





# George Hanna & Sarah Anne O'Neill

## On the Shores of Lough Neagh

*Traditional songs of a Tyrone Family*

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First published by TOPIC 1978  
Recorded and Produced by Robin Morton/A Kinmor  
Production/Notes by John Moulden  
Photography by Robin Morton  
Design by Tony Engle

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Many recordings of Ulster folk songs have been issued, but little or none from the Co. Tyrone. This record presents a sample from the repertory of a brother and sister, who come of a singing family within a singing region from which they have never moved. They are the carriers of a distinct and beautiful style. They are supported by their enthusiasm for songs which attract other singers who, with them, make a community within which an interchange of ideas is continually taking place. A delightful illustration of this is that Sarah Anne's changes to John Reilly on track 9 are so pleasing to Brian Mullan, who gave her the song a year or so ago, that he plans to relearn it from her! Both these singers are intensely creative but in different ways. Geordie possesses the family style to a much higher degree than his sister. It entails a breaking up of the tune and words into short phrases delivered with great force. It is also distinct in the placing and shape of the decoration. This results from the shortness of the phrases and allows a highly meaningful performance without any overstatement. Sarah Anne's ability to tidy up the words of a song or to lilt a tune to unsung verses complements Geordie's skill and the two interact; they sing a large number of the same songs, share the same style and adopt one another's changes. In short, these two singers represent the living tradition not its dying kicks.

George Hanna lives in the townland of Derrytresk, which lies on the flatland surrounding the Banks of Sweet Lough Neagh, about three miles south east of Coalisland. He is well known as a singer, for he has made a large number of television and radio performances and undertook a North American tour with a group of other singers and musicians under the auspices of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann. He has also won both the prestigious Ulster ballad singing competitions, the one sponsored by The John Player Company, and the Bellaghy competition.

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He and Sarah Anne are regular attendants at Fleadhanna and their presence at sessions is keenly hoped for and appreciated by those who know them, especially other singers who recognise masterly performance when they hear it.

Geordie's songs are mainly from around his home territory and many of them he got from his father. He used to work in the Coalisland coal mine (the larger of Ulster's two) until, after twelve years, an accident ended that. Later, he became an eel fisherman on the Lough. He is still learning songs.

#### **Brockagh Brae**

Emigration to Scotland was a not unusual feature of life in depressed West Ulster but such a swift turn round, as in this song, was rare. The description of the sea journey, though, points the significance to the emigrant of being sundered from home and family. This song was sung widely in the area round Brockagh, a district on the Lough Neagh shore about three miles north of Derrytresk and is localized there. Geordie learned it from various people but completed his version from Paddy McMahan, member of another singing family, who lived nearby. Many of Geordie's songs come at least partly from the McMahans. The distinctive air is used sometimes as a march by Ceili bands. Len Graham has a version *The Roslea Farewell* sung by Marie McEntee of Threemilehouse, Co. Monaghan and Sam Henry had a set from Ballymena which he did not publish in the 'Songs of the People' series which appeared from 1923 to 1939 in the 'Northern Constitution' newspaper of Coleraine and which Henry was largely responsible for.

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### **On Yonder Hill There Sits a Hare**

This seems to me the finest of all Ulster's hunting songs and known only from Geordie who has heard it from no-one but his father and Uncle George. Ulster has many songs of hare hunting but they tell of local men's sport, each with his own dogs, and carried out on foot because the animal hunted is not the English Brown hare but the Irish hare, a variety of Arctic hare, smaller than its cousin the Blue hare of Scottish mountains but like it inclined to lead the chase up mountains, which would not do for horse-men! Other songs of this kind are *The Granemore Hare* (Folksongs Sung in Ulster), *The Hare's Dream* (Songs of the People 172) and *The Hare of Kilgrain* (Songs of the People 12). Their chief characteristic is the high degree of sympathy the songmaker (often himself a hunter) shows for his quarry. He takes pleasure in failing to kill and if a kill is sung of it is with regret. Apparently it is the chase that counts, or do we have a hint of the old tendency for the hangman to ask his victim's pardon? The first four notes of the air seem to me to echo a hunting horn call.

