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Audience Influence on the Composition, Revision and Interpolation of Traditional Irish Ballad Narrative

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**Audience influence on the composition,
revision and interpolation of traditional
Irish ballad narrative**

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Technological University Dublin

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirement
for the award of
PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) by Prior Publication

School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences
Technological University Dublin

Supervisor: Dr. Paddy Dolan

August 2020

Abstract

The following thesis critically examines the essential thematic malleability of traditional Irish song narrative, with particular focus on the penetrative influence of the audience on both composer and performer alike. Such narrative fluidity is specifically examined within the context of works narrating attested historical events, output which could be reasonably assumed to adhere to factual and chronological consistency. The research concludes that the audience continuously exerts a powerful cultural influence on the performance space, and further demonstrates the considerable extremes that both composers and singers will routinely embrace in order to satisfy the constantly shifting demands of their audiences, even if this is to be ultimately achieved at the expense of historical fact. The five peer-reviewed papers documented in the present work examine distinct, yet simultaneously interrelated, ethnomusicological trajectories, namely: the noted Irish horse-racing ballad ‘Skewball’; and the specific sub-genre of death ballads found throughout the Irish Republican song tradition. Section 1.1 of the thesis details the cultural and musicological interplay between singers, composers and the audience, as evidenced in each of the published articles under consideration. Section 1.2 discusses the theoretical and methodological approach deployed within the original research, while Section 1.3 further explores the associated thematics of anti-colonialism and heroism, again within the specific context of the published articles under review. With a view to facilitating a more rigorous interrogation of the published research, the thesis further expands the trajectory of the original papers by examining composer-singer-audience dynamics within broader academic frameworks. Thus, Section 2.1 considers the excision, interpolation and censorship of traditional song narrative in more diverse ethnomusicological, social and political contexts. The resultant cultural outcomes of such manipulations — both intended and unintended — along with the more noted

academic disputations surrounding same, are also comprehensively analysed. Section 2.2 critically considers some of the inherent difficulties of song classification and associated nomenclature within the wider canon of traditional song. Such issues are particularly problematic in terms of suitably housing a text of such noted diversity and longevity as ‘Skewball’, a challenge which is similarly reflected in musical output from the militant Irish Republican tradition, with all of its attendant ideological subtlety and nuance. By expanding the thesis beyond a simple re-examination of the original articles themselves, the final two sections are deliberately presented as an additional interrogation of the published research and to further complement the successful peer-review and editorial processes.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis, which I now submit for examination for the award of PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) by Prior Publication, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) by Prior Publication of the Technological University Dublin and has not been submitted in whole or in part for an award in any other institute or university.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the Technological University Dublin's guidelines for ethics in research.

The Technological University Dublin has permission to keep, lend or copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material be duly acknowledged.

Signature:

Seán Ó Cathla

Date:

13 August 2020

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Foreword: Heroes

The continuous scholarly motivation to ‘add to the existing body of literature’, ‘break new ground’, ‘question established thinking’ or ‘bridge deficiencies in the narrative’, are among the many well-known and varied impetuses regularly encountered while navigating any field of academic discourse. Consequently, their reiteration as part of the introduction to the present body of work would prove to be as perfunctory as it would superfluous. It must be noted, however, that such scholarly endeavour must also be necessarily counterbalanced (if not, in fact, outweighed) by a lasting personal attachment to the research subject itself. It would be remiss, therefore, to commence the following thesis without due reference to my own particular relationship with the subject matter under review.

The motivation behind each of the research articles included in this PhD by Prior Publication emanates primarily from a life-long love of traditional Irish song and dance music. Beyond simple aesthetic appeal, my relationship with these traditional art forms is equally informed with a commensurate esteem for their robust longevity, being as they are, representative expositions of a vibrant, living cultural continuum that has survived centuries of socio-political turmoil in Ireland. The vast corpus of traditional Irish song and dance music has been transmitted to contemporary audiences by those innumerable women and men who undertook the immense task of cherishing, preserving and performing such output over the course of many centuries. That such endeavour was undertaken in the face of sustained colonial assault makes their achievements all the more remarkable. Without the continued dedication of these composers, singers, musicians, dancers, teachers, listeners, collectors and transcribers, there is no question but that today, we would have a considerably diminished corpus of traditional Irish music, song and dance — if indeed, we had one at all. These are the

great cultural heroes who are owed such an immeasurable debt from those of us who continue to enjoy traditional Irish music and song, in what is unquestionably a time of unparalleled popularity for the respective genre. Unfortunately, most of these same heroes are similarly notable for their anonymity: unlike their output, most will forever remain ‘unsung’.

Traditional singing has been a constant in my own life for as long as I can remember and the performance of song — sometimes public, but more often than not private — remains for me a daily experience. Alongside my own attempts at musical endeavour, I continually enjoy listening to singers, watching singers, learning from singers and perhaps above all else, immersing myself in the stories related by such performers via their repertoire of song. Indeed, it is often from such narratives that I have first learned of individuals who would later become my own lifelong heroes, many of whom populate the narratives of the songs contained in the published research under consideration. I am reliably told that my first foray into public performance was at three years of age, “singing ‘Nancy Spain’ to the top of your voice”, while sitting on my mother’s lap as we made the journey on the Number 77 bus from my home in Tallaght to visit my grandparents in the city centre. When informed by musical expression, such memories of intimate family moments become forever engraved in the consciousness, with both occasion and song becoming inextricably linked for all involved. My own life has had an abundance of such associations: my grandmother Sarah showing me the spot on Church Street where eighteen year-old IRA volunteer Kevin Barry was arrested and telling me of his execution by hanging “in Mountjoy Gaol, one Monday morning”, as per the famous ballad; my grandfather Ned’s love of the Kerry War of Independence narrative, ‘The Valley of Knockanure’; my grandfather Vincent singing the historical epic of the Great Hunger, ‘Skibbereen’; shouldering the coffin of my grandmother

Nancy from Ballyfermot church to the strains of ‘The Valley of Slievenamon’, in a final farewell to her beloved Tipperary. In later years, I was most fortunate to meet my wife Fiona — someone with an unshakable *grá* for Republican song — while helping to organise fundraising ballad nights for the families of Republican prisoners in my locality. Finally, and in what will forever remain my most enjoyable musical experience, I share a quiet *sean-nós* song every evening with our beautiful daughter Cáit, who will also happily deliver a perfectly-timed hornpipe, reel or slip jig across the kitchen floor, in spite of a gentle reminder that her father’s banjo playing can more often than not be “*píosa beag rósciobtha don damhsa áirithe seo.*”

While academic research is, generally speaking, a wholly solitary pursuit, it unquestionably impacts on those closest to the researcher. It is my firm belief that without the patience and understanding of loved ones, very little by way of academic endeavour would ever be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. One of the primary thematic trajectories of the following research is that of ‘heroism’. With that in mind, I wish to dedicate this PhD by Prior Publication, along with all of my academic output, to both my daughter Cáit and my wife Fiona — the two greatest heroes that I’ve ever known.

Chronological List of Publications

This PhD by Prior Publication comprises of the following five peer-reviewed journal articles:

1. **‘Horses for Discourses?: The Transition from Oral to Broadside Narrative in ‘Skewball’**, *Current Musicology*, no. 94 (Fall 2012), pp. 67-96 (Columbia University Press: New York, NY).

2. **‘In Search of the Original ‘Skewball’**, *Ethnomusicology Ireland*, no. 2/3 (July 2013), pp. 61-71 (International Council for Traditional Music).

3. **“‘Then to Death Walked, Softly Smiling’”: Violence and Martyrdom in Modern Irish Republican Ballads’**, *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 61, no. 2 (Summer 2017), pp. 262-86 (University of Illinois Press: Champaign, IL).

4. **“‘Young Men of Erin, Our Dead are Calling’”: Death, Immortality and the Otherworld in Modern Irish Republican Ballads’**, *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies*, no. 8 (June 2017), pp. 113-44 (Firenze University Press: Firenze).

5. **‘Ann Flood, Mairéad Farrell and the Representation of Armed Femininity in Irish Republican Ballads’**, *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 65, no. 3, (Fall 2021), pp. 471-96 (University of Illinois Press: Champaign, IL).

Thesis Presentation

The pursuit of a PhD by Prior Publication is an effective balancing act for the academic. While the published research must form the fundamental basis of the thesis, an excessive emphasis on same renders the work unduly repetitive and adds little to the subject under review. Similarly, while the broader body of academic literature in which the published works are housed must also be thoroughly interrogated, too diverse an analytical spectrum at the expense of the original works risks producing an entirely divergent topic for consideration. In consciously seeking to avoid either pitfall, I have divided the overarching critical document that forms the main body of my thesis into two distinct sections. The first focuses specifically on the published papers themselves, while the second further examines the original research outcomes in more diverse scholarly landscapes.

Section 1.1 reconsiders the symbiosis between the singer/composer and the audience as concluded in the five published works, by further examining their mutual influence and cultural interdependence. Section 1.2 provides an analytical overview of the various research methodologies deployed within the original research, the at times broad parameters of which were necessarily dictated by the diversity of the subject matter documented. Section 1.3 explores the associated thematics of anti-colonialism and heroism, both of which are analysed within the very specific context of the published works under review. While continuing to draw upon the methodologies and conclusions of the published articles themselves, Section 2 expands upon these parameters by positioning the original research within broader ethnomusicological, social and political contexts, thus facilitating an additional academic interrogation of the subject matter, which aims to further solidify the successful peer-review and editorial processes. Section 2.1 focuses on the deliberate manipulation of song narrative

throughout the wider traditional canon, along with its varied motivations and cultural consequences. Section 2.2 examines the significant challenges involved in successfully classifying and housing a text as multifarious as ‘Skewball’, along with comparable difficulties evident throughout the genre of Republican song, where even the very descriptor itself has proven to be a cause of regular disputation.

Regarding the latter, as the term “Republican ballads” has been used extensively throughout the present work, a brief rationale for its deployment is perhaps appropriate. Even during the current period of relative peace, the descriptors “Republic”, “Republican”, “Republicanism”, etc. remain highly-contested terminologies within Irish political and historical discourse. It should be noted that such contention does not solely emanate from varying theoretical interpretations of Irish Republicanism — nor, indeed, from what socio-political framework ‘The Republic’ will ultimately consist of — but will more regularly concern the morality of armed struggle as a constituent element of Republican ideology. Along with those who resolutely reject the use of force as a means towards achieving Republican objectives, such disputations will also regularly inform the worldview of those previously armed Republicans who have in due course eschewed the path of militancy themselves. For the latter, armed struggle represents an expedient tactic to be deployed only when all other political alternatives have been exhausted or suppressed; for others, it transcends such diminution, often becoming elevated into an elementary principle of Republican doctrine in the process. While the political mainstream may well view such essentialised nuance as an archaic abstraction, the issue of Republican legitimacy and continuity remain of fundamental ideological importance to those who remain committed to the necessity of armed struggle as an intrinsically justified response to continued British jurisdiction in Ireland. As the presented research consists of biographical accounts of Republican volunteers from numerous (and more

often than not, mutually antagonistic) organisations, it was necessary to carefully navigate several conflicting Republican worldviews simultaneously. The question of when someone can be safely considered ‘a good Republican’ — or indeed, when he/she ‘ceases’ to be so — presents a wholly subjective ideological conundrum that is largely impossible to untangle, and is certainly one that goes considerably beyond the parameters of ethnomusicological research. With this in mind, I have deployed the term ‘Republican’ universally throughout both the current thesis and in all previous research articles. This is not to ignore the intense contestation over such terminology, but rather is a pragmatic recognition that the composers of said works would no doubt have regarded the personalities narrated therein as ‘Republicans’, as indeed — and perhaps more importantly so — would the respective characters themselves. Furthermore, the descriptors “violent Republicanism”, “physical-force Republicanism”, “militant Republicanism” etc., have been used interchangeably throughout to delineate the active engagement in and/or support for armed struggle in pursuit of an independent Irish Republic. This is not to discount exclusively political approaches towards the advancement of Republican objectives, but is rather a reflection of the armed thematic presented within the papers under review.

