



# The May Morning Dew John Lyons

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### **The Maid on the Shore**

Patrick Joyce first printed this ballad in his *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs* (Dublin, 1909), and he boldly titled it: ‘*The Mermaid*’. There’s nothing to say that the artful heroine was anything other than human, but nonetheless there’s something uncanny in the way that she sings herself out of the delicate fix she’s in, among those licentious sailors. The song has its European ancestors, Nordic and Romance. In a French version, *Lepee liberatrice*, it’s a sailor who sings the girl asleep to facilitate the abduction. It’s been more often reported from America than from Britain, but that’s sheer chance. John Lyons got it ‘from an old tape of Eamon Butler and the Chieftains’.

### **The May Morning Dew**

A rather rare song, this one. As a rule, English and Anglo-Irish folk songs tend to be rather like short ballads, telling at least a bit of a story. True folk songs that are simply evocations of nature aren’t all that common in English, though they may be reasonably abundant in Gaelic. John Lyons got this one from Paddy Tunney, who has a great fancy for such handsome flowery pieces.

### **Morrison’s Jig / The Pipe on the Hob**

Two melodeon jigs of which the second is the more ingenious. The Chicago police chief Francis O’Neill had it from a Limerick fiddler (‘a veritable treasure’), John Carey, and he printed it as No. 705 in his *Music of Ireland*.

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### **The Tailor Bawn**

It used to be thought that a folk song had to be old before it could be ‘folk’. This one, about a couple of rollicking porter-swiggers, potato-pullers and poachers, was made by a man still living at Kilgarvan, Co. Kerry, who specialises in songs about local characters and events. It passed into the repertory of Willie Clancy, the Co. Clare piper and singer - no more with us, alas - and from Willie to John Lyons.

### **After Aughrim**

Catholic James II was backed by Louis XIV of France and the bulk of Anglo-Irish landowners. Protestant William of Orange was backed by a European Coalition and the bulk of the English merchant class. The mass of Irishmen had the choice to be robbed by an English Protestant landlord or an Irish Catholic one. They chose the latter alternative. The forces of James and William met on July 12, 1691, at Aughrim, near Ballinasloe, Co. Galway. The Irish were routed, James fled back to France, and 10,000 Irish patriots, the ‘Wild Geese’, opted for exile abroad. Some, however, stayed on to continue the fight as guerrillas, or ‘raparees’. One such was Sean O’ Dwyer, celebrated in this, the best of Irish Jacobite songs.

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### **The Boys of Barna-shraide**

In some parts of Ireland it's still the custom on St Stephen's Day (December 26) for boys and young men to disguise themselves in various fanciful ways, and to go from door to door bearing a holly-bush in which is a dead wren, or something to represent the bird. At each house they sing a luck-wish song, in hope of a small reward. That's the sense of the reference to 'hunting the wren' in this song, in which an old innocence is clouded over by the cruel events of the Anglo-Irish War of 1919-21, between the Republican forces and those of the Crown, notably the Auxiliaries ('Auxies') and the 'Black and Tans'. John Lyons says he first heard the song some twenty years ago on a radio programme called *Ballad Makers' Saturday Night*.

### **Erin's Lovely Lea**

A broadside song from the classic period of the Fenian movement. The end of the American Civil War in 1865 released a large body of Irishmen for action in their native land. A sequence of risings, arrests, executions followed, if ultimately it failed as a military conspiracy, the Fenian movement was nonetheless an inspiration to many Irish patriots. The song tells of the aftermath of the risings, with Fenians on the run, making their way to America where their comrades are eager for news about such Fenian heroes as the 'Manchester martyrs' - William Allen, Michael Larkin, Michael O' Brien - all hanged in November 1867. Eager too for evocations of the heroes of earlier struggles, Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone, Michael Dwyer 'the pride of the Wicklow Hills' and such. Nostalgia, pride and sentimentality join hands in the song.

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### **The Blackthorn / Unnamed reel**

John Lyons has no name for the second of these two reels, but he says that both of them are 'as played by the late Joe Cooley'.

