



Kevin Mitchell Free and Easy



Irish Traditional Songs and Ballads

# Kevin Mitchell

## Free and Easy

*Traditional songs mainly from north west Ulster*

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A Gilderoy production

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Kevin Mitchell was born in the city of Derry 36 years ago. In 1969 he settled in Glasgow where he works as an industrial painter, and is married, with two children. When asked to describe his singing voice, words like distinctive, personal style, lyrical and even beautiful come to mind, but none of them are enough. One thing is certain, if you ever hear him singing you will remember it.

Kevin's family background does not seem to have been particularly musical. The main influence in those early days was a Gaelic singer from his own city, Sean Gallagher. Sean and his family shared their great store of songs with Kevin, and gave him much encouragement. It is not surprising then that his first public appearance was in the traditional singers' section of a music feis in Derry in 1969.

By the mid-'60s he had gained more confidence and began to move out from home. He entered some of the then popular "ballad competitions" and in 1965 (or thereabouts) won the John Player's Ballad Competition in Belfast. The year later he came first in the prestigious Bellaghy competition. It was at this time that myself and my friends in Belfast first heard and met Kevin. Soon he was coming down to sing in various folk clubs in Belfast. He also became a regular on a radio folk programme on the local BBC, called "Come Listen Here Awhile".

Shortly afterwards he went to Scotland and slowly the word spread. Now he carries his distinctive voice south, to the English clubs, as regularly as his job permits, which means most weekends during the winter months. This record should have been made years ago. Continually there were rumours that Kevin was finally going to make a record but always the result was a disappointing silence.

Well, at last here it is; let's hope it's the first of many.

*Robin Morton*

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These twelve songs are a cross-section of the repertory of a singer who, although he ranges outside his own home place, finds the mainstream of his performance and most of its material in his own region. Mostly the songs come from the North Ulster counties of Donegal, Derry and Antrim. Those which don't, apart from **The Mickey Dam**, are songs which, although they can be associated with one locality, are performed in a standard form almost everywhere they are heard; songs whose shape has been fixed by print or in some cases by gramophone records.

The northern part of Ulster is exceedingly rich in traditional song. Several singers live here who have a repertory of more than 50 songs, and it is possible in many areas to walk into a pub, sing and be sung back to. *The Outlandish Knight, Little Sir Hugh, The Noblemen's Wedding, The Keach in the Creel, The Dark Eyed Gypsy*, all are sung in several versions at the present.

This richness gave rise to the most extensive publication of Irish song in existence: the "Songs of the People" which appeared one song each week, from 1923 to 1939 on the back page of the Coleraine weekly, "The Northern Constitution". Roughly 850 songs in all, three quarters of them collected by Sam Henry. Large numbers of the songs are still sung traditionally, but many of the songs sung in the area today do not appear in the collection.

Kevin Mitchell represents a most lively tradition.

### Free and Easy

This lovely, lyrical song of the young man intent on the avoidance of “joining heart and hand”, saying as he does:

*Look at yonder stream, as it gently glides,  
It can go no farther than it's allowed.*

*It can go no farther than it gets command:*

*I'll stay free and easy for to jog along.*

has been found only, as far as I know, in the north of Ulster. Some singers localise it in the Derry City area and others make it north Antrim. It's been printed once, in “Songs of the People”, no. 278 (see above), but no contributor is named. Kevin learned this from Bridget Kirk of Derry City whose mother had it before her.

### The Lurgy Streams

Another of the songs recorded by John McGettigan for labels such as Regal Zonophone and Victor. Lurgy Stream is near Kilmacrenan in Donegal and this is one of those songs, widespread in Ireland, which insist that the most beautiful women in the country nay, in the world, live on one's doorstep.

*Her eyes they shine like diamonds, her cheeks are like the rose,  
She's fairer than the fairest flower than in yon garden grows;  
She's neat, genteel and handsome, her countenance is serene;  
Her home and habitation stand near to Lurgy Stream.*

Two versions are in the “Songs of the People”, no. 229, collected by Sam Henry, and no. 410, collected by James Moore. Kevin sings a composite version, three verses from Rose McLaughlin of Glasgow (but once of Donegal) and the third and fourth from Geordie Hanna

### The Mickey Dam

A fine, robust Glasgow-Irish song learned from William Devine, once from County Derry but now working for Glasgow Corporation. Parts of the water works at Milngavie, a town on the northern outskirts of Glasgow, once constituted great feats of engineering. Large numbers of Irishman worked on the scheme - hence the “Mickers” dam. The reservoir is still known locally as “The Paddy Dam”. I suppose that some people might not like the song because of its portrait of the aggressive Irishman, brother to the “Boys who stir the Hot Asphalt”, but I find its violence good humoured and cannot sympathise much with its victims, “mouse” or rats!