Section 5.5 of Technological University Dublin’s *Graduate Research Regulations* (7th ed.) is not prescriptive regarding either style guide or referencing system for the final submission of a PhD by Prior Publication. As the author-date system had been previously deployed in the majority of the published articles, this referencing method has been applied universally throughout the present work to both final and in-text references, as well as to all footnotes. In the interest of continuity, all of the published papers have been amended accordingly. As all five articles are presented in one single section, footnotes run sequentially and do not show the same numbering as

in their original publication. The texts themselves remain unedited, except for the abstracts to both ‘Skewball’ papers which at editorial request were incorporated into the main bodies of the papers as introductions. They both appear here in their original abstract form. ‘In Search of the Original ‘Skewball’’ was written and submitted prior to ‘Horses for Discourses?: The Transition from Oral to Broadside Narrative in ‘Skewball’’ (2012), but due to the length of the journal’s editorial process, was published subsequently in 2013. Given the chronology of the information presented in both papers, the latter should be considered first. The final peer-reviewed paper — ‘Ann Flood, Mairéad Farrell and the Representation of Armed Femininity in Irish Republican Ballads’ — was accepted for publication as the current work was nearing completion and will be published by the University of Illinois Press in 2021. In line with Technological University Dublin’s regulations and with the agreement of my supervisor, this paper has also been included in the following thesis.

Overarching Critical Document

Out from many a mud-walled cabin eyes were watching through the night,
Many a manly heart was beating for the blessed morning light.
Murmurs rang along the valley to the banshee's lonely croon,
And a thousand pikes were flashing by the rising of the moon.

— Luke Kelly ('The Rising of the Moon', 1967)

Ní bhrisfidh siad mé mar tá an fonn saoirse agus saoirse mhuintir na hÉireann i mo chroí. Tíocfaidh lá éigin nuair a bheas an fonn saoirse seo le taispeáint ag muintir na hÉireann go léir. Ansin, tchífidh muid éirí na gealaí.

(They won't break me because the desire for freedom and the freedom of the Irish people are in my heart. A day will come when all of the people of Ireland will show this same desire for freedom. It's then that we'll see the rising of the moon.)

— IRA volunteer Bobby Sands (Day 17 of hunger strike, 1981)

Section 1.1

‘Skewball’ and the Representation of Death in Irish Republican Ballad Narrative: Audience Influence, Reaction and Expectation

And the public gets what the public wants.

— The Jam (‘Going Underground’, 1980)

In seeking to bridge the significant time frame between the earliest printed version of ‘Skewball’ (Roud: 456/Laws: Q22) to which a date can be definitively assigned (Souter 1818:526) and the actual date of the horserace itself (1752), ‘In Search of the Original ‘Skewball’’ examined a diversity of primary sources with a view towards locating possible earlier incarnations of the text. The research uncovered a previously unpublished MS version of the ballad housed among the Filgates of Lisrenny Papers in the Louth County Council Archive Collection, Dundalk. The handwritten dating of the text to 1764 revealed this transcription to be the earliest documented version of ‘Skewball’ hitherto unearthed, and confirmed the ballad’s well-established existence in Irish song tradition prior to its later popularity as a printed broadside in England and beyond. A particularly noteworthy feature of Filgate ‘Skewball’ is the presence of the speaking horse motif throughout, a dramatic device excised almost universally in later broadside versions. Here, we can observe a documented sporting event appropriated by oral tradition, with the historical narrative effectively rewritten by the insertion of such an unmistakably folkloric theme. Given the attested Irish folklore tradition of horses retaining human faculties, such editorial input would not have risked breaching any social convention and was clearly undertaken quite deliberately with a view to enhancing the ballad’s reception among its putative folk audience.

Such deliberate narrative manipulations are comprehensively analysed in ‘Horses for Discourses?: The Transition from Oral to Broadside Narrative in ‘Skewball’’, which investigates the evolution of Filgate ‘Skewball’ through to its popular dissemination as a nineteenth-century broadside. This article argued that the excision of the speaking horse thematic from later publications was quite consciously undertaken and was representative of a modernising shift in worldview that accompanied contemporary advances in literacy and industrial modernity. A comparative analysis of all extant broadside printings revealed that numerous attempts at excising this thematic all singularly failed, thus significantly compromising the ballad’s narrative chronology in the process. Combined with the four verses interpolated into Filgate ‘Skewball’, it was argued that these revisions were a deliberate attempt at obscuring the mythological significance of the ballad’s folkloric narrative so as to present the work solely as an historical account detailing the triumph of a sporting underdog. It was further demonstrated that broadside printers were also motivated to edit and amend their published works by a perhaps more fundamental motivation — the desire to make their wares more appropriate to the tastes of their target sales audience.

That the manipulation of attested historical fact was not exclusively restricted to such modernising (or, indeed, economic) considerations was examined in “‘Then to Death Walked, Softly Smiling’’: Violence and Martyrdom in Modern Irish Republican Ballads’. This article interrogated how the key ideological constructs of heroic martyrdom and self-sacrifice have been signified and interpreted within the broad canon of Irish Republican death ballads. The research demonstrated that narrative representations of sacrificial death were not solely restricted to ballads detailing acts of self-immolation (specifically the Republican hunger-strike), but rather enjoy a significantly broader commonality across the canon, thus reflecting the widespread

elevation of the tropes of sacrificial endurance and heroic martyrdom within the militant Republican tradition. The paper concluded that in order to portray all Republican deaths as a form of self-sacrificial martyrdom, Republican ballads pointedly obfuscate on the central thematic of Republican violence. It was demonstrated that this was achieved by the conscious manipulation of historical narrative with a view to portraying the Republican militant as suffering, rather than inflicting, the violence that he/she have themselves actually committed.

The modernising of ballad narrative discussed in ‘Horses for Discourses?: The Transition from Oral to Broadside Narrative in ‘Skewball’ was revisited in “‘Young Men of Erin, Our Dead Are Calling’: Death, Immortality and the Otherworld in Modern Irish Republican Ballads’. This article interrogated the tendency of Republican song to represent the interrelated tropes of heroic martyrdom and glorious immortality via the widespread promotion of posthumous, paranormal narratives. It was demonstrated that by utilising the immortal dead as ideological motivation for the living, Republican ballads seek to deliberately contrive an ambiguity between matters corporeal and ethereal, with representations of death deliberately obscured so as to provide a seamless continuity between the living and the dead. Several distinct subcategories of supernatural Republican ballads were identified, all of which display a marked diversity of posthumous representations. An analysis of thematically revenant ballads from the broader canon of folksong identified a total of six distinctive features common to such works, all of which have almost universally disappeared from traditional song in the modern era. A comparative analysis confirmed each of these criteria to be at odds with the standard format of the revenant Republican ballad. This positions the genre quite uniquely within the broader folksong tradition, demonstrating as it does, the marked absence of the modernising transition evident elsewhere. It was argued that this was due

to the ideal of heroic immortality, as represented by the revenant Republican hero-martyr, being too powerful and totemic a propaganda tool to permit its removal. Thus, the often explicitly essentialist framework of Irish Republicanism has acted as an effective barrier to the discarding of such revenant tropes from the Republican song canon, as has been demonstrated to be the case throughout the wider folksong tradition in modern times.

The final peer-reviewed paper — ‘Ann Flood, Mairéad Farrell and the Representation of Armed Femininity in Irish Republican Ballads’ — further demonstrates the status of Republican ballads as significant musical outliers. This paper examined the personal and cultural consequences for two prominent female Republicans, both of whom transgress the gender demarcation lines of war. While Ann Flood ‘succeeded’ by asserting her armed femininity in the context of male martial failure, Mairéad Farrell ‘failed’ through her death while on Republican active service. The ‘failure’ of the latter was ultimately erased, however, via her posthumous reappearance in the ballad narrative as a resurrected IRA volunteer. This article concluded that the militant Republican adherence to the essentialist tropes of death, martyrdom and resurrection, successfully supersedes the patriarchal worldview consistently promoted in traditional ballad narrative and in the process, facilitate alternative musical landscapes for the documentation of physical-force Irish Republican women.

The over-arching trajectory of each of the articles included for consideration in this thesis is, therefore, the fundamental and consistent malleability of traditional song narrative, an artistic freedom deployed to its utmost by composers and singers alike in order to meet the specific expectations of their respective audiences. The rich tapestry of historical subject matter retained within the corpus of traditional Irish song facilitated an

interrogation of the subject matter in the markedly diverse ethnomusicological landscapes discussed above. Despite the broad thematic canvass utilised, all of the works reviewed share one unmistakable attribute: when compared to the attested historical events that they purport to relate, multifarious factual inconsistencies are evident throughout their narratives. While the traditional ballad cannot, of course, be unquestioningly accepted as a source of indisputable historical fact, the works reviewed all display a notable manipulation and/or obfuscation of same, albeit in the differing social contexts cited. The current research has demonstrated such manipulation to have been undertaken both deliberately and with consistency in order to satisfy the very specific cultural expectations of the audience, with historical accuracy and chronology regularly demoted as a direct consequence.

Section 1.2

Research Methodologies and Theory

Music can and must be studied from many standpoints, for its aspects include the historical, social, psychological, structural, cultural, functional, physical, psychological, aesthetic, symbolic and others. If an understanding of music is to be reached, it is clear that no single kind of study can successfully be substituted for the whole.

— Alan Merriam ('Towards a Theory for Ethnomusicology',
The Anthropology of Music, 1964:35)

While all five published papers currently presented are thematically bound by the manipulation of historical fact in line with the specific social and cultural demands of a song's putative audience, they each, nonetheless, display a marked diversity in terms of their respective subject matter and resultant analytical focus. The current body of work, therefore, cannot be distilled exclusively into any one particular branch of research philosophy or another; rather, it is representative of a fluid combination of methodological approaches that have evolved over time, in tandem with the overarching ethnomusicological framework within which the research itself is housed. Such flexibility and interchangeability of methodology has been a consistent feature of ethnomusicological research since its initial recognition as a distinct academic discipline in the early 1950s, with the field long noted for its resistance to narrow definition (List 1979:1). The scholarly pursuit of demarcated parameters within which to comfortably locate the field has continually proven to be an elusive task, an endeavour dubbed by one noted contributor as a "harmless drudge" (Nettl 2005:3).

Broad delineations of ethnomusicology as “any type of human activity that conceivably can be related to music” (List 1979:1), or “a relation between music and society” (Aubert 2007:9) or “the study of why, and how, human beings are musical” (Rice 2014:1) — while all undoubtedly accurate and rigorously arrived at — ultimately conceal a vast multiplicity of academic sub-genre that must be considered when discussing the varied methodological approaches taken. Nettl (2018) has noted the necessity of deploying multifarious methodologies to ethnomusicological research, describing the discipline as “a heterogeneous field [where] practitioners follow a large number of methods and styles of scholarship” (2018:105). Such a wide academic spectrum has been similarly noted by Post (2006) who defines ethnomusicology as “a multidisciplinary field . . . including musicology, anthropology, dance ethnology, folklore and sociology” (2006:4), further adding that the attendant research methodologies must also be sufficiently diverse so as to embrace the areas of “cultural studies, gender studies, geography, history, linguistics, political science, psychology and religion” (2006:4). The undeniably wide academic net cast by the discipline has not always been universally welcomed, with even its very recognition as a distinct academic field being the cause of public scholarly angst. Lieberman (1977), for example, pointed out the acute absence of “agreement as to its goals, boundaries, methods, requisite skills or curriculum” and that consequently, there was “no logical reason for [its] continued existence other than the purely social needs of its members”, pointedly dismissing it as a “pseudo-discipline” (1977:199). In the same article, Helm (1977) — while defending the academic integrity and independence of the field — conceded that “strictly speaking, ethnomusicology remains undefined” (1977:201). Indeed, even as late as 2012, Harrison acknowledged that “the theorisation of the field is still in its early stages” (2012:505).