### **The Blackbird of Sweet Avondale**

There is a legend, not very likely, that this song was written by Anna Parnell, sister of the celebrated Charles Stewart Parnell. According to Georges-Denis Zimmerman in 'Songs of Irish Rebellion' (Dublin, 1967) it was probably made to the air of *The Royal Blackbird*; a Jacobite song referring secretly to the deposed James II. Our song also follows the convention of referring to its hero, Parnell himself, in a secret way as the 'Blackbird'. Parnell & other leaders of the Irish Land League, a body devoted to rights for tenant farmers, who were arrested in October 1881 and lodged in Kilmainham Prison in Dublin. The action was taken in exasperation when the League refused to concede anything in return for Gladstone's Land Act, itself intended to put an end to 3 years of passive resistance & acts of violence. The imprisonment led to the so-called Kilmainham Treaty which effectively ended the Land War.

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Geordie has the song from another of the McMahons, Paddy's father, Ned. It is very popular, sung to the same Doh mode air as here but, as Geordie says, 'with different birls'.

### **Erin's Lovely Home**

This is not the usual song of this title which tells of parental opposition to a girl's marriage. Instead it is an emigration song probably transmitted by ballad sheet. Eddie Butcher of Magilligan sings it also. Geordie's version is again from the McMahons, this time from Paddy's wife Mary, though she had it from Paddy's grandfather. Fever was a fact of emigrant ships during the time of the Famine in Ireland. Conditions were appalling and typhus was often brought on board among the passengers. It's estimated that of over 100,000 emigrants to Canada almost 40,000 died, 17,000 of them during the voyage (Woodham Smith, C: 'The Great Hunger': Four Square Books, 1964, p.234). 'If crosses and tombs could be erected on the water,' wrote a United States Commissioner for emigrations, '... the whole route of the emigrant vessels from Europe to America would long since have assumed the appearance of a crowded cemetery.'

### **Young Edmund in the Lowlands Low**

This often heard song, spread by ballad sheets in Ireland, Scotland and England, has been published many times and has been collected recently from other Ulster singers by Robin Morton and Hugh Shields It is also common in North America, especially in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. This song also came to Geordie from Mary McMahan who, though she sang her husband's family songs, had some from her own father. The air is in the Re mode.

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### **Kate of Ballinamore**

This song was learned from John Robinson, a Lough Neagh fisherman of Brockagh whose favourite it was. He generally sang *Baltimore* or sometimes *Kate from the Lough Shore* following the impulse of singers to localize their songs. Geordie brings the song nearly into Ulster by setting it in the Co. Leitrim village of Ballinamore. (Baltimore is in South West Cork). No published version is known to me though Hugh Shields has it from Eddie Butcher and gives several archive references in his article 'Irish Folk Song Recordings 1966-1972' in 'Ulster Folk- life' Vol. 17. It has also been collected from the traveller Winnie Ryan and is in the BBC Archive. The song is notable for its contrasting the romance of the idea of enlisting and the heartbreak of its actuality. The air, a variant of that which Packie Byrne has for *Paddy's Green Shamrock Shore* (EFDSS LP 1009), is hexatonic in the Soh mode.

Sarah Anne, a housewife, lives on the edge of Derrytresk about a mile nearer Coalisland than Geordie. The base of her interest in songs is the family singing tradition but she consciously seeks to fill in her knowledge of songs she once heard at home and misremembers, from other people. Most of the songs sung here have been learned or re-learned since childhood. Sarah Anne's modesty is a by-word. Despite her reputation she never sings unless asked and then her performance is very restrained. She has only once sung in competition and that by invitation.

### **The Rambler from Clare**

This is Sarah Anne's 'base' song, the one she uses to help her assess the mood of her audience and 'sing herself in'. Almost everytime I have heard her at a session it has been her first song. Many other singers do the same. She learned it in Belfast, while working as a waitress, from a colleague, a girl from Donegal County. The late Colm O'Lochlainn printed it in 'More Irish Street Ballads', the words from ballad sheets, the air

(substantially the same as this one) from tradition. He thought it was 'a genuine United Irishmen ballad' and gives references. The United Irishmen were, at first, middle class debating societies in Belfast and Dublin dedicated to getting themselves and their fellow Presbyterians and Roman Catholics the vote, but within seven years had become a secret army part of which rose abortively in 1798. Although most place names are different in the ballad sheet versions I would like to think that this is a Tyrone song. There are even four places called Clare in the County - Clare Bridge, Clare Rock, and two townlands, Clare Upper and Clare Lower. 'The Moy' is a Tyrone village.

