

# Len Graham: Wind and Water

## Traditional Songs, Ballads and Lilts

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Len Graham has been studying and performing the song tradition of Ireland, more especially that of his native Ulster, for years. He has become well known and respected for both his scholarship and his singing. Of course, coming as he does from a background of craftsmen, singers and musicians, that is only to be expected.

His father is a cabinet-maker to trade and a fine singer. On his mother's side there were generations of blacksmiths, who worked in and around Glenarm, Co. Antrim. Len himself works in a modern textile factory in Coleraine, Co. Derry, and lives in the neighbouring Co. Antrim town of Portrush. The musical instruments in his family range through fiddle, hammer-dulcimer, to church organ, french horn and kilty drum.

In 1971 he won the senior All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil Na hEireann competition in traditional singing and since this has adjudicated on a number of occasions. Len's search for a 'good session' carried him farther afield in 1976. Under the auspices of the Irish American Cultural Institute he went on a lecture/concert tour of the United States of America. More recently Free Reed Records put out an album of Len and his good friend Joe Holmes. It was well received. Now here is Len's first solo record

*Robin Morton*

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*This is not a record of sea songs and shanties, so you may wonder why 'Wind and Water' for its title? It was wind and water that brought our ancestors to these shores, be they Celts, Norsemen, Normans or planters. It was also wind and water that propelled the missionaries, the 'Wild Geese' and the emigrants to foreign parts... These various comings and goings have left their mark on the traditional songs of Ireland and, in particular, Ulster where forever history seems to stare one in the face. I hope the choice of songs on this record will in some way illustrate and reflect some of these influences. I would like to thank all the singers and musicians who have, over the years, shared songs and airs with me - without you this record would not have been possible.*

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**My Parents Reared me Tenderly**

I first heard a line or two of this song from Joe Holmes, Ballymoney, Co. Antrim. Joe recalled the song from the singing some fifty years ago of the late John McAfee, Armoy, Co. Antrim. I got the rest of the song from Malachy Clerkin, Threemilehouse, Co. Monaghan and again Eddie Butcher, Magilligan, Co. Derry. It's Joe's air I sing, which differs slightly from Malachy's and Eddie's.

**Maggie Picken**

The highland schottische is a common dance throughout Ireland. Perhaps Ulster with its geographical position to Scotland has more than the other provinces. This schottische has some words which Eddie Butcher and Joe Holmes supplied.

**Seán Ó Duibhir a' Ghleanna**

There are many versions of this song in both Irish and English - this one, in English, I got from the late John McGrath, Moneygran, Co. Derry. John attributed the song to a 'scholar' from the famous hedge-school of Tirgarvil, Co. Derry (circa 1800). Seán Ó Duibhir a' Ghleanna (John O'Dwyer of the glen) held the commission of colonel from the Irish Confederacy for the counties of Tipperary and Waterford. He was defeated by Cromwell's Parliamentary forces and in 1651 sailed from the port of Waterford for Spain with about 500 of his followers, to join the ranks of the many exiled 'Wild Geese'. He was killed fighting for the Spanish against the French in 1654. The 'glen' is said to be Aherlow, Co. Tipperary.

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**The County Mayo**

A comic song I got from David McKee, Taylorstown, Co. Antrim; another version can be found in 'Folksongs Sung in Ulster' by Robin Morton (Mercier Press 1969). Besides emigrating to America, some Irishmen wandered a bit nearer home. The hero of this song went to industrial Glasgow, but the city ways were not his.

**The Star of Moville**

Although Moville is in the Co. Donegal, this song is from across Lough Foyle in the Co. Derry. It was composed by the late James McCurry, the blind fiddler from Myroe about a hundred years ago. This is part of the song I got from Eddie Butcher. Because of the restriction on recording time, I had to condense, but I have endeavoured to retain the 'story-line' as far as possible. Annual regattas with fishermen rowing clinker-built boats against one another, as opposed to the Henley river-type, were common around the coastal towns and villages of the North of Ireland up until about thirty years ago.

**The Green Fields of Amerikay**

This is one of the numerous traditional songs of emigration in which Derry is mentioned. Derry was a major port serving most of Ulster and parts of Connacht during the main 'waves' of emigration to the United States of America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I got this song from three sources - Mary Magill, Ballinacaird, Co. Antrim, the late Paddy Maguire, Mullalun, Co. Fermanagh and Tom Anderson, Clooney, Co. Derry.