### **Farmer Michael Hayes**

The period 1850-70 was one of great unrest among Irish tenant farmers. Laws passed enabling landlords speedily to evict any tenants who fell behind with rents. Dispossession was often violent, leading to reprisals in the form of terroristic attacks on landlords and agents. In places, agrarian crime took on the aspect of guerrilla warfare. Against this background, the song of Michael Hayes was made. After being evicted from his farm, the enraged Hayes murdered the landlord's agent Badel at Thurles, Co. Tipperary, and went on the run. Despite close pursuit, involving telegraph messages and mounting offers of reward, he managed to get to America, thumbing his nose to all his enemies. John Lyons long had the words of the song, and eventually he recovered the tune (a fine one) from Willie Clancy.

### **The Lambs on the Green Hills**

England knows the song under the title: *The False Bride*. This Irish version became famous after Colm O Lochlainn printed it in his valuable *Irish Street Ballads* (Dublin, 1939). O Lochlainn had learnt it from Mrs Reddin, of Dublin, in 1915. John Lyons first heard it from Tom Leach, likewise of Dublin.

### **Fiac an Madrarua**

A brief squib, in Irish, about a fox-hunt. It comes from Kerry, and consists in the main of a catalogue of the people at the hunt and the names of the dogs involved.

### Kitty's Wedding

At one time, weddings throughout these islands were accompanied by songs and instrumental music for performing at certain stages of the proceedings. Echoes of a few of these 'occasional' pieces remain in Ireland, particularly in the repertory of fiddlers. It's said that this piece was meant specially for playing when the married couple returned home from their honeymoon, and held a party. The tune is sometimes known as *The Hauling Home*, and it is still popular at weddings in Co. Clare.

### Farewell, Lovely Mary

An English song, usually called *Farewell, lovely* (or: *charming*) *Nancy*. It was a favourite situation in songs made towards the end of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth century, where the girl volunteers to dress in sailor's (or soldier's) clothes and share her sweetheart's hazards, but she's gently dissuaded. This particular song was enormously popular in its time, turning up in many parts of Ireland and the British Isles, and reprinted over and again on broadsides. John Lyons learnt it from Mrs O'Sullivan of Ennis 'when we used to have sessions on Friday nights about ten years ago in Brian Hogan's pub.'

'Ireland's greatest export is her people', it has been said, and John Lyons, like many another Irishman, has known what it is like to leave your country in the long search for employment.

A Cork man, he lived and worked for some years in England and Wales, but has now settled in Crussa, Co. Clare, barely a mile from Ralahine, which in 1831 became the first commune in Europe. He is an electrician, and he and his wife, Marion, have five children.

Most of his spare time is spent in the company of the many respected traditional singers and musicians whom he has met in the last few years, and from whom he has learnt considerable skills. Anyone who has sat in with John on sessions in back-kitchens and bars, seen how deeply he enjoys the music and singing of others, noted his willingness at any time to oblige with a tune or a song, and observed the respect with which these are received, will have seen him in the setting at which he is most at home. Yet, on a recent (too short) tour of clubs in England, he showed himself well able to handle long guest-spots with expertness, warmth and humour. At home, however, he is very concerned that as healthy a situation should exist with regard to the singing as is obviously the case with the dance music. He has been instrumental in ensuring that the songs get a good hearing at music sessions and he and Marion are seriously considering organizing a club in Ennis, Co. Clare, at which the emphasis will be on traditional singing.

It is this kind of objective concern which distinguishes John as a revival singer. But at the same time he brings all the features to bear upon his singing which the best traditional singers do upon theirs. It would be easy to talk about his skills in terms of phrasing, decoration and so on, but what really anchors him in the tradition, for me, is the strength of his interpretation. Whether he is singing 'The Tailor Bawn', 'Sean O'Dwyer a Gleanna' or 'The Green Fields of America', what is apparent is his feeling for the people and the history of Ireland.

This record will make it possible for a wider audience to hear, and without doubt, appreciate the worth of a fine singer. For someone as accomplished as John Lyons, it is the least he deserves.

*Sandra Kerr*

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