Importantly, however, the manifest lack of clearly demarcated theoretical fault lines has not resulted in any scholarly hiatus, with the elasticity of methodological approach instead opening up a vast diversity of academic wells from which ethnomusicologists have continually drawn. Post (2011) notes the tendency of scholars to embrace the ‘uncertainty’ of ethnomusicology’s methodological parameters and in doing so, greatly expand upon their respective academic worldviews. Thus, ethnomusicologists should pursue “other disciplines for their frameworks, including linguistics, psychology, gender studies, cultural studies, geography and environmental studies”, along with “anthropology, area studies, history, philosophy and religion” (Post 2011:15-6). Guilbalt (2014) similarly notes how ethnomusicologists have continually “borrowed theories and methodologies from several disciplines, including not only anthropology, but also linguistics, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and more recently, cultural geography, rhetoric, psychoanalysis, and visual and media-technology studies” (2014:321). Post (2011) argues that such broad methodological brushstrokes are “typically necessary for in-depth understanding of musical expression in its social and cultural context” (2011:15). Indeed, Rice (2014:26) reminds us that such diversity and comparative approach are indispensable academic tools “if ethnomusicologists are to keep in balance their fascination with the way music works in particular cultures and their goal of contributing to a general understanding of human musicality” (2014:26).

Such a diverse methodological approach was essential in interrogating a text such as ‘Skewball’, a narrative that enjoys a multifarious existence over several centuries and multiple locations. As a ballad known primarily as a printed English broadside, song collections housed in the libraries of the University of Oxford (Bodleian), Cambridge University (Madden), along with the significant collection of broadsides retained by the Irish Traditional Music Archive (Dublin), were all mined

with a view towards providing a comprehensive overview of the printed format, a process which yielded a total of twenty-seven extant versions. In order to investigate the parallel manifestation of ‘Skewball’ in oral tradition, further archival research was undertaken in the National Library of Ireland (Dublin), Louth County Council Archive Collection (Dundalk) and the British Library (London). The robust longevity of ‘Skewball’ allowed a yet broader examination of the text, by the inclusion of interrelated oral versions collected by ethnomusicologists in North America during the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, along with the numerous commercial and field recordings of the ballad documented in Ireland and elsewhere as late as the 1970s.

While ‘Skewball’ has had numerous metamorphoses and exhibited significant shift in terms of the *dramatis personae* narrated, it is, nonetheless, representative of a static text in terms of the basic thematic, i.e. Skewball’s unexpected race victory. The research underpinning the analysis of Republican song required a considerably more fluid methodological approach, however, given the ever-changing events, personnel and methods of Irish Republicanism since the late eighteenth-century. The muscular, marching narratives of the 1798 Insurrection, for example, cannot be analysed with the same set of academic tools as those deployed when examining the pathos-infused ballads of dying hunger strikers from the 1970s and 1980s. If the revolutionary methodology changes, then clearly so too must the ethnomusicological.

While recent years have witnessed a welcome increase in the examination of Republican song (Rollins 2018; Parfitt 2019; Millar 2020), the genre remains relatively under-researched. Despite such academic lacunae, there are, nonetheless, a substantial volume of extant primary sources available which facilitated a rigorous and wide-ranging examination of the varied subject matter discussed in the published papers. Many of the Republican texts pertaining to the early twentieth-century were gathered

from the Samuels Collection (Trinity College, Dublin) and also from the extensive spectrum of materials housed in the Irish Traditional Music Archive (Dublin). The period immediately preceding the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising witnessed a multitude of Republican songbook publications, which not alone covered the revolutionary period of 1916-23, but also contained ballads documenting the various IRA campaigns of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, many of which appear in the present work. The recommencement of Republican armed struggle in 1970 again saw a major expansion of the attendant song canon, with both newly-composed and long-established material regularly appearing side by side in live performances, recordings and Republican songbooks. Regarding the latter, one in particular — *Songs of Resistance* (2001) — was thoroughly excavated as a contemporaneous source of Republican song, a text that was published in four separate editions over the course of the conflict, each time with expanded contents. Similarly, the multiplicity of commercial recordings from the 1970s and 1980s were also comprehensively examined for relevant material. The manifest sense of political ‘other’ pertaining to Republican song during what was a period of acute historical revisionism and cultural censorship, offered yet another methodological pathway: that of private recordings of performances for political prisoners. Two such recordings were examined as part of the current research, namely Christy Moore’s 1990 performance for Republican prisoners in Portlaoise Prison; and the 1991 album ‘Music from The Blocks’, performed and recorded (illegally) by IRA prisoners in Long Kesh.¹ Both recordings were widely copied and circulated among Republican supporters in the early 1990s, the possession of which were viewed at the

¹ ‘Music from The Blocks’ was subsequently digitised and officially released via the Sinn Féin Bookshop, Dublin. A sequel album — ‘Music from The Blocks 2’ — was also recorded by the Republican prisoners in Long Kesh and released at the time of the prison’s closure in 2000.

time as something of a marked political statement by their owners, during what was a period of continuing (yet diminishing) armed activity by the IRA.

To return to the specific ballads considered in the five published papers, each are, as noted, representative narratives of attested historical events, something which necessitated a historiographical approach to the interrogation of the facts behind the songs themselves, along with their varied *dramatis personae*. Importantly, however, these are historical events that have been recounted through the worldview of a composer (and subsequently delivered by a singer) with a specific audience in mind. The methodological approach cannot, therefore, be historiographical in isolation and must necessarily draw upon a wider spectrum of research philosophies in order to fully explain the manipulation of song narrative as posited.

Both papers detailing the evolution of 'Skewball' show a ballad in constant narrative flux. In oral versions, the audience are presented with an account of an attested horserace that has been effectively mythologised by the welding of folkloric motifs onto historical narrative. Here, attending to the expectations of an intimate folk audience is clearly of the essence and the historical chronology of the tale is demoted as a result. Consequently, the strict historical parameters of the narrative become irreversibly blurred, necessitating a broader methodology that simultaneously encompasses both historiography and folkloric studies. A contradictory tendency can be observed in the ballad's nineteenth-century incarnation, in which Skewball's human faculties are deliberately censored in order to more appropriately reflect an intellectual change in contemporary worldview. Had the ballad simply been interrogated as a stand-alone English broadside, musicological methodologies may well have sufficed. By reaching back into oral tradition, however, a folkloric approach allowed the analysis to be considerably expanded upon, with the reasons behind the editorial revisions of the

printed versions becoming unlocked in the process. Here, the simultaneous deployment of a sociological approach helped to successfully elucidate the narrative complexity of 'Skewball's evolution from the Irish fireside to the English racing track, a journey that witnessed the blunt jettisoning of folkloric, supernatural tropes along the way.

The examination of the Irish Republican song tradition necessitated a similarly wide-ranging and inclusive methodological approach. Again, the facts underpinning the various song narratives were ascertained from a necessarily rigid historiographical perspective. In examining Republican song, however, the attested events narrated are not, in themselves, sufficient analytical parameters. It is only when the very specific ideological contexts of Irish Republicanism are unpacked that the exceptional thematics of the song genre become apparent. Output depicting the heroic death and martyrdom of Irish Republicans effectively shuns the modernising tendency evident in broadside 'Skewball', with folkloric tropes and motifs widely deployed as supporting ideological constructs. Where popular ballad composition of the modern era had long since abandoned the antiquated thematics of revenant visitations and the otherworld, Republican song is notable for its retention of such long redundant tropes within its narratives. The unconventional melding of fictional, folkloric constructs with modern political narrative is musicologically unorthodox and was clearly undertaken with the specific ideological expectations of the Republican audience in mind. Further manipulation of attested historical fact can be observed in the noted tendency of such ballads to deliberately obfuscate accounts of Republican violence so as to enable their narratives sit more comfortably within the broader ideological adherence to the endurance, as opposed to the infliction, of political violence. A similar exceptionality was evidenced in the ballad narratives of Ann Flood and Mairéad Farrell who, as violent Republican females, manage to successfully elide the didactic sanction of patriarchy

commonly found in traditional ballad narrative. All of the above show the genre of Republican song to be a major musical outlier, not merely within political song, but across ballad tradition of the modern era in general, thus requiring a suitably diverse methodological trajectory. The analysis of Republican death and martyrdom, therefore, involved both a political and ideological interrogation of the ballads considered; the examination of the Republican otherworld required a political, ideological and folkloric approach; the article on militant Republican femininity necessitated a combination of methodologies that enabled a political, ideological, folkloric and gender analysis of the two ballads considered. The three papers on Republican song, therefore, are the culmination of an ever-evolving research trajectory that required a willingness to simultaneously embrace a multiplicity of methodological approaches in order to interrogate the complexity of Republican dogma through the medium of traditional song with sufficient academic rigour.

Section 1.3

Upsetting the Odds: Narrative Underdogs and the Trope of the Anti-Colonial Hero

Historically, a nation on the run did not sculpt or paint portraits, but it could, and did, sing.

— Tim Pat Coogan (*The IRA*, 2000:624)

While the primary academic focus of the presented research is, as stated, that of composer-singer-audience interactions, along with the consequent deliberate manipulation and interpolation of song narrative, all of the works under review are each individually informed by the dynamics of colonial power relationships. Consequently, they share a common thematic framework whereby their respective narratives are utilised as literary vehicles in which colonial injustice may be highlighted, and ultimately corrected, a consistent feature of the popular ballad described by Ehnenn (2014) as the process of “both subverting and reinscribing social convention” (2014:255). The blank canvass provided by ballad narrative through which such complex socio-political interplay could be interrogated — either via blunt assertion or subtle nuance — was of equal motivation in undertaking the body of research currently presented.

As part of an analysis of Irish Republican song, such an anti-colonial narrative trajectory is to be expected and requires little by way of introduction. However, given the somewhat unique specificities which continue to sustain the ideological framework of militant Republicanism, such injustices must necessarily be addressed through the deployment of markedly atypical literary paradigms in which colonial power dynamics are consistently inverted. Such output routinely extols the absorption and passive

endurance of British aggression by Irish Republicans. Consequently, acts of Republican violence are deliberately obfuscated in song narrative, with said violence ultimately portrayed as having been effectively endured by those same Republicans actually responsible for its infliction. Similarly, a broad array of heavily-nuanced literary devices are deployed throughout the genre to promote the concept of Republican ‘victory’, not in the traditional military sense, but as one of moral superiority against a vastly stronger and belligerent opponent — a subtle acknowledgment, perhaps, of the unlikelihood of an outright military victory by Republicans against the British state.

All versions of ‘Skewball’ promote the familiar trope of the triumphant underdog prevailing against all odds, a narrative guaranteed to please audiences since the Biblical defeat of Goliath. Regarding Skewball’s unexpected triumph over Grey Mare, we can observe a reversal of the prevailing power relationship similar to that already noted in the Republican song tradition. Whereas the latter is overtly anti-colonial by definition, such sentiment is not so readily discernible in ‘Skewball’. It must be remembered that Skewball and his owner Arthur Mervin were both English, thus depriving the narrative of the clear-cut colonial binary attendant to an unpredicted Irish victory against a stronger British opponent. Regardless, the politico-cultural significance of *any* unknown horse — Irish or otherwise — comprehensively defeating a noted favourite belonging to a member of the landed aristocracy would surely not have gone unnoticed by a local Irish audience. Indeed, that said horse belonged to Sir Ralph Gore — a British war hero and landlord of Cromwellian planter stock — would arguably have been cause for yet further celebration.