### Nancy Bell

This refashioning of the English song *Pleasant and Delightful*, in its turn a fragment of *Farewell Nancy* (on Topic Records and Collinson and Dillon, “Songs from the Countryside”), comes from Cornie McDaid, sexton of Cockhill Church, Buncrana. It's not so economical as the English versions, it tells less story in more verses and the last two are additions in the characteristic form for the end of emigration or leave-taking songs, but in itself it's an engaging song. It's less emotionally intense and more reflective than its “foreign” counterparts. *Farewell Nancy* is sung, in one shape or another, moderately commonly in Ireland but I've never heard it as thoroughly remade as in this case. Despite temptation and the name “Nancy Bell” there is no connection between this song and Lord Lovel (Child 75).

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### The Boys of Mullaghbawn

There is, despite strong English and Scottish influence, an even stronger Irish strain in the Ulster song tradition. This is one of many Ulster songs which retain the metre and internal rhymes of Gaelic poetry. It is also wedded to one of the most beautiful airs known, even if one singer who sang it to Sean O'Boyle told him "There's no air to the Boys of Mullaghbawn; it's just sung by brute force." To hear how wrong he was just listen to Kevin. The song records a real happening: the transportation, during the latter part of the 18th century, of some South Armagh farmers. This was a time of great agitation over land holding, especially in South Armagh, with rival secret societies raiding farms owned by people of different religious persuasions, and it's possible that the "combination" referred to was such a secret society; some people think that "combination" refers to an early trade union, forbidden by Pitt's Combination Act of 1800. I have no evidence which would allow a choice. The "cuckoo" of the third verse probably refers to the bird rather than to a ship called "The Cuckoo". Gaelic poets were fond of having nature mirror human disasters. "The trout and salmon gaping, the cuckoo left her station" in the consternation at the tragedy of transportation.

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### Going to Mass Last Sunday

This very widespread song probably owes some of its popularity to its performance by John McGettigan. However, at around the time it was recorded by McGettigan, Sam Henry was sent twelve versions from various parts of Derry and Antrim, two of which are published in "Songs of the People", nos. 615 and 625, so perhaps the song lives because, as Peter Kennedy puts it, "it's one of the outstanding love songs in the English language" (Kennedy, "Folksongs of Britain and Ireland", no. 155). The "bottle" verse is a bit of a puzzle; no two versions (and I know seven) have it the same way and one leaves it out altogether. Conjecturally, there might have been poison in the drink, or perhaps this was a customary pledge on parting. I'd be glad to be told. Kevin has the song from Sean Gallagher of Derry City, from whom he got many songs, though it has been augmented from elsewhere. The air is a variant of *The Star of the County Down*, *My Love Nell* or *Dives and Lazarus* tune.

### The Magherafelt May Fair

Until about 1920 in rural Ireland a girl's status in the community, be she seventeen or seventy, was of no consequence until she married; she would not (and nor would a man in like case) be considered grown up or capable of administering her own affairs. Hence the anxiety and excitement produced by an event like a fair, a dance, a wake even, because for once in a while there would be unattached men around. Many a "nice wee bouncing girl" (what a picture that conjures up) went off full of hope that she might attract a husband. Parents would have preferred the security of the arranged match, made with property in mind, rather than connubial bliss. (See *The Oul' Grey Man*.) The children, reckless perhaps or mindful of the other song which enjoins: "Marry for love and work for riches" would not have seen it that way.

Kevin has here joined words and air from different sources; the words from Anne Brolly of Dungiven and air from Brian Toner of Bellaghy.