### **A Fair Young Maid in her Father's Garden**

This is one of the most popular versions of the 'broken token' story where a lover returns unrecognised after a long absence and tests his sweetheart's fidelity by pressing marriage, claiming to have witnessed her lover's marriage or his death in battle, and on being refused discloses himself by a simple statement or by producing half of the love token they broke between them on parting. In modern terms the story is unlikely, but applied to times when transport was very slow, when people aged early and when betrothal often took place between children it becomes more possible. Sarah Makem sings this song to an older air on Topic 12T182 and a version very close to Mrs. Makem's is in 'More Irish Street Ballads'. The air Sarah Anne sings is the one used in the family but it carries the words of this song in many places in the North of Ireland. This song was common on ballad sheets and is in the English, Irish, Scottish and North American traditions.

### **John Reilly**

'My father used to sing John Reilly from the Town of Bray but I never learned it. After that I heard it a few times and was interested because of my father so I got the words from Brian Mullan of Derry. I heard it once at a Fleadh, I think from Kevin Mitchell.'

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Sarah Anne has remade parts of this song since learning it. This very widespread song more often called *Reilly the Fisherman* has a story of tragedy, almost certainly the work of a broadsheet writer. All the ingredients are here, true love, forbidding father, departed lover, lover returning prosperous, elopement, mutual accidental death and, final irony, the discovery of the dead lovers, locked in each other's arms, by the cruel parent. The air is a variant of the Star of the County Down and, like it, pentatonic.

### **Gosford's Fair Demesne**

Gosford Castle and Estate lie just by the village of Markethill in Co. Armagh. The only other version that I know of came from Jim O'Neill of Markethill. Collected by Sean O'Boyle and Peter Kennedy in 1952 it is on RPL 18480 of the BBC Archive. This is one of those abundant stories of a pair of lovers (fortuitously overheard by the songmaker) one of whom has doubts of the other's love which are cleared up by a single fervent avowal of devotion. The words Sarah Anne sings were got from Nigel McClatchey of Portadown, Co. Armagh who had them to a different air from the nearly hexatonic one which Sarah Anne remembers and uses.

### **Carrickmannon Lake**

The late Richard Hayward recorded a version of this on a 78 rpm record, and included it in his 'Ireland Calling' (Glasgow, n.d.). I know of no one who sings this song apart from Sarah Anne and people who live in the area where it is set and the County Down people sing a somewhat different air and slightly different words. Carrickmannon lies between Saintfield and Killinchy (about 15 miles south of Belfast). Drumreagh is a townland nearby and the Blackwater River is one of dozens of that name in Ireland but this one flows through Drumreagh and then to the sea on the west side of Stransford Lough at Ardmillan I wonder whether the strength in tradition of the purely local song has not been underestimated. It seems to me that local songs with which a singer can identify have a more powerful grip, answer a more immediate need and are therefore more easily transmitted within their own area than the most powerful ballad story.

### **The Fisher's Cot**

This song was made specially for Sarah Anne. 'The Poet' Jimmy McGurk of Carland (between Donaghmore and Coalisland) heard her sing and made a song incorporating the names of many places on the western shore of Lough Neagh, the names of Sarah Anne's old school and present church (King's Island) and Clanoë, the parish of her birth. It is perfectly within the tradition of songs where an exile or aged person looks back on 'days when but a boy'. The verses, sent to her via the local bread delivery man, were set to the air with its variable 7th by Sarah Anne. The local song-maker survives as a receding figure in Ireland. Sarah Anne describes McGurk's talent saying: 'He's the sort of a man who, if his wife emptied out a half pound of tea, would write you a song on the tea bag.' Others of his songs are known around Coalisland.

*John Moulden, December 1977*

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