While acknowledging the obvious absence of any overt ‘Irish *versus* British’ thematic in ‘Skewball’, there is, in fact, an underlying anti-colonial dynamic located within the ballad’s pre-history. The established narrative of ‘Skewball’ as presented in

both oral and broadside versions is effectively only half the story and some further analysis of contemporary racing history is revealing in this regard. A particular favourite among the Irish public at the time was the champion mare Irish Lass, who had twice won the Royal Plate at The Curragh prior to Skewball's famous 1752 victory, in 1745 and 1748, respectively (Pick 1803:506). The popularity of Irish Lass stemmed not solely from her feats on the racetrack, but equally emanated from her being a native-born champion, a significant rarity in Irish racing circles at the time. The mare was the charge of "Mr. Archbold of Eadestown, near Naas" (Cox 1987:107), a short distance from The Curragh. As was common convention at the time, she was also popularly known by an alias, in this case, 'The Podareen (i.e. Paidrín) Mare', a name gained from the reputed wearing of rosary beads around her neck while racing (Cox 1897:109; Ó hÓgáin 1977:236). The extent to which Irish Lass/The Podareen Mare had caught the public imagination at the time can be garnered from the fact that an air was composed in honour of her numerous victories (Joyce 1909:303) which would in due course appear in Dublin theatres in the operatic production, 'Jack the Giant Queller' (Cox 1897:108; Royal Society of Antiquarians in Ireland 1909:206). A subsequent sporting ballad lauding Irish Lass/The Podareen Mare was duly composed, of which only a single couplet unfortunately survives (Shields 1985:5):

'Sit firm in the stirrups, my boy, do not fear,

You'll never be jostled by my father's grey mare.' (Cox 1897:109)

It will be noted that the almost exact same lyrics are found extensively throughout oral versions of 'Skewball':

'Stick close to your saddle, my boy, never fear,

We ne'er shall be beat by the gallant Gray Mare.' (Benton 1826:3)

'Stick tight to your saddle, my boy, never [fear],

For you ne'er shall be beat on the Plains of Ki[ldeer.]' (Thompson 1958:84)

'Keep close to your saddle, boy, ye need not fear

That e'er ye'll be beat by the famous grey mare.' (Peter Buchan MS)

The same lines also appear in the Stephenson broadside printing, a version which retained many of the narrative features of the oral tradition, most notably the motif of the talking horse:

'Then stick close to thy saddle, my boy, never fear,

Thou shall ne'er be beat by this charming grey mare.' (Harding B25:1785)

Shields (1985) notes the consistency in "style and treatment, as well as metre" (1985:10) between 'Skewball' and the two lines quoted by Cox, and given that both are "of Dublin provenance" (1985:10), suggests that the couplet may emanate from an existing text later used as a source for 'Skewball'. Both the location of The Curragh and the contemporary timeframe would further support this suggestion. More interesting, perhaps, is the additional verse quoted by Cox (1897), which he attributes to an

unreferenced version of 'Skewball'. It should be noted that the lines in question do not appear in any extant version of the ballad:

And when that they came unto the ending post,
Wicked Jemmy, he call'd for a bumper and toast:
'Here's a health to all sportsmen and to the grey mare
That lost all her cash on the Plains of Kildare.' (Cox 1897:115)

This same verse is also quoted (similarly in isolation) by Lawrence (1809), who notes the enduring popularity of 'Skewball' which he claims was "chanted about the streets of London to the well-known popular, merry tune of 'Little John Alcock of Petticoat Lane'" (1809:276). He claims that the ballad was consistently revised and amended since its original composition, so that "the words have been so misplaced, and the sense so transmogrified and improved by those . . . who labour diurnally in the Long Lane and other manufactories, that it is now, perhaps, impossible to recover the original song" (1809:276). Referencing the "Wicked Jemmy" lines quoted above, Lawrence claims that "the following verse only may be considered as really genuine" (1809:276). If these lines alone are to be regarded as "really genuine" in the context of the constant contemporary revisions of 'Skewball', we may safely assume that the same verse emanates from one of the very earliest versions of what Lawrence refers to as "the original song" (1809:276) and that "Wicked Jemmy" was a key character in the narrated events. As noted, "Wicked Jemmy" does not appear in any extant version of 'Skewball', in either oral or printed form. Thus, if we are to accept the above suggestion that a similar text preceded 'Skewball', then this verse is, in all probability, a surviving fragment of the now lost, 'The Ballad of Irish Lass'. The consequences of this for

‘Skewball’ are, of course, that the heroic epic of over 250 years (and counting) is simply an expedient — and somewhat opportunistic — revision of a pre-existing work. The charge of expediency is lent further credence by Lawrence’s suggestion — later reiterated by Cox (1897:115) — that ‘Skewball’ was an entirely spontaneous composition which was “said to have been written and sung on the occasion of the successful race by Squire Mervin’s chaplain” (1809:276). The ability of even the mighty Skewball to inspire the penning of an 11-verse ballad at the precise climactic moment of victory is obviously questionable, to say the very least. Here, a much simpler (and considerably less fantastic) explanation for the suggestion of lyrical spontaneity can be posited: given the understandable exhilaration following the unprecedented victory, Mervin’s chaplain (or one of his retinue), simply inserted the names of Mervin, Gore, Skewball and Grey Mare into ‘The Ballad of Irish Lass’. Thus, in a moment of hubris, the singer unwittingly consigned Irish Lass/The Podareen Mare to musical anonymity, while simultaneously launching Skewball’s 250-year career in popular song. It must also be remembered that Irish Lass had considerably more success on the racetrack than Skewball. Indeed, the latter’s only victory of note was that of ballad fame, identifying the gelding as something of a ‘one-hit-wonder’ in sporting — but clearly not musical — terms. That the unknown (albeit mythological) Skewball could ultimately embed himself in public consciousness ahead of a noted Irish champion shows how in this particular instance, myth superseded historical fact, with the fantastic, supernatural narrative of Skewball capturing the *zeitgeist* more readily than the actual racetrack successes of Irish Lass.

To return briefly to the couplet, “‘Sit firm in the stirrups, my boy, do not fear, / You’ll never be jostled by my father’s grey mare”” (Cox 1987:109): it can unfortunately never be ascertained which of Irish Lass’ numerous victories is being recounted in these

lines, but clearly her success as an Irish champion in a sporting arena of unquestioned English dominance was worthy of musical commemoration in both ballad and musical air. That Skewball should become immortalised via Irish Lass' own ballad is not to suggest, of course, any diminution of the latter's reputation: rather, it simply points to the ever-shifting sands of ballad narrative and the facility that it provides to both composers and singers alike to constantly (re)appropriate events and/or themes as necessary for their respective audiences. Simply put, when Skewball's unprecedented victory required a narrative framework for its documentation, one was expediently found to hand by either an opportunistic composer or singer, with Irish Lass' racing successes — along with the politico-cultural significance of her numerous high-profile defeats of English opponents — becoming duly lost in the process.

Regarding Skewball's victory, it will be noted that like all heroic underdog protagonists, he must effectively and cleverly play the inferior hand dealt to him. In order to successfully engage his stronger and much-favoured opponent, he must effectively change the rules of engagement to suit the occasion, in this case, via the assumption of human faculties. In an echo of Irish Republicans' deployment of the supernatural tropes of revenance and eternal immortality in order to achieve their own unconventional 'victory' in ballad narrative, a noted English favourite and her landed gentry owner can only be ultimately defeated by a mythological horse who is, in many respects, semi-human. Similar to the worldview promoted in Irish Republican song, efforts at overturning British domination of the sporting arena in Ireland seem only possible when approached via wholly unorthodox methods.

The heroic racehorse was not on his own in this regard, and the sporting field has been used elsewhere by ballad writers seeking to recalibrate colonial imbalance. The text 'Master McGrath' delivers an almost identical narrative to 'Skewball', in

which an Irish champion greyhound travels to England for a hare coursing match. On arrival, both Master McGrath and his owner are initially ridiculed by the assembled participants. The only additional character cited in the ballad is “Rose”, but there is a notable opaqueness as to whether or not this is the other competing greyhound. This is of itself significant, as given that coursing matches were almost universally run between two greyhounds, it would be expected that the opposing dog would also be named. Rose first appears in Verse 7, where due to her having a “master and keeper” (and, of course, being duly named), there is a certain implication that she is, in fact, an English greyhound:

And Rose stood uncovered, the great English pride.

Her master and keeper were close by her side.

They have let her away and the crowd cried, ‘Hurrah!

For the pride of all England and Master McGrath!’ (Ó Lochlainn 1939:66)

An interesting clarification as to the identity of Rose is contained in the contribution made by a Mr. M. McEniry to the Irish Folklore Commission in 1937. The respondent informed collectors that:

“[Master McGrath] was sent to England to run against the English dogs in a coursing match and, as the poem says, he came out victorious. ‘Rose’ was the name of the hare chased.”²

² ‘Master McGrath’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5162128/5156458/5197680?ChapterID=5162128>

(Accessed 14 February 2020).

As it would be highly improbable for a coursing hare to have been known by a specific name, it can be safely assumed that the national symbol of England was deliberately appropriated by the writer and interpolated into the narrative as a thinly-disguised political allegory.

Similar to events in ‘Skewball’, a mid-race conversation ensues between the two animals in which Rose immediately asserts her superiority over the Irish greyhound:

As Rose and the Master they both ran along.

‘Now I wonder’, says Rose, ‘what took you from your home?’

You should have stayed there in your Irish demesne

And not come to gain laurels on Albion’s plain.’ (Ó Lochlainn 1939:66)

Unperturbed, Master McGrath replies:

‘Well, I know’, says the McGrath, ‘we have wild heather bogs,

But you’ll find in old Ireland there’s good men and dogs.

Lead on, bold Britannia, give none of your jaw!

Snuff that up your nostrils!’ says Master McGrath. (Ó Lochlainn 1939:66)

Whether Master McGrath is addressing “Britannia” *en toto* at this juncture, with a view to asserting the superiority of Irish athleticism and prowess on the sporting field, or simply deploying the imminent death of the hare as an emblematic symbol of a wider political defeat of Britain at some point in the future, is surely irrelevant. In either instance, the result is clearly the same: the Irish greyhound has successfully wrested

colonial power back from the dominant, albeit temporarily and only with the assistance of supernatural narrative constructs, as similarly evidenced in ‘Skewball’.

Any ambiguity as to anti-colonial trajectory of the thematic is dispelled in the final verse:

The hare she led on with a wonderful view,
And swift as the wind o’er the green fields she flew.
He jumped on her back and he held up his paw —
‘Three cheers for old Ireland’, says Master McGrath. (Ó Lochlainn 1939:66)

The revised final lines of a later rendition further reinforce the political significance of the victory:

Well the hare she led on just as swift as the wind,
He was sometimes before her and sometimes behind.
He jumped on her back held up his auld paw —
‘Long live the Republic!’, says Master McGrath. (Soodlum’s Irish Ballad Book 1982:50)

While the identification of Rose as the hare clearly makes more narrative sense from the point of the view of the chronological flow of the ballad, its political significance as an allegory for a vulnerable and weakened ‘Britannia’, is considerably more pointed. Along with the anonymous English dog that Master McGrath has successfully outrun, he has simultaneously pursued the defenceless English hare, who he has pounced upon, trapped with his paw and presumably killed. As a figurative

representation of British colonial involvement in Ireland, the established roles have been unmistakably reversed, delineating Master McGrath's victory a considerable escalation on that achieved by either Skewball or, indeed, Irish Lass.