### The Light Horse

Known better as *The Airy Bachelor* or *The Black Horse* (O Lochlainn, "Irish Street Ballads", no. 17) this has been widely distributed on ballad sheets and is common, especially in Donegal, whence this version obtained from John McCracken of Innishowen. The "Songs of the People" contains a song called *The Hungry Army*. The title is, intended or not, a pun; the army composed of underpaid, badly treated, hungry men, or the army hungry for recruits to replace those who fell in battle, deserted, died under the lash or from disease. Sergeant Acheson is just such a recruiting officer as contrived by dint of cajolery, chicanery or sometimes criminality to feed it. The Black Horse is, according to Sam Henry ("Songs of the People", no. 586), a by-name for the 7th Dragoon Guards - The Princess Royals.

### The Moorlough Shore

A song of unrequited love which ends in the emigration of the unsuccessful suitor. Kevin has it from Jimmy McHugh, the Glasgow/Tyrone fiddler and the version is exactly (save that the air has been made grander) that which was sung on a 78 rpm record made by John McGettigan in the 1930s. McGettigan was an interesting, if over-rhythmical and unstylish, singer who, with his "Irish Minstrels", recorded many songs including one which starts "I love my whiskey, my lovely Irish whiskey" to the tune of "I love a lassie"! In a number of cases these and other records had an effect on the tradition similar to that of ballad sheets. (See *The Lurgy Streams* and *Going to Mass Last Sunday*.) The song is sung mostly in the north of Antrim and Derry, where it is identified with Murlough Bay, and in south and east Down where it is "The Maid of Mourne Shore" (Sam Henry collection, "Songs of the People no. 34A). Some of the place-names in the present version suggest a Tyrone setting. The air is very widely known as the one which, in simpler form, attaches to Yeats' song *Down by the Sally Gardens*.

### Two Strings on a Bow

American singers call this song *The Bird's Courtship* or *The Leather Winged Bat* - it's quite common there but only once has it been collected in the British Isles; Peter Kennedy and Sean O'Boyle obtained it from Liam O'Connor of Pomeroy, Co. Tyrone. (Kennedy, "Folk Songs of Britain and Ireland," no. 295). Kevin's version, again given him by Anne Brolly (see *The Magherafelt May Fair*), shows only slight verbal differences from Liam O'Connor's and it's possible that Anne, reared in Coalisland, only 12 miles from Pomeroy, has the song from him. Kevin has changed the tune of the chorus so that the air as a whole is that of the hornpipe *The Cuckoo's Nest* - a not inappropriate combination of tune and words.

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For some reason the song is thought of as one more fit for children than adults I can't think why.

### **Seán Ó Duibhir** (Sean O Dwyer)

The Battle of Aughrim, 12 July 1691, saw the last opposition in open battle to the forces of William of Orange; the Irish and French forces supporting the deposed James II were thoroughly defeated. Patrick Sarsfield commanded the Irish and St Ruth the French: opposing them the Williamite army under the Dutch general Ginkel. Despite Sarsfield's disquiet, St Ruth insisted on giving battle; the French were scattered. Sarsfield led his men to Limerick where they were besieged for three months; and following the surrender of Limerick, Sarsfield and 11,000 others went into voluntary exile under the terms of the treaty. Many of them went into the armed service of the King of France. In Irish history these exiles are known as "the Wild Geese". This song, written by Patrick Augustine, Canon Sheehan, priest and novelist, who died in 1913, brings forward by some thirty years the resistance of Seán Ó Duibhir, a gentleman of Kilnamanagh, Co. Tipperary who, having fought Cromwell's forces, survived to petition the restored Stuarts for the return of his family's lands, unsuccessfully: "O Seán Ó Duibhir an Gheanna, you are worsted in the game." Sheehan took the air and last line from an earlier Gaelic song which celebrated the way of life of the Irish nobility before Cromwell's conquest.

### **The Oul' Grey Man**

The late Jeannie Robertson of Aberdeen had this song in four verses beginning "Hold your tongue, dear Sally" - one case among many of song sharing between Ulster and Scotland; but who is to say which is the original? The theme is a common one but has special relevance in economically depressed farming areas where, because the land would support no more people, a man's marriage would have to wait upon the death of his father and his inheritance of the holding. If ugly daughters could be made "puny with cows", than old men, well endowed with goods, would be eagerly sought by matchmaking parents with a hope of increasing their own store or of getting away without paying a dowry (see Morton, "Folksongs Sung in Ulster", p 17). Kevin heard this from a lady who used to attend a weekly session of Innishowen people which was held some years ago, in Buncrana, Co. Donegal. The air is similar to that printed in Morton, "Folksongs Sung in Ulster", p 36.

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