Hardebeck).

### **The Jolly Thresher**

This quiet little song, though English in origin, is sung here to a variant of "The Enniskillen Dragoon". In the conjunction of words and tune, it illustrates one salient fact about Sarah Makem's repertoire and, indeed, about the folk singing of North-East Ulster. In this part of Ireland, our tradition is inextricably mixed. Three streams of traditional music and verse converge - the native Irish, the English and the Scots, and this convergence is most marked in small market towns like Keady, whose rural character was gradually modified during the nineteenth century by the introduction of manufacturing industry. Sarah Makem's selection of songs for this disc is in itself a musical history of the process - and surely history has never been taught so beautifully.

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### **Caroline and Her Young Sailor Bold.**

Folksingers all over the world have a special affection for songs that tell how love breaks down the barriers between rich and poor. Sarah Makem's song tells of a rich nobleman's daughter who elopes with a poor sailor, even though she knows that "In sailors there's no great dependence For they leave their true lovers behind." Caroline serves for three and a half years on the same ship as her young sailor, and returns to gain her father's permission to marry. Sarah Makem's song should be compared with Colm O Lochlainn's broadsheet version (*More Irish Street Ballads*, No. 39., Dublin, 1965). The comparison will show the interesting interweaving of verses, the omission and addition of lines, the inversion of stanzas, and general reshaping of songs that always occurs in transmission by oral tradition.

### **The Wind that Shakes the Barley.**

Politically-inspired songs may often be loudly called for in singing-pubs but at the fireside they are very seldom heard. Consequently very few patriotic songs have found their way into the repertoires of Irish folksingers. In Gaelic-speaking Ireland they are particularly rare. Only a strong love story associated with the patriotic or 'rebellious' sentiment will ensure for a song a permanent place in folk memory. "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" is just such a song. The words were written by Robert Dwyer Joyce, historian and poet, brother of P. W. Joyce the famous Irish folksong collector. They have been published to another air in "The Irish National Songbook" by Alfred Perceval Graves. In metre and tune the present version is founded on "The Maid that Sold Her Barley", a long-lived song already in print in 1700, in Vol. II of *Wit and Mirth, or Pills to Purge Melancholy*.

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### **I Courted a Wee Girl.**

This delightful little song, with a most interesting tune, tells the sad story of a lover rejected for “courting too slow”. It is perhaps better known as “The Lambs on the Green Hills” (*Irish Street Ballads*, O Lochlainn, Dublin, 1939). Mrs Makem’s first verse is a better introduction to the theme than Colm O Lochlainn’s first verse which, although it supplies his title, seems to be completely unrelated to the story of the song. Here are the verses in question:

O LOCHLAINN

The lambs on the green hills they sport and they play,  
And many strawberries grow round the salt sea  
And many strawberries grow round the salt sea  
And many’s the ship sails the ocean.

MRS MAKEM

I courted a wee girl for many’s along day  
And I slighted all others that came in my way  
And well she rewarded me to the last day  
For she’s gone to get wed to another.

There seems to be a good case for the general adaptation of Mrs. Makem’s title. The air sung here is the traditional one associated in Donegal with “Caitlin Triall”, first published in an instrumental version by Bunting in his 1840 edition of *Ancient Music of Ireland*. It is of particular interest to students of folk song that the four-line musical verse has acquired a fifth line in the process of oral transmission - most probably to supply a chorus for the singer’s audience.

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### **A Servant Maid in Her Father’s Garden.**

English folk song enthusiasts probably know this song as “The Young and Single Sailor” (*Journal of The English Folk Song Society*, Vol. VI, p 272), but they will be less familiar with the lovely air which comes from the province of Connacht, and is known all over Gaelic-speaking Ireland. Sarah Makem’s song contains verses always associated with “The Bleacher Lassie of Kelvin Haugh”, a favourite Scots song on the same theme, but it should also be compared with “A Lady Fair” (*Irish Street Ballads, Dublin, 1939*), where a version of the air is given in its full sixteen-bar form. The air is in the Re Mode.

### **Barbara Allen.**

Everyone knows the tragic story of young Jemmy Grove and Heard-Hearted Barbara Allen. One look through the list of texts and tunes given in Cecil Sharp’s *English Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians* will show its widespread popularity. It is recorded in *Shropshire Folklore* (p 543), *Folksongs of the Upper Thames* (p 204), *Folksongs from Somerset* (No. 22) and in Gavin Greig’s *Last Leaves* (No. 32), in Mackenzie’s *Ballads and Sea Songs of Nova Scotia* (No. 9), in *British Ballads from Maine*, in *Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, and in *Folksongs of the Kentucky Mountains*, and elsewhere. In all, more than 200 variants of the ballad are known from printed sources and recordings. This version from Keady, Co. Armagh is as good as any I have heard, and it differs from all of them in one remarkable respect. Most versions place the tragedy

“in the merry month of May  
when the green buds they were swelling”,

but Sarah’s song has a more sombre and appropriate timing  
“Michael’s Mass (Michaelmas) day being in the year  
When the green leaves they were falling,  
When young Jemmy Grove from the North Countrie  
Fell in love with Barbara Allen.”

The melody is in the Re Mode.



Ulster  
Ballad  
Singer  

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