The trope of the victorious underdog overcoming insurmountable odds will by definition be infused with the interrelated thematic of heroism, a demarcation which will, of course, prove contentious. Given the prevailing anti-colonial thematic of the works discussed — along with the fundamentally binary nature of colonialism — who, or indeed what, constitutes a 'hero' will necessarily be in the eye of the beholder. That Irish Lass/The Podareen Mare, Skewball and Master McGrath are all sporting heroes is surely beyond disputation. Whether the animals would have welcomed the additional title of 'anti-colonial hero', is anybody's conjecture, but no doubt many of the song's audience would have appropriated them as such. Regardless of such interpretation, it is clear that each of the sporting ballads cited above can simultaneously project a dichotomous heroism, depending on the cultural vantage point of the audience. Such academic speculation is not available in the case of Republican song, however. Here, there is scant analytical space available for the thematic nuance evident in the above works, and any contention as to what 'type' of hero is represented is consequently redundant. Instead, it is simply a case of whether the characters in such narratives are regarded by the audience as heroes at all. To supporters of the Republican armed struggle, the *dramatis personae* narrated in the attendant song tradition are, by definition, indisputably heroic; to its opponents, they simply can never be. From the early 1970s onwards, this polarising and divisive aspect of Republican song was to prove a source of some considerable friction, not just among audiences, but more generally in terms of official state reaction to the potential propaganda value of such

output as a contemporary cultural adjunct to the IRA's renewed military campaign, a topic which will be explored in more depth in a later section.

Section 2.1

Traditional Song Narrative and the Audience: Revision, Interpolation and Censorship

I like to respect an audience; without them, you wouldn't be there.

— Seosamh Ó hÉanaigh (quoted in Mac Con Iomaire, 2007:362)

While the finely-balanced interaction between the singer and the audience is unquestionably at the heart of any performance, not all scholars have universally recognised this dynamic as the most definitive agent of song dissemination. Porter (1993) notes the thinking of Wilgus (1970) in this regard, who while conceding that “singers, context, transmission process, cultural meanings, and the like, had relevance” (1993:68), they were ultimately secondary to the narrative theme and concept of the ballad, which the latter regarded as “objects worthy of study in and for themselves” (Porter 1993:68). Thus, the text of the ballad should be considered solely as a literary output, in distinct isolation from its actual performance (Wilgus 1970:164). Of course, at a safe remove from a potentially hostile audience, an academic can make such bold evaluations without having to navigate the immediate consequences that a performer would. While Wilgus (1970) is essentially correct in the sense that the texts are, by definition, the very foundation stone of any ethnomusicological analysis, and are the necessary focal point of scholarly attention as a result, the active, dynamic context of performance and audience reception have an undeniably significant impact on the dissemination and survival of a song within the tradition. Indeed, Booth (1978) confers the delivered performance a more authoritative agency yet, insisting that “the ballad is by nature a performance and not a text” (1978:378). Without the symbiosis of a

performer and receptive audience, a ballad will forever remain a static, written text, devoid of musical articulation and will thus fail to enter the collective consciousness of the tradition and survive as a living artistic endeavour. Indeed, countless songbooks and broadside archives abound with such unperformed and long-forgotten output. Similar to Booth, Atkinson (2013:133-4) also emphasises that the ballad does not stand in isolation and via its public performance, acts as an essential binding agent between both singer and audience. He further extends the participants in this dynamic to also include composer, collector and scholar, all of whom are “representative of an essential process of reception” (2013:133) of the song. Porter (1993) also expands the parameters for analysis beyond simply the singer and the audience, positing that “beneath the narrative surface . . . are the stories of the song, . . . of the singer, . . . of the audience, . . . of the situation(s) in which the song is sung and of the observer” (1993:74).

However, while the composer has the luxury of time, and may take a more long-term and measured approach to satisfying the expectations of the audience, the singer — being at the coalface of public performance — may often have to do so in a completely *ad hoc* manner. Scholars have noted the propensity of singers to constantly adapt their performance style and repertoire in line with their audience’s specific requirements and cultural expectations (Long 1973:229), a process which raises considerable doubts around the notion of ‘pure’ folksongs emanating from a ‘pure’ tradition and by extension, a single, cohesive folksong community. As an organic, artistic phenomenon, a given song simply cannot be culturally hamstrung by the rigid idealistic parameters posited by folk essentialists and must reflect “the impact of personality upon tradition” (Long 1973:230). Ashton’s (1977) case study of Mayo-born singer James Murphy is informative in this regard. Finding himself in an English Midlands pub frequented by fellow Irish emigrants in the mid-1970s, Murphy deliberately abandoned much of his

previous repertoire, opting instead to embrace songs with “themes of Irish nationalism . . . and of emigration” (1977:14). The contemporary context — mass emigration from Ireland following the economic collapse of the early 1970s coupled with the height of the IRA’s bombing campaign in England — formed the contextual backdrop to the singer’s re-evaluation of his performance material, representing a musical shift that at the time would have required little by way of explanation to his audience.

Therefore, while the original thematic concept of a particular song is the preserve of its composer, and the nuance of delivery is very much that of its performer, the audience will by necessity always retain a ubiquitous and powerful influence over both. Such influential agency not only impacts upon the actual performance of the song, but also “acts as a constraint on the transmission, preservation and development” (Atkinson 2014:10) of same, with audience reaction ultimately functioning as “a process of ‘censorship’” (Atkinson 2014:10). Referencing the role of the audience as an effective ‘musical filter’ through which the performer’s content passes, Wehse (1975) notes how “a new song will only be admitted into folk tradition if its content and mode of expression fit the community’s ethos, and it must be related to a vital and relevant oral tradition into which it may be absorbed” (1975:325). He further argues that the composer must actually be a part of the community at which the work is directed, i.e. be a potential audience member themselves. Long (1973) also notes the audience’s transformative influence on the performer through “expression of approval and disapproval, curiosity and concern for relevance” (1973:229). In such circumstances, if not in actual control of the output, the audience certainly flexes some considerably influential cultural muscle regarding same.

Commenting on the socio-cultural restrictions imposed upon the performance space by the audience, Atkinson (2014) notes the exceptionality of traditional song by

pointing out that “[t]he repetition of ballads . . . [is] constrained by an encompassing, collective, cultural system, in a manner that is simply not applicable to conventional literature” (2014:11) or comparable ‘static’ forms of artistic expression. While a painting or a sculpture may be bought, sold and passed down through generations, it will ultimately always retain its original shape or form. Interpretations of the works or their respective popularity may vary through time, but the physical parameters of the piece itself remain steadfast. Even where edited or revised, written literature will appear in separate versions and be delineated accordingly. Not so with ballad narrative, however. Given its repeated performance as a ‘living’ artefact, the spontaneous nuance and delivery of the singer, the marked longevity and geographical spread of particular works, and the varying expectations of the audience, the ballad — rivalled only perhaps by its sister art form of traditional folklore storytelling — is distinguished for facilitating an exceptional narrative flexibility.

Ehnenn (2014) has noted how this same flexibility forms part of a significant paradox that lies at the very heart of ballad studies by referring to “the unique, dialectical relationship between the conforming regularity of the ballad form on the one hand and on the other, the fact that the ballad is a malleable narrative that is accepted as having, or perhaps even expected to have, multiple versions” (2014:254), a position, it should be noted, that has often been the cause of some significant disputation among scholars. Long (1973) states baldly that “without the periodic transfusion of radically new textual materials embodying the same or converging narrative themes, . . . the ballad *in sich* will die” (1973:236), thus becoming an extinct cultural artefact and not the living artistic expression previously discussed. Indeed, without the presence of receptive audiences to continually influence performers — and thus, indirectly participate in the revision and remoulding of song narrative as a consequence — it is

highly improbable that a text such as ‘Skewball’ would have enjoyed its two-and-a-half centuries’ existence.

The previously cited “multiple versions” (Ehnenn 2014:254) of an individual ballad narrative essentially emanate from interpolations of varying kinds: some accidental from simple mishearing of a rendition; others from the deliberate reworking of the narrative, by either composer or performer. The ballads analysed in the current research show evidence of both tendencies. The insertion and/or omission of entire stanzas (whether by singer or composer) may, of course, enhance or diminish the narrative, depending on one’s particular vantage point. The excision of Skewball’s gift of human speech, for example, would no doubt ‘tarnish’ the ‘folk’ dynamic of the text to the purist mindset, whereas for those of a more modernising tendency, it would render the text a more ‘realistic’ account of the actual race. This is not to forget, of course, the broadside seller, for whom it may well have made the ballad more marketable to his/her target sales audience.

While it has been established that the editorial interpolations of broadside ‘Skewball’ represented a shifting worldview brought on by increasing levels of literacy and sophistication in nineteenth-century English society, such a modernising dynamic was not a universal phenomenon of contemporary ballad culture. Noting the widespread proliferation of ballads among the English middle-classes during this period, Ehnenn (2014) reminds us that as a cultural pursuit, ballad singing was quite often disparaged as a “sentimental, even feminine, form of recreation” (2014:253). Such sentimentality was at times reflected in narratives that effectively spurned the modernising tendency of ‘Skewball’, preferring instead to culturally retreat to “the rural landscape and romantic past in a time of unrivalled industrial production and social change” (2014:253). Even allowing for such affectionate nostalgia, it is highly questionable whether the folkloric

trope of a talking horse who could accurately predict a race result, provide gambling advice, casually make a mid-race assessment of his opponent's position, encourage his jockey to "stick close to the saddle" and after winning the race, call for a toast to his defeated opponent, could have readily penetrated the contemporary social paradigm, as posited by Ehnenn (2014). Melancholic reaching for a pre-industrial past via ballad narrative was one thing: mythological animals with human faculties were clearly a step too far for nineteenth-century English sensibilities. Porter (1993:80) notes how British colonial expansion had a largely prohibitive impact on the acceptance (let alone promotion) of such nuanced folkloric motifs as evident in 'Skewball'. Furthermore, he argues that "[s]uspicion of the terms 'folklore' and 'tradition' . . . mirrors antipathetic class attitudes" (1993:80), adding that "[i]ssues of song and music in Britain are bound up with class structure, regional and national identities and policies of internal colonialism" (1993:84). He further points to the presence of such cultural complexities within the attendant scholarly discourse, noting how the British academic establishment has "largely ignored folklore as a discipline worthy of institutional structure" (1993:80).

As noted, the multitudinous revisions of 'Skewball' have succeeded in creating an entire suite of differing texts, with only the broad trajectory of the heroic victory of an underdog remaining in common across all versions. The overarching narrative of the ballad is inundated with revisions, excisions and interpolations, all of which have led to the transformation of the text from a pre-existing folkloric narrative of a talking horse who upset prevailing odds (and colonial convention in the process, if we are to accept that 'The Ballad of Irish Lass' was its prequel), to one of a simple horse race in which the unfavoured mount triumphed. Not alone was Skewball himself in all probability an expedient replacement of Irish Lass, but a whole array of differing opponents have similarly been inserted into the narrative at various stages, namely Maid Sportly, Miss

Sportl(e)y, Miss Portsley, Miss Sportsly, Miss Sprightly, or in later versions, Miss Grizzle, with American renditions offering yet further nomenclature. Indeed, the Filgate MS is the only documented version of ‘Skewball’ in which the defeated horse is accurately identified as Grey Mare. This is also not to forget, of course, the original welding of historical fact with folkloric trope in order to ‘create’ the ballad in the first place.

While the interpolations of ‘Skewball’ may well have been welcomed by its audience as suspense-building dramatic devices (regardless of the economic considerations previously discussed), they would without question have been beyond The Pale for the more traditionalist school of academic thinking. Scholars such as Cecil Sharp, Sabine Baring-Gould, Francis James Child, *et al*, all variously “subscribed to a devolutionary view whereby ballads suffered loss and deterioration the further they were removed from the purely imaginary social environment in which they had been nurtured, isolated from the effects of literary and social differentiation” (Atkinson 2013:127). Indeed, both Sharp and Baring-Gould argued strongly that “the effects of print were deleterious” (Atkinson 2013:127). Child went further still, by denouncing oral reinterpretations and interpolations as having a similarly corrupting agency, describing the majority of the texts that he himself had collected as being either “corrupted or mutilated, their stories deranged because some verses were missing or other spurious ones have been added” (Brown 2011:237). He roundly condemned such editorial efforts as “contemptible imitations” (Brown 2011:237) of traditional song, “typically imbecilic . . . fabrications [which] contained stanzas and other elements that were utterly out of place” (Brown 2011:237).

