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Co. ANTRIM

# THE IRISH COUNTRY FOUR

## Songs, Ballads and Instrumental Tunes from Ulster



- 1 **Reels: Roaring Mary** and **The old torn petticoat** played by the group (union pipes, whistle, guitar and bones)
- 2 **The cotton-mill song** sung by Jess Harpur (w. guitar) and chorus
- 3 **The Granemore hare** sung by Jess Harpur, acc. Brian Bailie (flute) and Valerie Bailie (guitar)
- 4 **The boys of Mullaghbawn** sung by the group (unaccompanied)
- 5 **Pulling the lint** sung by Trevor Stewart (unaccompanied)
- 6 **Air: The melodious little fort of Bruff** played by Brian Bailie (whistle)
- 7 **General Munro** sung by Jess Harpur and Valerie Bailie, with Brian Bailie (flute)
- 8 **The load of kale plants** sung by Trevor Stewart, with Brian Bailie (flute)
- 9 **O'Meally's hornpipe** played by the group (union pipes, whistle and guitar)
- 10 **Jigs: Kitty's bonnet** and **The flax-dresser** played by the group (union pipes, whistle, flute, bodhran)
- 11 **The doffing mistress** sung by Valerie Bailie, Jess Harpur, Trevor Stewart (w. guitar and mandoline)
- 12 **The maid of Ballydoo** sung by Jess Harpur (w. guitar) and chorus
- 13 **Air: Blind Mary** played by Trevor Stewart (union pipes)
- 14 **Magherafelt hiring fair** sung by Valerie Bailie and Trevor Stewart (w. guitar)
- 15 **The Heights of Alma** sung by Trevor Stewart and Jess Harpur (unaccompanied)
- 16 **P for Paddy** sung by Trevor Stewart, acc. Brian Bailie (flute) and chorus
- 17 **Reels: Martin Mulhaire's no. 1, Kitty goes a-milking** and **Pigeon on the gate** played by the group (whistle, union pipes, bodhran and bones)

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This talented group of youngsters from Northern Ireland have won a keenly appreciative following on their relatively sparse appearances in folk song clubs in London and elsewhere in England. What particularly attracts is their versatility, the capacity they have to convey their own enjoyment of the music without having to fall back on show biz falsity or the clowning that some Irish groups feel is demanded, and the fine freshness of their repertory, much of it comprising songs from the city streets and the textile mills of Belfast, that still retain the graces of latterday country song.

**Brian Bailie** is leader of the group, singer, flute-player, and outstanding performer on the whistle. He is a collector of songs and airs, mostly in Co. Down.

**Valerie Bailie**, Brian's wife, has the sweet clear voice of many traditional singers, notably in the Irish North-east (the notion that the true folk song voice is nasalised and tending to shrillness is rubbish; traditional singers produce their voices in innumerable ways). Valerie, born and brought up in Donegal but best at home in Co. Down, has a lively hand for guitar and whistle, also for the bones.

**Leslie ('Jess') Harpur** was born and lived in Sligo until he moved to Belfast a few years before joining the group. His best interest is singing, but he is also an instrumentalist on guitar, mandoline and bodhran.

**Trevor Stewart** comes from Antrim, and his singing style and song-repertory show it. Besides being a serviceable singer, his chief contribution to the group is as a player of the bellows-blown union pipes. He is a pupil of the Belfast piper Frank McFadden, who made the set of pipes he plays. He too is a collector of songs and instrumental tunes, mostly in Antrim and Derry.

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### **Reels: Roaring Mary and The old torn petticoat**

Titles of Irish dance tunes seldom mean much. Some have said that *Roaring Mary* is a musical commentary on a quarrelsome old woman, with its growling opening and strident top notes. Others have pointed out that the original title of this reel was *Forlorn Mary*, so the argument hardly holds. A good tune, whichever.