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### Western Winds

Robert Burns the Scottish poet was and is very popular in Ulster. We find several of his songs in the repertoires of traditional singers - *Go Fetch to me a Pint o' Wine*, with the late Sandy McConnell, Co. Fermanagh, *Highland Mary* with his son Cathal, also Sarah Makem, Co. Armagh, Willie McPeake, Co. Derry and many others. I was delighted to come up with a version of Burns' 'Now Westlin Winds' in Co. Antrim from Tommy Kelly, Newtown Crommelin. This song has the 'twin sports' of guns and girls and Seán Ó Baoill in his book 'The Irish Song Tradition' (Gilbert Dalton 1976) says with regard to this category of song - 'The twin arts of hunting and love-making go together in the mind of the country poet'. I would say from the tone of this song and also Burns' reputation, that the latter recreation was closer to his heart!

### Páidín Ó Raibheartaigh

The late and sadly lamented uilleann piper - Willie Clancy of Milltown Malbay, Co. Clare - piped me several versions of this tune. Willie was a 'store-house' of versions of tunes and songs, with a fund of anecdotes to go with nearly every piece. He told me one story that Páidín Ó Raibheartaigh (Paddy O'Rafferty) was the name of the horse that young Willie Reilly used for his famous elopement with Squire Foillard's daughter. Another story had it that Páidín Ó Raibheartaigh was a hen-pecked husband, who finally got rid of the wife in a bog-hole, but refrained from dancing on top of her, as the bog was too soft! I prefer the latter story, as I think, for an elopement, a reel would be a better gallop than a jig!

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### My Willie-O

This is a County Antrim version of 'The Lover's Ghost' or 'The Grey Cock', which I learnt from the late Johnnie McLaughlin, Skerry. Joe Holmes also recalls his mother singing this ballad.

### Daniel O'Connell and his Steam Engine

Again both Joe and Eddie helped me to piece this song together. To some, Dan was 'The Great Liberator', whilst to others he was 'The King of the Beggars'. A priest I met after a concert one night, said it was strange that Ireland in her piety should have three adulterers for national monuments in her main thoroughfare - O'Connell Street, Dublin; Charles Stewart Parnell, Lord Nelson (he's gone now) and Daniel O'Connell! The author of this song perhaps knew something of Dan's record?

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### **The Rights of Man**

Thomas Paine's pamphlet 'The Rights of Man' was the handbook of the United Irishmen of the late eighteenth century. From this era the title survives with a hornpipe and this song, which I learnt from the late John McGrath. On July 14, 1791 the French Revolution was celebrated in Belfast. The citizens of the town, at that time mostly Presbyterians, moved in procession through the principal streets. Their rear was brought up by the Northern Whig Club and a great number of the participants were wearing green cockades. They carried banners with captions reading - 'Fourth year, era of liberty', 'Our Gallic brother was born July 14, 1789; alas! we are still in embryo' etc. This revolutionary spirit culminated in the 1798 rebellion - in the North with the battles of Antrim and Ballynahinch. The song was written by a Drogheda weaver, Richard Sheil (c.1800 to 1860) and appeared in 'Sheil's Shamrock' vol. 2, 1840. Of its verse structure G.D. Zimmermann says, 'In Irish poetry, in which rhymes are only assonantal, this pattern is not too difficult... but in English it is something of a tour de force.'

### **One Morning in May**

This is yet another song I learnt from the late John McGrath. There is a modest seduction scene - modest as with most Irish songs, the seduction isn't too explicit. In this case 'When the birds sang so sweet, this young man proved his deceit'

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### **The Knight Templar's Dream**

This is a masonic song I learnt from the late Sandy Given, Dundooan, Co. Derry. The secret society of freemasons claim to trace their origins back to Solomon and were originally a kind of trade union for stone-masons and architects. The oldest material evidence of the freemasons' existence in Ireland is a brass square bearing masonic symbols and the date 1507. Unlike many of the other secret societies in Ireland, the freemasons are international and comparatively non-sectarian. Until the Vatican edict banning membership in the nineteenth century many Irish Catholics practised freemasonry .

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