Similar to the inherent difficulties pertaining to the overall classification of traditional song, academic contention surrounding the interpolation of song narrative is

similarly doomed to subjectivity. For some scholars, they represent a base corruption from which a text will simply never recover; for others, they merely reflect the (re)creative impulse of the composer and/or the performer or, indeed, a shift in contemporary mores, and therefore constitute an essential element of the song's survival and progression within the tradition. Regardless of such disputation, their resultant contribution — particularly in works of anonymous composition — cannot simply be dismissed as 'corruptions' which in turn create 'faulty texts'. Atkinson (2014) convincingly counters such notions, arguing that "it is not a question of the text being 'faulty' . . . but of it being simply one possible exemplification out of many that could represent the same work, . . . even if this means that the resultant postulated work is one that encompasses an increasing degree of fluidity" (2014:20). He further cites additional interpolators such as "editors, printers, readers, actors, . . . censors, . . . performers [and] scribes" (2014:21) as being no longer perceived as "potentially hostile mediators of the originating intentions of authors and composers . . . but instead, they are acknowledged as essential collaborators in the creation of aesthetic artefacts" (2014:21) — a considerable leap into pragmatic realism from the stultifying claustrophobia of the ballad purists.

While the deployment of such academic rigidity as a defence of a potentially disappearing art form and 'tradition' — in Britain, at least — is laudable to a point, it essentially ignores the day-to-day realities of song as a constantly shifting and evolving artistic expression. In the case of broadside 'Skewball', the sheet printers and sellers simply sought to peddle a good story to an audience who wished to hear something exciting and entertaining in equal measure and, if possible, to which they could personally relate. Oral versions — while often absurd from a realistic, historical perspective — are clearly more acceptable from a scholarly viewpoint, due to their

appearance in relatively unedited form. Indeed, that ‘Skewball’ itself was in all probability the product of a clumsy interpolation into a pre-existing narrative further demonstrates the fragility of such essentialist thought. Ultimately, such academic conjecture is of negligible consequence to the audience, as the ballad requires but an entertaining storyline and a receptive listenership for its survival. Given the broad timeframe, geographical coverage and sheer diversity of artists and respective genre involved, ‘Skewball’ clearly had both to spare.

Unlike the multichotomous ‘Skewball’, Republican ballads are not notable for their interpolation of existing narrative, instead demonstrating a remarkable lyrical consistency, often over considerably prolonged timeframes. Where the narratives of such ballads do, in fact, show clear and consistent evidence of revision is not in the established lyrical content of existing works, but rather in the actual events that they purport to narrate. As noted previously, this manipulation and obfuscation of attested historical fact is achieved via (i) the construction of heavily-nuanced song narratives in which the armed activity engaged in by Republicans is either obscured and/or pointedly omitted from the narrative, resulting in a deliberately contrived equivocation on the issue of violence, and (ii) through the consistent deployment of supernatural and revenant apparitions — a thematic largely abandoned in traditional song of the modern era — which are, in turn, duly conflated with actual historical events.

Similar to the propensity of Irish Republicanism to invert military defeat into an effective ideological ‘victory’ (Kearney 1980/1:62-70; Bishop and Mallie 1987:455; Clarke 1987:111; Bell 2017:585), attitudes as to what precisely constitutes ‘violence’, along with who bears ultimate responsibility for same, are also highly flexible precepts which remain very much in the eye of the Republican beholder. To analyse such convoluted delineations on the definition of violence, it is necessary to refer to the

change in philosophical outlook which Republicanism underwent in the mid-to-late-nineteenth-century. During this period, the ideology experienced a notable thematic shift by embracing the trope of the heroic, self-sacrificial martyr as a key ideological (and thus, inspirational) construct (Smith 1995:13; Sweeney 2004:338; Shanahan 2009:40; Beiner 2014:199). Consequently, the concept of national liberation being ultimately delivered “not [by] those who can inflict the most, but [by] those who can suffer the most” (IRA hunger striker, Terence MacSwiney, quoted in Coogan 1980:15), was to assume an almost quasi-theological significance within the physical-force tradition, an ideological tenet that has remained largely *in situ* ever since. While still wholly dedicated to the deployment of force as a vehicle towards achieving their political aspirations, Republicans simultaneously endorsed a parallel juxtaposition of heroic passivity. The promotion of such ideological dichotomy has had the effect of obscuring thematic representations of violence that Republicans themselves are actually responsible for, ‘heroic’ and ‘liberating’ though it may well be. Republican ballads also duly reflected this change in worldview, with the ‘reconfiguring’ of violence within the genre taking varying forms. From the mid-nineteenth-century onwards, the muscular, androcentric ballads of the 1798 Insurrection were gradually displaced, being succeeded instead by narratives overtly promoting the stoic endurance of violence as an elementary constituent of Republicanism. Within such output, maternal tropes were widely deployed to signify this ideological shift, either via the portrayal of the Republican mother as a grieving *mater dolorosa*, or by the personification of national liberation in the familiar character of ‘Mother Ireland’ (Zimmerman 1967:54;77; Steel 2004:97). Furthermore, within ballad narratives commemorating a specific hero-martyr, Republican violence became increasingly elided and/or obfuscated, or as evidenced in certain works under review, simply ignored (Ó Cadhla 2017).

It must also be noted that the ubiquitous presence throughout Republican song of unmistakably antiquated tropes such as revenant visitations, the otherworld, the supernatural, etc., are not reflective of any specific adherence to either ballad purism or folkloric narrative on the part of the Republican constituency. Paranormal, mythological tropes — long since abandoned in traditional song — are rigidly retained in Republican ballads quite simply because they ideologically dovetail with the most doctrinaire and essentialist manifestations of the militant Republican belief system. As an ideology that continues to be reinforced by the interrelated tropes of heroic self-sacrifice, martyrdom and glorious immortality, such supernatural and folkloric representations find a welcome framework in which to seamlessly locate themselves, even in the modern era. Indeed, the arrival of the twenty-first century has seen no brake on the composition of works that retain such intricate narrative subtleties in relation to the deployment of political violence, while simultaneously extolling a largely essentialist worldview via the utilisation of folkloric tropes.

An illustrative example of a recent narrative that combines both of the above tendencies is provided in ‘The Warrior from West Belfast’, a ballad written in memory of Belfast IRA commander and 1980 Long Kesh hunger striker, Brendan Hughes (1948-2008).³ The work consists of four verses and a repeated chorus, none of which make any reference to armed activity on the part of Hughes (or anyone associated with him), nuanced, obfuscated or otherwise. Indeed, the only militant reference is in the chorus, which portrays Hughes “with rifle in his hands”. It will be noted, however, that this is a posthumous description of the revenant Hughes, with his armed actions while alive pointedly avoiding documentation. The development of the narrative follows a somewhat standard format of Republican song: Verse 1 conveys an idyllic, peaceful

³ Lyrics published at: <https://www.irish-folk-songs.com/> (Accessed 26 July 2019).

scene, depicting a young Hughes “[h]igh in the Cooley Mountains”, where along with his comrades, he would “march, drill and train, . . . laugh and joke and sing a rebel song”; Verse 2 advances to his escape from prison in 1973, making no mention of the intervening period of sustained violent activity which Hughes both oversaw and participated in as a Commanding Officer of the IRA’s Belfast Brigade (Moloney 2007:106); Verse 3 cites Hughes’ period on hunger strike in 1980 (again, deliberately bypassing why he was re-imprisoned in 1974), before finally describing his burial in Verse 4. Given Hughes’ rank and reputation as a noted IRA activist, the failure to mention any armed activities whatsoever — save for the wholly oblique statement of “[f]or all knew he’d work to do” post-escape — leaves a significant lacuna in the narrative, an oversight rendering the deployment of “warrior” in the title all the more incongruous.

The twin themes of eternal life and revenance also form the central thematic of the ballad narrative, with the chorus depicting Hughes as an armed revenant ‘guarding’ two separate locations simultaneously:

And Brendan Hughes still guards The Falls with rifle in his hands.

He stands atop The Cooley Hills and guards his native land.

‘The Republic!’ was his battle cry, a rebel to the last.

‘The Dogs⁴ will not give up the cause’, said the Warrior from West Belfast.

The point that Republicans who still adhere to the doctrine of physical-force do not retain archaic beliefs in the supernatural need not be made here. To the Republican

⁴ “The Dogs” is a reference to ‘D’ Company of the 2nd Battalion of the IRA’s Belfast Brigade, who were popularly known by this nickname.

audience, however, while Hughes may not be *physically* alive, perhaps more importantly, he is *ideologically* so, and it is via this ideological presence that he still “guards his native land”. His appearance in revenant form, therefore, is less a case of him guarding The Falls — or indeed any physical location — and more an instance of him ensuring that living Republicans do not stray from the path of puritanical militancy and ‘abandon The Republic’ in the process. By his continued presence, he is effectively ‘haunting’ the Republican constituency into following the same militant course that he himself pursued while alive. The thematic cohesion that such supernatural representations provide to the Republican ideological framework is essentially why such antiquated folkloric tropes have been so popularly retained within the attendant song tradition, and why they create neither ideological nor musicological friction among their putative audience, even in the modern era.

As is to be expected, the narrative continuity of Republican song mentioned previously is not without its exceptions. One notable instance of editorial revision is evidenced in the amended lyrics to Robert Dwyer Joyce’s 1798 ballad, ‘The Boys of Wexford’. In Verses 3, 4 and 5 of the original, the composer attributes the Republican defeat at Vinegar Hill, Co. Wexford almost exclusively to widespread drunkenness among the Irish insurrectionary forces:

We bravely fought and conquered at Ross and Wexford town.

And if we failed to keep them, ‘twas drink that brought us down.

We had no drink beside us on Tubberneering day,

Depending on the long, bright pike, and well it worked its way.

They came into the country, our blood to waste and spill,
But let them weep for Wexford and think of Oulart Hill.
'Twas drink that still betrayed us — of them we had no fear,
For every man could do his part, like Forth and Shelmalier.

My curse upon all drinking — it made our hearts full sore,
For bravery won each battle, but drink lost evermore.
And if for want of leaders we lost at Vinegar Hill,
We're ready for another fight and love our country still. (Dwyer Joyce 1872:
404-5)

Later revised versions interpolate an additional verse after the original opening lines so as to develop the conversation between the narrator and “the Captain’s daughter”:

'I want no gold, my maiden fair, to fly from home with thee.
Your shining eyes will be my prize — more dear than gold to me.
I want no gold to nerve my arm to do a true man’s part.
To free my land, I’d gladly give the red drops from my heart.’ (Soodlum’s Irish
Ballad Book 1982:94)

More noteworthy yet is the fact that all references to alcohol have been excised, with Verses 3, 4 and 5 of the original version now compressed into two:

We bravely fought and conquered at Ross and Wexford town.
Three Bullet Gate for years to come will speak of our renown.
Through Walpole's horse and Walpole's foot on Tubberneering's day.
Depending on the long, bright pike, we cut our gory way.

