



MARY ANN CAROLAN
SONGS FROM THE IRISH TRADITION



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Recorded by Roly Brown
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Notes by Sean Corcoran

Mrs Mary Ann Carolan (nee Usher) was born in 1902 in the townland of Tenure, near the town of Drogheda in south County Louth. Her father, Pat Usher senior, was a renowned traditional musician in the locality and was a fine exponent of 'old-style' concertina playing. He also had a huge repertoire of songs which he sang constantly, even while working. He died in 1962 at the age of 94 and right up to the end his playing was like that of a young man - full of energy and dash. His instrument was a simple diatonic one and his family still fondly remember his unusual method of 'rolling' notes in fast reels - he simply gave himself a rib-cracking 'dunt' with his elbow in the side, so producing the desired effect!

Pat Usher's love of music, his gaiety and a large slice of his repertoire passed on to his son and daughter and even to his nephews. Mrs Carolan plays the concertina in the same lively style her father used. Her brother, Pat Usher junior, still living in the old family house at Tenure, is a fine fiddler and singer. Her cousin, Petey Curran, plays the warpipes and among his store of songs has many he learned from old Pat Usher.

When I first met Mrs Carolan in 1966 she had not sung or played for quite a number of years but once she started again the songs and tunes poured out. She has a repertoire of about 60 songs and more keep popping up from time to time when a particular incident or story jogs her memory.

The two main dialects of English spoken in Ireland, Northern and Southern, meet in Co. Louth and the influences of this can be seen in Mrs Carolan's repertoire. Scottish songs are well represented, some even being sung in their original dialect. She sings no ballads from the Child canon. (The only Child ballad sung in her family is part of *Jock o' Hazeldean*, also sung in Scots dialect.)

Mary Ann Carolan is one of the finest female traditional singers in Ireland. She and her husband Nicholas live at Hill o' Rath near Drogheda where she still works the farm and, of course, still plays the concertina and sings like a woman half her age.

Sean Corcoran 1978

Bold Doherty

This appears to be a fragment of a longer song. However, as Mrs Carolan sings it, the story, which is told by innuendo, is so complete in itself that it would be a pity to extend it. I have never heard the song sung elsewhere, even in the Donegal-Fermanagh area where the story is set. The air is taken from the jig *The Connachtman's Rambles* (see O'Neill's "Music of Ireland," new edition, 1963, No.1003). Herbert Hughes collected a version of the song in North Antrim in 1903. It was called Molly of Cushendall and was set only to the first part of the jig (Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society, Vol. I, p. 17). When first recorded in 1970, Mrs Carolan sang this song at a much faster tempo with fluctuating 3rd and 7th. A 'saucepan' (v.2) was a measure of ale.

The Maid of Ballymore

A fine example of Mrs Carolan's restrained but finely-crafted melodic decoration and her use of rhythmic variation. I have come across no other examples of either the fine pentatonic melody or the text.

Bob Riddley

A corn-shucking song from the Southern USA which is peculiarly popular among Irish and British traditional singers. A song called **Old Bob Ridley** was used for corn-shucking in North Carolina ("Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore," p.131) and a fiddle tune with words was derived from this (Ira W. Ford, "Traditional Music in North America," pp. 54 and 400/1). The song was brought across the Atlantic by the black-face minstrels in the 1850s and became universally popular. Alfred Williams published a version in 1923 in his "Folk Songs of the Upper Thames". Sam Lerner of Norfolk sings it on Topic's *A Garland for Sam*. It came to Ireland via the Dublin stage and the Dublin Penny Songsters which reprinted many 'nigger' songs from the English sheets in the second half of the last century. It was even sung in the Irish-speaking areas of West Cork.

The Old Oak Tree

This song is sung all over Ulster and also in North-East America. Its distribution appears to be due to ballad sheet circulation since it is sung to a variety of common ballad-carrying airs. Mrs Carolan's tune is a variant of what is probably the commonest air at present in use in Ireland for topical and local balladry. (Of this melody one Co. Louth singer said to me, "Sure, it's a grand air - you can put any song to it!") Although of fairly recent origin the ballad echoes the old folk tales when the corpse bleeds afresh in the presence of the murderer. The song appears to be of English origin. One Newfoundland version is called *Squire Nathaniel and Betsy*. However, tradition in the Usher family localises the song in the North Louth/South Monaghan area. The name McCullough is commonest in this area, and it is this name or its corruption which is given to the murderous squire in most of the recorded versions of the song.

