



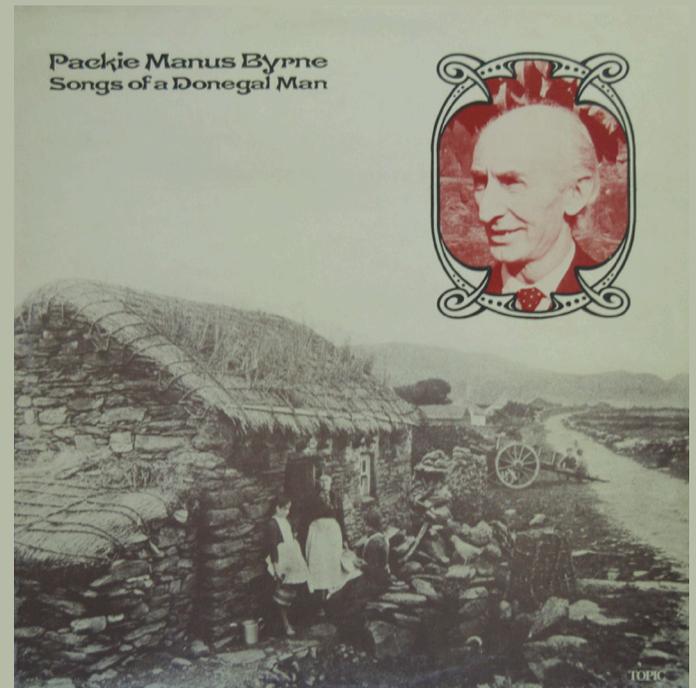
# PACKIE MANUS BYRNE

## Songs of a Donegal Man

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Corkermore in the Parish of Killybegs, County Donegal, is a small village set in a corner of Ireland that is famed for its remoteness and isolation. Farmsteads and crofts scatter across the surrounding glens like windblown chaff caught in the folds of the hills or trapped by the sides of the ever-present streams and rivers. It is a land of old men and old ways, depleted of its youth, dependent upon an economy that can scarcely support its inhabitants. The very harshness of life has forced these tenant farmers and stockmen to become introverted in their ways. Socially and economically they have drawn towards one another for support and sustenance so that their ways have become woven together and communal. Spring, summer and autumn, short feverish seasons spent among crops and cattle, pass quickly before the bitter cold of winter finally settles across the sleeping land. And it is then, behind shuttered doors, in rooms scented with the sweet smell of burning peat, that the singers, musicians and storytellers come together, following the custom of generations that have gone before them.

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Packie Manus Byrne was born on such a farm on February 18th 1917, the son of Gaelic-speaking parents. Many of his songs and stories come from long-ago winter nights spent in his parents' kitchen where a large flagstone, set in front of the fire, was used by step dancers who would compete to the sound of fiddles and whistle. Relatives, who had spent the summer working in the South or in Scotland, would, on their return, sing every night for a week or so, teaching fresh songs or lilting new tunes for the fiddlers to play. The songs were usually long and were valued, not so much for the quality of the singer's voice, as for the quality of the story which they told. Packie sees himself today not as a singer, but rather as a story teller whose tales, at times, are set to music, and it is of interest to note that he cares little for the highly ornamental styles of singing which are to be found in many other parts of Ireland. 'It didn't matter if an old singer was out of tune. People would listen if he had a good story. It was a case of either sitting around staring at the bare floor, 'cause there was nothing else to do, or else you could just listen to the older people singing ... why, you couldn't help but learn songs from them.'

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Sometime around 1946 Packie was invited to sing in a festival in Sligo, 'Just to help make up the numbers,' as he so modestly puts it, and took first prize in the ballad singing class. Ciaran MacMathuna of the Irish Broadcasting Company was at the festival with a mobile recording van and, as a result of his broadcast, Packie met the song-collector Sean O' Boyle who, realising Packie's remarkable talent, became the first person to collect songs from him. The matter may have ended there, with Packie returning to obscurity in Donegal, had it not been for his friendship with the fiddlers Michael, Simon and John Doherty. In October 1964 Packie was selling sheep in the market-town of Glenties when he met John Doherty in company with one of his own cousins. John had been invited to play the fiddle at a London festival and Packie's cousin, a Dr Macluskie, had agreed to accompany John on his journey. However, John had developed second thoughts on the matter, having somehow got it into his head that he would have to walk all the way to London, a prospect that didn't particularly appeal to him. When Packie heard that the festival was in Camden Town he readily agreed to take John's place because, previously, he had lived there for a short while and was quite fond of the place.