And Oulart's name shall be their shame, whose steel we ne'er did fear.
For every man could do his part, like Forth and Shelmalier!
And if for want of leaders we lost at Vinegar Hill,
We're ready for another fight and love our country still! (Soodlum's Irish Ballad
Book 1982:94)

There is nothing particularly revelatory regarding the inebriation of soldiers entering into the white-heat of battle, a phenomenon both as widespread and as old as war itself (Kamienski 2016). Consequently, any disputation as to whether the Wexford Republicans were, in fact, drunk at Vinegar Hill is moot, and should therefore be parked at this juncture. From the Republican perspective, however, the original ballad's consistent highlighting of alcohol as the sole responsibility for the defeat was clearly seen as a pollutant element within the accepted musico-historical narrative. Such contention — whether factual or otherwise — effectively tarnished the ideal of unblemished patriotic heroism attendant to the 1798 Insurrection and was a literary device which required blunt removal from the original narrative. Therefore, while still duly acknowledging the military failure at Vinegar Hill, the absence of the accusation of public drunkenness from the revised narrative deliberately infuses the defeat with a tangibly more heroic dynamic than that provided for in the original version. To the Republican audience at least, being militarily overwhelmed by superior armed forces

clearly represented a far more acceptable form of defeat than that proffered in Dwyer Joyce's original lyrics.

Equally rare as the editorial revision of Republican song narrative is the tendency for singers to deliberately spurn specific lyrical content. When it does occur, however, the influential power of the audience can once again be clearly observed. A case in point is Dominic Behan's composition, 'The Patriot Game'. The ballad was penned by Behan following the death of 20-year old IRA member Feargal O'Hanlon, who was killed (along with Seán Sabhat) during an IRA raid on Brookborough RUC station on New Year's Eve, 1956. The song consists of a wide-ranging political monologue related by O'Hanlon as he lies dying in the immediate aftermath of the raid, and has remained a staple of the Republican tradition ever since. Despite its widespread popularity, significant elements of Behan's original lyrics were to be the cause of considerable unease for a number of well-known singers, who ultimately self-censored their performances of the song.

A noted source of contention was the very pointed reference made by Behan to former Fianna Fáil Taoiseach and President, Eamon de Valera. Despite serving as one of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, de Valera remained a particularly divisive figure among the general public throughout his entire political career. Indeed, he was regarded with unqualified opprobrium by militant Republicans due to his government's effective suppression of the IRA via the introduction of the Offences Against the State Act in 1939. His subsequent tenure as Taoiseach saw the execution of several high-profile Republican prisoners (Coogan 2000:192; Patterson 2002:56) as well as protracted protests for political status in which Republican prisoners went naked in solitary confinement (McGuffin 1973:32-3), with three protesting prisoners ultimately dying on hunger strike during this period (Flynn 2011:85-125; O'Donnell 2007:8). In the song's

original lyrics, Behan condemns de Valera for his inactivity on the national question, blaming him (alone, it would seem) for the continued partition of the country:

This Ireland of mine has for long been half free.

Six counties are under John Bull's monarchy.

And still de Valera is greatly to blame

For shirking his part in the patriot game. ('The Patriot Game', *Easter Week and After: Songs of the IRA*, 1960)

Given the contemporaneousness of de Valera — he had reassumed office as Taoiseach a mere four months after the Brookborough raid — and no doubt due to his enduring popularity among large swathes of the population, the above lines were to create some predictable difficulties for singers attempting to navigate the political worldview of their respective audiences. To avoid the risk of committing a politico-cultural *faux pas* (and inciting a potentially hostile reaction from their audience as a result), many performers simply excised de Valera's name completely from the narrative. The Dubliners, for example, amended the lyrics so as to genericise responsibility for the failure to end partition:

This island of ours has for long been half free.

Six counties are under John Bull's tyranny.

And most of our leaders are greatly to blame

For shirking their part in the patriot game. ('The Patriot Game', *The Dubliners in Concert*, 1965)

In seeking to circumvent any potential confrontation with his audience, folksinger Liam Clancy went considerably further than The Dubliners by completely rewriting the third and fourth lines, thus removing any references to politicians at all, specific or otherwise:

This island of ours has for long been half free.

Six counties are under John Bull's tyranny.

So, I gave up my boyhood to drill and to train,

To play my own part in the patriot game. ('The Patriot Game', *Liam Clancy*, 1965)

That the version of 'The Patriot Game' sung by Liam Clancy in various New York folk clubs since the early 1960s was subsequently 'borrowed' by Bob Dylan — Behan would always claim "plagiarised" (De Curtis 2009:46; Wilentz 2011:71) — and reproduced on his 1964 album *The Times They Are A-Changin'* as 'With God On Our Side' is one of the most well-known and oft-retold musical anecdotes of the period (Shelton 1987:213). A combination of Dylan's 'borrowing/plagiarism', along with the ensuing public accusations from Behan over many years, generated international attention for 'The Patriot Game' that was perhaps greater than the sum of the ballad's parts, and numerous cover versions of the song were recorded as a result. The episode also had the wholly unintended consequence of embedding Clancy's revised lyrics within the popular repertoire, thus consigning the original anti-de Valera barb to a forgotten footnote in the song's history.

Notwithstanding his public anger at Dylan's appropriation of his work, Behan could hardly take issue with the subsequent excision of de Valera from his original

lyrics, as he had, in fact, committed an almost identical act of lyrical censorship on the very same album on which he had recorded 'The Patriot Game', albeit with completely contradictory political motivations. The 1916 ballad 'The Row in the Town' (written by Behan's own uncle and composer of the Irish national anthem, Peadar Kearney) lauds de Valera's participation in the Easter Rising, thus:

A young de Valera was down at Ringsend
For the honour of Ireland to hold and defend.
He had no veteran soldiers, but volunteers raw
Playing sweet Mauser music for Erin Go Bragh. (An Góilín 2015:10)

Similar to the cautious lyrical tack taken by The Dubliners in their rendition of 'The Patriot Game', Behan excises de Valera and genericises the reference in the process:

Now one of our leaders was down in Ringsend
For the honour of Ireland to hold and defend.
He had no veteran soldiers, but volunteers raw
Playing sweet Mauser music for Erin Go Bragh. ('The Row in the Town', *Easter Week and After: Songs of the IRA*, 1960)

Clearly, for an album subtitled as *Songs of the IRA*, a narrative lauding a 1916 leader whose government had arrested, jailed, shot, hanged and let IRA men die on hunger strike, would have politically jarred with the Republican audience that Behan was attempting to reach. Without question, this aspect of de Valera's subsequent

political career was of equal motivation in Behan's deletion of the former's name from 'The Row in the Town', as it was for its inclusion in 'The Patriot Game'. These acts of self-censorship are noteworthy in that they reveal how the deliberate removal of de Valera from two separate Republican ballads had markedly different motivations and narrative consequences. Where Liam Clancy and The Dubliners were both clearly ill at ease with blaming de Valera exclusively for partition and ignoring the plight of northern nationalists — and potentially alienating their audience as a consequence — Behan clearly sought to suppress his role in the musico-historical narrative of the 1916 Rising, again with audience considerations in mind.

Before examining a further controversial section of Behan's lyrics, it is worth noting some additional thematic depictions of Feargal O'Hanlon in contemporary ballad narrative. Numerous commemorative works were written in the immediate aftermath of O'Hanlon's death, all of which conform to well-established standards of Republican song. Besides 'The Patriot Game', perhaps his most well-known appearance in ballad narrative is in the final verse of 'Seán Sabhat from Garryowen'. Here, alongside Sabhat, he resides for all eternity with his fellow martyred heroes in Republican Val Halla, among "that gallant band of Plunkett, Pearse and Tone" (*The Harp: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. 2, 1960:36). In 'Feargal Óg O'Hanlon', he is depicted posthumously near Clones in the familiar form of the revenant Republican martyr, returning to the mortal realm to urge fellow IRA members to continue the struggle for which he gave his life at Brookborough (*The Easter Lily: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. 3, 1964:23). In 'A Mother's Blessing', the composer engages in blatant hagiography, elevating O'Hanlon into the crucified Christ and his mother into the suffering *mater dolorosa*, while Brookborough and Calvary are conflated as sites of voluntary suffering for a greater, collective good (*They Kept Faith* 1957:11). While it

will be noted that each ballad deploys its own unique literary devices and distinctive narrative style, all three share the common trope of the noble hero-martyr courageously sacrificing his young life for the cause of national freedom and promote O’Hanlon as an idealistic exemplar that Irish youth are expected to duly emulate. For much of ‘The Patriot Game’, Behan’s original lyrics stay true to standard (youth, idealism, bravery, self-sacrificial martyrdom, etc.) but in Verse 6, the narrative makes a significant departure from such principled heroism. Here, O’Hanlon states:

I don’t mind a bit if I shoot down police.

They are lackeys for war, never guardians of peace.

But yet at deserters, I’m never let aim.

Those rebels who sold out the patriot game. (‘The Patriot Game’, *Easter Week and After: Songs of the IRA*, 1960)

Given the articulation of such undiluted militant sentiment, it is unsurprising that this verse does not appear on any recordings from the period (except that of Behan himself) and has been almost universally expunged from the narrative by subsequent performers. Yet, it is not only the raw militancy itself that is potentially problematic for singers and thus, for their putative audience: rather it is at whom said militancy is actually directed. As stated, O’Hanlon was killed while attacking an RUC station in Fermanagh. On initial examination, therefore, the lyrics could easily be assumed to refer to the police force of the northern state. The term “guardians of peace”, however, is a generally accepted translation of An Garda Síochána — the RUC’s (unarmed) southern equivalent — and it would appear that this is who Behan is referring to in the forgotten verse. Line 3 further supports this suggestion, as since 1948, IRA members were

“strictly forbidden to take any military action against 26 County forces under any circumstances whatsoever” under ‘General Army Order no. 8’ of the organisation’s regulations (English 2012:71; O’Brien 1993:356), a prohibition that was not always followed by IRA volunteers. Behan presents O’Hanlon as lamenting this military restriction, complaining that, “at deserters I’m never let aim”. As well as referring to those who have ‘abandoned the Republic’ (i.e. endorsed the southern state) as “lackeys” and “deserters”, he also pointedly labels them as “rebels” (and in the final verse as “Quislings”), who he would appear to have no difficulty in shooting dead. The wider Republican elevation of O’Hanlon as a youthful, idealistic, unpolluted martyr (indeed, the song depicts him erroneously as being merely sixteen years of age) is noticeably complicated by these lyrics and the ballad strays into considerably uncharted political waters as a result. In referencing an attack on an ‘occupying force’ such as the British Army or the RUC, lyrics such as

It's barely two years since I wandered away
With a local battalion of the bold IRA.
I read of our heroes and wanted the same,
To play up my part in the patriot game (‘The Patriot Game’, *Easter Week and After: Songs of the IRA*, 1960)

are sufficiently opaque and non-committal so as to facilitate the audience in being cognitively dissonant regarding support for Republican violence, should they so wish. The unambiguous (yet notably casual) reference to the shooting dead of unarmed members of An Garda Síochána, however, would appear to have been a revolutionary bridge too far for the majority of ballad singers at the time and there can be little doubt

that the potential divisiveness of the sentiment expressed caused the verse to be quietly dropped by most performers. Indeed, one of the very few artists to have sung both the ‘de Valera’ and the ‘shooting police’ verses in live performance was Luke Kelly, who was recorded by a German television crew singing the ballad at a pub session in Dublin in 1967.⁵ As stated, the revisions of ‘The Boys of Wexford’ and ‘The Patriot Game’ (much like the contentious lyrics of the latter) would be the exception rather than the rule within the Republican tradition. Nonetheless, they are illustrative examples of the many ideological tripwires that performers must constantly be mindful of when seeking to navigate the complex performance arena of Republican song. While such interpolations and revisions clearly demonstrate some of the finely-balanced nuance of Republican ideology, without question they equally highlight the fundamental malleability of ballad narrative as a key element in satisfying the ever-fluid cultural requirements of the audience.

⁵ Footage of Luke Kelly singing the complete original lyrics of ‘The Patriot Game’ can be viewed at: <https://www.youtu.be/t4FsUXouWzA> (Accessed 3 March 2020).

