

1.08 A Galway gentleman piper.

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In *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Chicago, 1913), p. 183, Francis O'Neill has a brief notice of a Galway gentleman piper:

Casual but provokingly meagre mention has been made of a "Gentleman Piper" named Edward Blake, of Castlegrove, near Tuam, County Galway. He is said to have been "a beautiful performer." Having been referred to as an ancestor of the late Edward Blake, MP for County Longford, he probably flourished in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Notwithstanding that O'Neill gives his forename as 'Edward', the piper in question is likely to have been John Blake of Belmont, Tuam, co. Galway - 'incomparably the best performer on the Irish pipes in the country' - who died 11 March 1866 in London, where he had resided for fifteen years (*Galway Vindicator*, 28 March 1866). An obituary in the *Tuam Herald*, 24 March 1866, depicts a man who was talented in several ways besides music:

With regret we have to announce the death of John Blake, late of Belmount, Tuam, which took place in London on the 11th inst. This gentleman, though living out of Ireland for some fifteen years, is remembered for his remarkable athletic powers which he possessed with the very rare combination of extraordinary intellectual gifts. Owing to an unconquerable backwardness, and a strangeness of disposition that is but too often the accompanier of genius, he never could be induced to turn his great mental faculties to any account; but, though he showed in a considerable degree the same dislike to an exhibition of his physical strength, still it was often enough displayed to make him celebrated as, probably, the best thrower of the sledge in three kingdoms. A good many years ago at the fair of Ballinasloe, where some of the first sledge throwers in Ireland were assembled, he beat his nearest competitor by the extraordinary distance of 15 yards. We saw him long after, when he was past his prime, throw an 11 lb. hammer 66 yards. In intellect he comprised the highest talent for poetry, painting and music, the last of which made him known as, beyond comparison, the best performer on the Irish pipes in the country. His perfections of moral and social character were equal to the others. We can safely say that Ireland might indeed be proud of him, had he possessed the single quality of making himself known. For ourselves we surely shall never see his like again. - *May he rest in peace.*¹

One talent of Blake's not eulogised above was his skill in repairing and maintaining pipes, which he was remembered as doing for travelling professional players. However, his family were not enamoured of wandering pipers marching up the avenue of the big house, as the following anecdote makes clear. A collector for the Irish Folklore Commission took it down in the Belmont area in May 1937 from Paddy Fitzpatrick, a farmer aged eighty-eight, who had heard it sixty years before from a Mikey Fogarty, who had also lived around Belmont. The original account is in Irish and a translation follows:

¹ For a copy of this obituary, I wish to thank Patrick Melvin, The Oireachtas Library, Leinster House, Dublin 2.

There was a gentleman of the Blakes in Blake's Hill west of Belmont and he was a great man for repairing pipes. It was the son who used to repair the pipes. A poor piper came in this direction one day because he had heard mention of the young Blake and the way he was able to repair pipes. When he came to the door of the big house he spoke to Old Blake. 'Whereabouts is Blake of the pipers?' he said. That was enough. It was a great insult to Old Blake to hear this speech. He closed the door on the poor piper's heels and called the son. 'Put out your tools for me,' he said. This was done. The father carried the pipemaking tools down to the lake and threw them into the middle. They are there since.²

As his obituaries state that Blake had lived in London for fifteen years before his death in 1866, he would have left Ireland in 1840 or 1841. He is very likely to have been a good age at the time of his death: the writer in the *Tuam Herald* stated that he had seen Blake throw the hammer when he was well past his best, and this would have been before c.1840.

Blake was also celebrated in a song to be found on a ballad sheet in the National Library of Ireland, which Colm Ó Lochlainn republished in what was to become the bible of the 1960s ballad-boom, *Irish Street Ballads* (Dublin, 1939), pp 22-3:

THE PIPER'S TUNES

As I rov'd thro' the town to view the pretty lasses,
The old maids with a frown, peeped at me through their glasses,
To Cove we will go down to view the lasses pretty
And the sailor-men also which sets forth all its beauty.

CHORUS

Ri-too-ral-ah, Ri-too-ral-oo-ral-ad-dy, Ri-tooral-ooral-ah, Ri-tor-ral-oo-ral-ad-dy.

There's Captain Burke of Grove, a very famous name, sirs,
He keeps the buck and doe, and hunts the sporting game, sirs,
He winds the whip and spur, and makes the hunters rattle,
And when that home he comes he'll surely crack a bottle.

John Blake for to promote, he plays some tunes so merry;
He gave some charming notes to banish melancholy,
He'll then blow up the pipes to play the tune "Brave Larry,"
You'll until you die to hear "Sweet Paddy Carey."