The festival introduced Packie to the British folk-music revival, which he soon became part of, and enabled him to remain in England where he developed a justified reputation not only as a fine traditional singer but as a whistle player as well. Back in 1937 Packie had worked in England as a clarinet and saxophone player in a dance band. Today he is known for his traditional music. Sadly, ill-health has lately restricted his music making, but it has not in any way dampened his enthusiasm or love for his songs. This then is a ballad singer's heritage, one which will, I believe, be greatly valued not only by you and I, but by many generations yet to come. It is a rare thing, unique and genuine, and, at times very moving.

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### **John and the Farmer**

*John Sold the Cow, Well Sold the Cow* and *The Yorkshire Bite* are all titles for our present ballad which, since its inception towards the end of the 18th century, has spread throughout Britain and North America. The ballad is related to *The Crafty Farmer* (Child 283), only in this ballad it is the farmer, not his servant, who outwits the would-be highwayman, and also to *The Farmer of Chester* which is especially popular among English gypsies (see Songs of the Open Road Topic 12T253). According to Packie, 'The song was going around long before I was born. My mother and father both knew it and, in fact, before I left home I thought that everyone in the whole world would know it!'

### **The Rich Man's Daughter**

Several ballads which Professor Child included in his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* are concerned with the theme of incest between a brother and his sister and in both *Sheath and Knife* (Child 16) and *Lizie Wan* (Child 51) the ballads end with the sister's death at the hands of her brother. Recent research has led Professor R S Thomson to suggest that these ballads stem from a scandal which occurred in the French Court of Henry of Navarre and which, no doubt, was soon a topic of conversation throughout Europe. *The Rich Man's Daughter* clearly belongs to this tradition. However, as with *Young Alvin*, Packie appears to be the first person from whom this ballad has been collected. The text, which is full of romantic imagery, would seem to date from the latter half of the 19th century, although it is difficult to imagine that a poem dealing with an incestuous relationship could have been written at this time and, accordingly, one is tempted to believe that the piece may in fact be even more recent. Packie learnt the ballad in 1946 from Tom O'Connor of Cork when they were both employed as cattle drovers and he uses an air which is related to the well-known *Boyne Water* family of tunes.

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### **The Holland Handkerchief**

(Child 272) Professor Child called this ballad *The Suffolk Miracle* and reluctantly admitted it to his collection with this comment, 'I have printed this ballad because, in a blurred, enfeebled, and disfigured shape, it is representative in England of one of the most remarkable tales and one of the most impressive and beautiful ballads of the European continent. The story seems to have originated in Southeast Europe - perhaps Greece - and to have drifted all over Europe, both as tale and ballad. A romantic 18th century re-working of it, in G A Burger's *Lenore*, gave extra impetus to its spread. The ballad, which has been collected in its entirety as a folk-tale in the west of England, was printed by several 17th century broadside printers in London and today, usually under the title *The Holland Handkerchief*, is met with not infrequently in Ireland, particularly in those parts that were on the itinerary of a couple of influential wandering minstrels and casual labourers of the mid-nineteenth century, Andy and Tommy Hearn (according to the American folklorist Phillips). Packie's brooding tune fits the ballad well - far better than the tune of *McCafferty* which many singers use - and he had it as a boy from his cousins, the Gallagher brothers, who lived in Meenacahan, County Donegal.

### **Molly Bawn**

Packie learnt *Molly Bawn* from Charlie Waters of Meentinadea near Ardara, Donegal, many years ago when they were both trapped in a deserted farm house at Glendown during a snow storm. The farm belonged to Packie's sister who was away in hospital expecting a baby, and Packie and Charlie had gone there to look after the farm animals, expecting to only stay for an hour or two. A storm blew up and it was not until four days later that they were able to leave the house where they had been trapped without food or turf. In order to keep warm and cheerful Packie and Charlie had huddled together and spent the time teaching one another songs. According to A L Lloyd

the ballad is but a remake of the Greek myth of Cephalus and Procris in which Procris, suspecting that her husband Cephalus is about to visit a mistress, hides in a thicket to watch his progress. In fact Cephalus was out hunting and, mistaking Procris for a deer, he killed her with a magic dart. Others, including P W Joyce and Professor Hugh Shields, have sought to identify the ballad with an actual event, albeit one which has incorporated the swan-maiden theme. Packie's tune, in common with most that are associated with this ballad, is especially fine.