### **The cotton-mill song**

A nineteenth century song, urban in its setting of the Springfield Road, Belfast, but rural in its melody and the run of the verse. Even today the countryside is close to the rawboned city of Belfast; it was even more so a hundred years ago when thousands of villagers were flocking into the mills and settling in the slums. Small wonder so many characteristic Ulster songs are peasant in form, proletarian in content. The song is seldom printed, often heard. The great McPeake family sing it.

### **The Granemore hare**

The song was written by Owen McMahon of Tassagh, Co. Armagh, a great place for hunting the hare. The poet W. R. Rodgers, himself an Armagh man, says: 'In our split community hare-hunting was the only social activity in which both Catholic and Protestant participated. Why? Because it was older than either faith. Its roots ran back to prehistoric times.' Arrian of Nicomedia, eighteen centuries ago, wrote: 'There would never have been a hare coursed in Greece had not the first hound been brought from Ireland.' Beagle hound, no doubt. Hares are chased on foot, with beagles, according to strict ritual, and with no pink-coated snobbery. A common folks' sport, giving rise to common folks' songs, and all the better for it.

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### **The boys of Mullaghbawn**

Mullaghbawn is a mountain parish in the south of Co. Armagh, not far from Slieve Gullion. In the past its young men were famous for sportiveness and sedition, and the song - probably from the troubled times of 1798 or soon after, treats of a number of local youths charged with illegal 'combination' and sentenced to be transported, to such general distress that even the small birds lament that they'll have no more sporting engagements with the Mullaghbawn lads. P. W. Joyce prints the song in his *Old Irish Folk Music*, in a version obtained by a schoolteacher in nearby Co. Monaghan.

### **The pulling of the lint**

We owe this excellent industrial piece to the splendid and neglected hunter of North of Ireland song, Sam Henry, who for several years contributed a column, 'Songs of the People', to a Coleraine newspaper, *The Northern Constitution* (our song is No. 487 in this collection). Henry got the song in the Bushmills district from John Elliott, a singer and fiddler still remembered by Trevor Stewart's father. 'Kemp' (a word of Scandinavian origin) means to compete; pullers, in teams of two, used to race each other up the rows of lint.

### **The melodious little fort of Bruff**

*Binn lissin aerach a Bhrogha* is the not easily translatable Irish title of this grand air. Well, one of the titles. Like many tunes of the sort, it has had several sets of words attached to it. Patrick Weston Joyce knew it as *Nancy the Pride of the West*, whereas Petrie collected it under the name of *Nancy the Pride of the East*. It is also one of several tunes that have carried the words of the well-known *For Ireland I'd not tell her name*. Bruff is in Co. Limerick, on the road to Mallow.

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### **General Munro**

Henry Munro was a linen-draper of Lisburn who, at the time of the Irish rising of 1798, became the leader of the rebel forces in Co. Down. Under him, the rebels fought two hard and brave engagements before they were defeated at Ballynahinch on June 14. All the partisan leaders were hanged, Munro outside his own shop door.

### **The load of kale plants**

The narrative run of this song doesn't hide the fact that it derives from a fiddle tune, the same jig air to which the well-known *Rollicking Boys around Tandaragee* (a Paddy Tunney favourite) is set. Kale is, of course, a kind of cabbage, sometimes called borecole, not so often grown nowadays.

### **O'Meally's hornpipe**

One of the great twentieth century pipers of Northern Ireland was R. L. O'Meally, Dublin born but Ulster by adoption. Besides being a player and composer he was also a pipe-maker, and his 'flat sets' (pipes tuned a bit below concert pitch) are much sought after.

### **Jigs: Kitty's bonnet and The flax-dresser**

The Irish Country Four have *Kitty's Bonnet* from the piper and pipe-maker Frank McFadden, who taught Trevor Stewart and made his pipes. The well-known Flax-dresser jig is No. 835 in Francis O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*, where it is credited to the Co. Down fiddler, whistler and singer James O'Neill, who later emigrated to Chicago and became a police sergeant (he also became Police Superintendent Francis O'Neill's chief musical aide).