He play the Prussian Wars, the falls of the Boyne Water,
Jeanette and Jeannot and the March of Alexander,

² Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin, MS A 354, pp 244-5. The translation is my own. I am very grateful to Bairbre ní Fhloinn for a copy of this account, and to Dr Séamas Ó Catháin, head of the Department of Irish Folklore, for permission to publish it in translation.

The blooming White Cockade, the Old Brigade is coming,
O'Connell's in for Clare and All the bells are ringing.

He played the Colleen Bawn, the banks of Kitty's Cottage,
The affermonious jig, called - My mother's mess of pottage.
The Wexford Rakes in style, an Trip the world before him,
The Sailor's Hornpipe, and Garryowen and Glory.

He played Kitty from Athlone, with Moreen Mora Glanna,
Noreen on the road, and the flashy Rakes of Mallow.
Aughrim's overthrow, and the fall of Carrig Castle,
Brave Sarsfield took command at many a famous battle.

He played the Chorus jig, the ancient Ladies Fancy,
Jack and the Jug of Punch, and the Bonnie highland laddie
The Ale-house in great glee, with the Glass of brandy
The Roving sporting wheel - My love he is a dandy.

Nora Creena, he can play with all the variations,
The Ramblers from Tralee, the De'il among the Tailors.
The Job of journey work, and the Boy she left behind her,
The song of Paddy Whack, and Tally-hi-ho the grinder.

He played up Bob and Joan, with Ju Ju joice the joker
The famous jig Tow-row, that was kept for Captain Croker.
The Ball of Ballinafad, and the Banks of Bannow
Plunkett's Moll in the wad, and Shawn O'Deer a'Glana.

He played of Bonaparte who crossed the Alps in winter,
The Union hornpipe, and the Killinick fox hunters,
The song of Patrick's Day, and the jig of Paddy Carroll
And each boy will Kiss the Maid behind the whiskey barrel.

So now I'll sing no more, because my song is ended
If I said anything wrong I hope you're not offended
Of hornpipes, jigs and reels, I'm sure I told you many,
Get up and shake your heels, 'tis better sport than any.

Not surprisingly, 'The Piper's Tunes' is rarely sung, as it is of more interest to instrumentalists than singers; indeed, the only person I have personally heard singing it is Seán Garvey, who is both an instrumentalist and singer. Quite a number of the tune-titles mentioned would be recognised today, but some others appear to have vanished. The song

probably dates from before Blake's departure to England. The mention of Cobh, co. Cork, in verse one means that it was composed before 1849, when Cobh was renamed Queenstown in honour of Queen Victoria's visit that year. 'O'Connell's in for Clare' is likely to be a variant of 'O'Connell's Welcome to Clare', a tune that the Galway piper, Paddy Conneely, composed to celebrate Daniel O'Connell's famous electoral victory of 1829.³

The song would have had a particular resonance for Colm Ó Lochlainn (1892-1972). Besides being an Irish scholar, typographer and proprietor of Three Candles Press (among other accomplishments), he was, to use his own words, 'an indifferent player' of the Highland and union pipes. During the 1920s and 30s he used to exchange lessons in Irish for tuition on the pipes with James Ennis (1885-1965), and Seamus Ennis had fond memories of Colm's singing and playing the piano in the house in Finglas. In 1938 Colm gave Seamus his first job, at the Three Candles Press, where his duties included editorial work on *Irish Street Ballads*, in which appeared, coincidentally, some songs from his mother, Mary (pp 220-1). Seamus later worked on *More Irish Street Ballads*, but this was not to be published until 1965.⁴

No air for 'The Piper's Tunes' is either given or named on the original ballad-sheet in the National Library of Ireland. However, the metre of the song demonstrates that it could be sung to 'Bob and Joan', one of the tunes mentioned in it, and this is the air Ó Lochlainn gave. 'Bob and Joan', found in both 9/8 and 2/4, is familiar to everybody as the tune of 'Courting in the Kitchen.' Less familiarly, it was the air of 'The Rakes of Stoneybatter,' a bawdy eighteenth-century song, and it was under the title, 'Stoneybatter', that Breandán Breathnach published a version of the tune, notated from the piper John Potts (1871-1956), in 1963.⁵ The first part of this tune is now best known as part one of 'The Butterfly', a beautiful slip-jig that the fiddler Tommy Potts created out of two of his father's tunes.

End.

³ O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, p.215. See also article 5 by James O'Brien Moran.

⁴ Diarmaid Breathnach & Máire ní Mhurchú (eag.), 1882-1982: *Beathaisnéis a cúig* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1997), lgh. 57-61.

⁵ Breandán Breathnach (eag), *Ceol Rince na hÉireann* [I] (Baile Átha Cliath, 1963), lgh. 27, 91.