The Tinker's Old Budget

An extremely common song, known all over Ireland. The air is one of the basic stock of Irish and British folk tunes and is much used for comic narratives (e.g. "The Kilkenny Louse House", "The Sign of the Crow" etc.). Mrs Carolan's air has a wider range (an octave and a half) than the usual version.

The Bonny Light Horseman

This English song was circulated on ballad sheets in Ireland and became quite popular. Versions have been found in Wexford (Stanford-Petrie No. 779, and the P.J. McCall Collection in the National Library, Dublin), in Galway (sung by Sean O Conaire) and in Antrim (Sam Henry, "Songs of the People", No.122). It was sung to two distinct airs - a Southern and a Northern/Western. Mrs Carolan sings the Southern air while the Galway tune is the same as Henry's version A, although Sean O Conaire sings it in the highly decorated *sean nos* style of Connemara. When first recorded in 1970 Mrs Carolan sang this song at a much faster tempo.

In London So Fair

A "broken token/female sailor" ballad in which the token is a familiar phrase rather than an object. Versions have been recorded from Wexford (P.J. McCall Collection, National Library, Dublin) and from Antrim (Henry, "Songs of the People", No. 203). It probably owes its distribution to the ballad sheet trade but it is remarkable that a version collected by Peter Kennedy in the Orkneys (*Captain on the Sea* sung by Ethel and John Findlater on *The Lovers' Stone - Lyrics and Legends from the Orkneys*, Folktrax Recordings) has almost exactly the same air as Mrs Carolan's song. The tune, with the fourth line repeated, is used in Galway for a more recent emigration song, *Home Boys, at Home*.

My Father's a Hedger and Ditcher

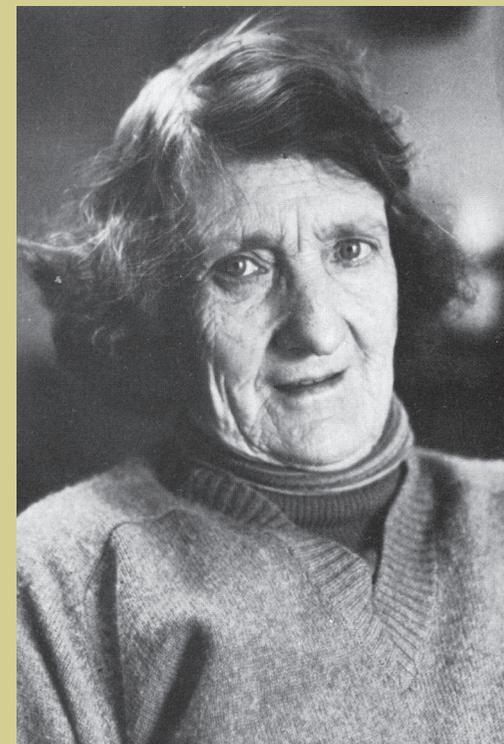
This lilting little song sounds like a fragment of a longer piece but, interestingly, a version was sung in Wiltshire made up of the same verses as Mrs Carolan's (Alfred Williams, "Folksongs of the Upper Thames", 1923, p. 226). The song was known in Scotland. Greig gives a text from Buchan ("Folk Songs of Buchan and the North East," XVIII) which is very similar: It begins: "My Daddy's a delver o' dykes ...". He considered it to be "a variant of the old English ballad *Nobody's Coming to Marry Me*." An American version (Gardner and Chickering, "Ballads and Songs of Michigan", No. 181) begins "Me father's a lawyer in England, Me mother's a justice of peace", but also has the verse "Me father is a hedger and ditcher", etc. The basic ingredients of the song also appear as floating verses in many American songs as, for example, the well-known *Roll in my Sweet Baby's Arms*.

Highland Mary

This folk adaptation of a song on a similar theme by Burns is popular all over Scotland and the North of Ireland. Greig points out that the folk knew Burns' material but did not usually sing it, treating it rather like "Sunday clothes or best crockery" ("Folk Song of the North East," IX). However, in the Usher family Burns's original and the folk version are both sung.

The Wedding of Sweet Baltray

Baltray is a small fishing village at the mouth of the river Boyne in South Louth and this song was written by Johnny Brodigan, a slokegatherer and poet from there, sometime towards the end of the last century. Local tradition says that Brodigan felt snubbed when he was not invited to the wedding in question and, in revenge, wrote this grotesque account of the proceedings. As well as their other shortcomings, the poet attributes to the guests socially inferior tastes in food - rayfish, hearts, goats' kidneys, lights and pigs' croobs. (It seems strange to the modern ear to hear veal included in this list!) Another version of the song has the guests playing a bizarre wake-game - also, apparently, regarded as socially inferior at the time.



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