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### **The doffing mistress**

The national anthem of the Belfast textile mills. It's said that the line "she hangs her coat on the highest pin" is wishful thinking - most doffers were crook-backed from carrying heavy full bobbins from the spinning machines, and couldn't reach the highest coat-peg.

### **The maid of Ballydoo**

A song from the Four's own district, the Mourne. Ballydoo is near Hilltown, in the south of the County Down. It's another half-rural, half-industrial song from the linen industry. 'Con-doling' at a loom is Ulster for 'toiling' at it. A variant of the tune floated over the oceans to Australia where it emerged as the great shearers' anthem, *The Road to Gundagai*.

### **Pipe air: Blind Mary**

Trevor Stewart got this fine air from the Co. Fermanagh piper Sean McAloon, now living in Belfast. It is commonly thought to have begun life as a harp tune, a composition by the blind minstrel Turlogh O'Carolan (1670-1738); the evidence is not based on a rock. A version of *Blind Mary* is No. 814 in P. W. Joyce's *Old Irish Folk Music and songs*.

### **Magherafelt hiring fair**

A little one-act comedy, this duet song of the hungry widow and the appetising young labourer. Coarser versions of this song exist, particularly in the repertory of travelling people. This version is another from the collection of Sam Henry, who suggests it derives from the late eighteenth century. Magherafelt is in Co. Derry near the western shore of Lough Neagh. "Sowans (porridge made from oat-husks) and eels" establishes the area.

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### **The Heights of Alma**

Thousands of men were lost in the bloody battle of Alma, in the Crimea, in 1854. Good soldiers won the victory, terrible generals undid its effects by poor organisation and idiotic staff work. Throughout England, Scotland and in particular Ireland (many of the troops, especially the raw recruits sent out to replace the fine trained men who had unnecessarily perished, were Irish), the street ballad sellers did well with the broadsides of this song, during and after the Crimean War. It still survives in the memory of many country singers.

### **P for Paddy**

Many Irish lyrical songs use a similar prop to start the inspiration flowing. 'B for Barney', 'T for Tommy' are almost as familiar as 'P for Paddy', a song which hasn't gone very far before it reveals itself as first cousin to the well-known *Verdant Braes of Skreen*, with its motif of robbing the wild bird's nest.

### **Reels: Martin Mulhaire's No. 1, Kitty goes a-milking and Pigeon on the gate**

The Country Four learnt the first tune from Tom Hickland, formerly violinist with the Northern Ireland Youth Orchestra, later fiddler with sundry popular string bands including the 'California Brakemen'. *Pigeon on the gate*, a special favourite of oldtime fiddlers, appears as No. 648 in O'Neill's "1001 Gems". Well, one set of it; at least three different reels bear this picturesque title.

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Let's ask the Country 4 to consider making a record for us. They'd need to record about 20 items, in order to allow for a reasonable choice when it comes to editing the record.  
If they want to consult me, I'd be welcome.  
Bert.



Brian M Bailie  
10 B. Sunsevic Lodge  
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For Belfast.

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16th July 1970

Tape passed to Bert 24/7/70

Dear Sir,

enclosed is a tape recording of The Irish Country Four who are at present on their third tour in England and return to Ireland on Sunday 26th July.

The tape speed is  $3\frac{3}{4}$  ins/sec 4 track on the right track.

I would be pleased if you would listen to the tape and give me your opinion.  
I would also be pleased if you could return the tape.

Yours sincerely  
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**The Irish Country Four**  
Irish Traditional Music and Song

From left to right:—  
LESLIE HARPER, bodhran, guitar, mandoline, vocals  
BRIAN BAILEY, whistle, flute, mandoline  
VALERIE BAILEY, whistle, vocals  
TREVOR STEWART pipes, whistle, concertina, vocals