### **The Jolly Ploughboy**

Packie Byrne once told me that he recalled seeing broadside sellers in the west of Ireland peddling their sheets at country fairs as late as 1935. *The Jolly Ploughboy* was one such song which was printed over and over again. Many Irish printers called it *The Irish Ploughboy* and one version appeared in P W Joyce's *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs* (1909). Packie's words are similar to those in Joyce's book and also to the set which Daniel O'Keefe included in his *First Book of Irish Ballads* (1955) although his tune, which came from his mother, appears to be unique. Packie's version of this song, which has always proved popular in the folk clubs, was recently included in a collection of occupational songs, *The Iron Man*, edited by Michael Dawney in 1975.

### **Young Alvin**

*Young Alvin*, according to both R S Thomson and Frank Purslow, appeared in late 18th-century chapbooks. To my knowledge Packie is the sole person from whom it has been collected and, remarkably, his version appears to be complete. Packie learnt the song in the early 1930's at Ballysadare horse fair from Kathleen Collins, a tinker whose family travelled around Fermanagh and Tyrone, and he cannot recall having heard it sung elsewhere.

### Johnny o'Hazelgreen

(Child 293) About 12 years ago, when both Packie and myself were living in Manchester, Packie asked me to record him playing his whistle so that he could send a tape to some relatives in North America. When the tape was completed we began to talk about ballads and I asked him whether or not he knew the one about 'the milk-white steed'. Packie had only to think for a few seconds before he sang me his version of Johnny o'Hazelgreen which, he added, he had not sung for at least 30 years. So far as I am aware Packie is the first traditional Irish singer to give us a set of this ballad, and his tune differs considerably from those which have recently been collected in Scotland. Professor Child included live Scottish versions in his collection, all of which date from the early part of the 19th century and, in the form rewritten by Sir Walter Scott, the ballad has proven especially popular in Scotland. Packie believes that the ballad was taken to Donegal by his grand-uncle, who had learnt it whilst working in Scotland, and who had taught the song to Packie's aunt 'Big' Bridget Sweeney of Meenagolin, County Donegal, who in turn taught it to Packie.

### Lament to the Moon

*Sweet Silvery Moon*, or *Lament to the Moon* as Packie prefers to call it, possibly came from an early 19th-century stage play. The song appeared on an English broadside which was issued by Jackson of Birmingham and the version collected in Gloucestershire by Alfred Williams bears a striking similarity to the words on Jackson's sheet. Williams included the text in his *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* (1923) and the English music scholar Ann Geddes Gilchrist noted in her copy of William's book that the music to the song was composed by JW Turner in 1847. According to Packie, there are at least a dozen airs to the song, including this one which, he believes, comes from the Glens of Antrim. Packie calls this a 'round the fire song', meaning that it is the sort of song which would be sung at home during the long winter evenings. and although several singers in his parish knew the song he recalls that he had the words from Sarah Hegarty of Donegal.

### The Creel

(Child 281) *The Keach in the Creel*, to use its full title, was known in 14th-century France as *Du Chevalier à Ia Corbeille* and belongs to that class of balladry so so beloved by Boccaccio and Chaucer. Sadly, Professor Child couldn't see the joke. 'No one looks for decorum in pieces of this description', he wrote, adding that 'a passage ... is brutal and shameless almost beyond example.' In Scotland the tale is known as *The Wee Toon Clerk* and during the last 20 or so years the School of Scottish Studies have collected several good versions. The ballad was no doubt taken to Northern Ireland by Scottish settlers, and a version from County Fermanagh appears in the album *Child Ballads - Volume 2* (Topic 12T161). Packie had his version from Jim Doody, a farm labourer who worked around Corkermore some 40 years ago.

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