Section 2.2

“Stubbornly Resistant to Definition”⁶: Traditional Song Classification and its Associated Difficulties

Ballads are awkward things.

— David Buchan (*The Ballad and the Folk*, 1972:1)

As all of the published works under review focus primarily on the interactive dynamics of composer-audience and/or singer-audience relationships, a commensurate analysis of the musicological categorisation of the various texts, along with their respective locations within the wider song tradition, was consciously not undertaken. As a consequence, descriptors such as ‘song’, ‘ballad’, ‘narrative’, ‘folksong’, ‘text’, etc., have been deployed interchangeably throughout. This is not to discount the various debates that have arisen around such terms, however. The nuance and minutiae of traditional song classification have long occupied academics, from the doctrinaire positions taken by those who sought to idealise folksong as an intrinsically ‘pure’ artistic expression of the people, to the multitudinal criteria and sub-classifications appended to the broad descriptor of ballad. Even with the best of academic intention, excessively rigid approaches to the categorisation of an individual song (or indeed, of an entire genre of song) can prove highly problematic, often resulting in blunt pigeon-holing. Ultimately, questions such as, “what is a ballad?”, “what is a folksong?” or perhaps more importantly, “who are ‘the folk’?” are entirely social constructs for which no real definitive answer can ever be satisfactorily given. This is similarly the case

⁶ Atkinson (2013:123).

when attempting to navigate such interrelated descriptors as ‘traditional song’, ‘story-song’, ‘vernacular song’, ‘popular song’ or ‘dialogue song’, among others.

Comparable variations can also be observed in attempts at delineating the all-encompassing label of ‘ballad’, to which ‘oral’, ‘traditional’, ‘popular’, ‘narrative’, ‘broadside’, etc., are routinely prefixed, or through the established practice of identifying and collectivising ballads under the name of those who have documented and classified them according to their own respective academic criteria. Given such a broad spectrum of potential nomenclature, it is hard to counter Atkinson’s (2013) contention that, while academic efforts at traditional song categorisation “are designed in some way to introduce more precision into the discussion, [they] in fact do nothing of the sort” (2013:124). This is due to the unavoidable fact that such efforts must necessarily confront a multitude of categories and genre that are “not, in fact, in the slightest degree mutually exclusive” (2013:124). Nonetheless, the marked porosity of terminology such as ‘ballad’, ‘folksong’, ‘traditional’ etc., has not dampened the enthusiasm of scholars in demarcating same.

One of the more noted instances of academic theorising (and subsequent disputation) on such specific delineations was that of English song collector and scholar Cecil Sharp (1859-1924). As a self-described “conservative socialist” (Walkowitz 2010:75), Sharp promoted highly idealised notions of ‘folk’ and ‘folklore’ (Porter 1991:113), in which he routinely celebrated traditional song, music and dance as cultural phenomena with the potential to galvanise widely disparate classes “from prince to ploughboy” (Sharp 1905:4). He famously declared the need to “flood the street . . . with folk tunes”, whereupon such ‘genuine’ output of the people would arrest the vulgarity and coarseness of the music halls and do “incalculable good in civilizing the masses” (Sharp 1907:137). In particular, he lionised the traditional oral folksong as “an

ameliorating factor, . . . an antidote to the ills of modern life” (Porter 1993:63), with the potential to regenerate cultural and social mores across all strata of society. In terms of the ‘authenticity’ of any given song, the integrity of the oral tradition would always reign supreme, with printed versions condemned as “garbled, debased . . . urban productions [of] genuine rural folk songs” (Atkinson 2013:126).

Unsurprisingly, such calcified idealism was never destined to be universally accepted without provoking considerable counterargument. As early as 1955, W.F. Amaan had roundly dismissed overly-prescriptive criteria for folksong such as “anonymity of authorship” and “individual authorship [from] within ‘the folk’” (1955:101), due mainly to the subjectivity and fluidity of such terminology. (Again, that most fundamental of questions must be asked here: “Who, exactly, are ‘the folk’?”) Equally, the romantic contention that a folksong should be a composition penned by a member of “the lowlier classes” (1955:101) — while doubtlessly true in some instances — effectively (and deliberately) ignores the artistic contribution of the learned and literate sections of society. Dispensing with the thematic of musical ‘purity’, Amaan (1955) describes a folksong simply as “any song which caught the fancy of the people (‘people’ in the broadest sense of the word) and which was sung by many over a reasonably long period of time” (1955:101). Evans (1974) takes a similarly all-embracing view, deploying the generic term ‘folksongs’ to any and all musical works that “tell a story or develop a theme” (1974:241), regardless of age, source or narrator.

The 1980s produced a significant body of scholarship which was particularly scathing of the idealisation of both folk and folksong, with notably vocal critics such as Harker (1985) deliberately excising the latter of its prescriptive prefix. During this same period, the qualifiers ‘vernacular’ (Pickering and Green 1987; Pickering 1988) and ‘popular’ (Pickering 1984) gained prominence as descriptors of traditional song,

primarily as pointed antidotes to the concept of ‘folksong’ which was by now too heavily imbued with the sepia-tinged nostalgia of the traditionalist school of thought. Indeed, the perceived authenticity of oral tradition as an intrinsically ‘genuine’ artistic articulation has become yet further discredited in more recent academic discourse (Atkinson 2013:125-6; 2014:98), along with the idealistic trope of a closed artistic ‘community’ — bound by what Sharp (1905) famously described as “a common atmosphere of ignorance” (1905:4) — in which neither class nor creed inhibited the creation and transmission of traditional song. Porter (1993) cites the modern academic trajectory towards dispensing with overly-rigid and prescriptive classification nomenclature such as ‘folk’ or ‘popular’, primarily for their opaqueness, but also due to their potentially subjective deployment by academics. He notes that such descriptors “have always been polysemic, and thus problematic in actual usage”, resulting in “continued misuse in scholarly representation and practice” (Porter 1993:61), with even the seemingly innocuous ‘traditional’ having been the cause of some notable disagreement (Porter 1993:80).

The descriptor ‘ballad’ also exhibits a comparable diversity to that of ‘folksong’ in terms of the classification criteria deployed, along with associated delineating terminologies. Given the breadth of academic contention surrounding the category, Buchan’s (1972) statement that “[b]allads are awkward things” (1972:1) is hard to dispute and is, in reality, something of an understatement. He cites the ubiquitous difficulties of the “authorship, definition, terminology and classification” (1972:1) of ballads, adding that “[f]ew literary genres . . . pose such refractory problems for the scholar and critic” (1972:1). Atkinson (2013:123) concedes that ballads are “stubbornly resistant to definition” and that scholarly attempts at defining and classifying them have been “ambiguous, confusing and in some cases, misleading”, further adding that “[l]ike

all generic categories, that of the ballad is porous at the edges” (2013:124). Indeed, his own definition of ballads as “multi-form song-stories with a focus on dramatic narrative” (2013:123) is also suitably vague. Wehse (1975) suggests a certain academic futility associated with the deployment of overly rigid classification criteria by arguing convincingly that a song’s audience would have no discernible interest in distinguishing between such terms as ‘broadside’ or ‘popular’ in any event (1975:324). He describes such titles as “artificial terminology [which] only serves scholars and librarians to distinguish the two varieties” (1975:325), citing the practice of the British Library in deploying the generic title of ‘ballad’ for all works contained within its song collections, regardless of source. Predictably, such broad academic brushstrokes have not always received a cordial welcome. Indeed, the aforementioned elevation of folksong into an elite form of culturally ‘pure’ musical expression has as its *raison d’être*, the very specific demarcation of such output from the ‘vulgar’ or ‘popular’ ballads of the street. In doing so, however, such convention largely ignores the considerable difficulty in exclusively confining a particular text to one or another grouping, given the established porosity of the terms ‘folksong’ and ‘ballad’ respectively, along with the unavoidable literary crosspollination between the two as a consequence.

While individual scholars have clearly gone to some considerable lengths in order to distinguish the respective categories of ‘folksong’ and ‘ballad’, others have pointedly ignored such academic convention by simply conflating the two. Gerould (1932), for example, states that “[a] ballad is a folk-song that tells a story” (1932:11), while Del Giudice (1994) notes a comparable malleability of demarcation lines within the Italian song tradition, arguing that “the narrative song genre is a hybrid where archaic and broadside . . . ballads coexist” (1994:118). Indeed, Barry (1909) had largely dispensed with such distinctions as early as the first decade of the twentieth-century and

had unequivocally dismissed resultant arguments as contrived and unnecessary conventions in the study of traditional song. In doing so, he elevated the thematic of performance, by urging that the singer “makes no distinction between earlier and later balladry: a good song with a good melody needs no further recommendation. . . . Why make a distinction when the folk makes none?” (1909:386). Porter (1993) notes the liberating agency that this approach provided to Barry, enabling him to take a wholly inclusive academic trajectory whether studying “Child ballads or Tin Pan Alley concoctions, . . . broadside songs, folk hymns, Irish songs and other types” (1993:65). As everyday musical expressions of the people, he consciously collectivised them all as simply ‘folksongs’, in what Porter refers to as “a realist . . . position” (1993:65) when compared to the essentialism of Sharp, *et al.*

Notwithstanding the determination of academics to minutely locate and classify traditional song(s), what of a text such as ‘Skewball’? As noted, this work presents a complex narrative of documented historical fact fused with established folkloric tropes, which began its existence in late eighteenth-century Ireland as oral narrative, was popularised as an expanded (yet censored) broadside print throughout nineteenth-century England, traversed the Atlantic and appeared in several sources in nineteenth-century America in its ‘original’ oral (i.e. pre-broadside) format, whereupon it breached the race barrier and was reconstructed firstly as a slave, and later as a prison chain-gang, work song. It re-entered the popular repertoire in England and America in the folk revival of the 1960s and during the same period, had oral versions collected in Ireland which, while retaining the original folkloric thematic fully intact, deployed much of the structure of the revised broadside rendition. In essence, how does one satisfactorily classify a common narrative that effectively bridges both ‘folk’ and ‘ballad’ spheres, and whose lifespan extends across 250 years, the Irish Sea and the Atlantic Ocean?

Atkinson (2014) notes how such fluidity of song text and structure effectively renders any inflexible approach to song classification as immediately redundant. He argues convincingly that “[t]he ballad should be seen not as a closed, original and seminal utterance, but as constant and multiple production. . . . It may be uncomfortable, but the appropriate organising principle is precisely one of proliferation and of multiple sets of instructions or exemplifications for the reconstitution and repetition of a work which . . . can never be wholly represented by a single exemplification” (2014:23).

As a manifest example of the inherent difficulties attached to song classification, it is worth considering the trajectory of ‘Skewball’ in some further detail. The scribal errors in the Filgate MS point strongly towards the documentation of an existing oral text, as opposed to an entirely new composition. How closely the Filgate MS reflects the ‘original’ ‘Skewball’ — if such a thing can ever really exist — can, of course, never be satisfactorily determined and such speculation is ultimately futile. As has already been noted, there remains the strong likelihood that ‘Skewball’ was itself not an original composition and that the entire *dramatis personae* of the ballad were expediently inserted into a pre-existing narrative framework. Furthermore, the transcription by a member of the Filgate family — or at the very least by one of their immediate social circle — points to the transmission of a ‘folksong’ by a member of the wealthy elite, a clear breach of some of the more essentialist academic thinking as to who, or what, constitutes ‘the folk’. The almost immediate appropriation of the song by broadside publishers indicates the ‘vulgarisation’ of an oral folk text, which in the process, had morphed into a ballad transmitted for financial gain, as well as for, we must assume, its intrinsic artistic qualities. Where the journey of the song simply to end at this juncture and ‘Skewball’ continue its existence exclusively as a broadside printing, the text could be broadly classified as one that had made the established transition from oral to printed

format, albeit in significantly revised and truncated form. As noted, however, ‘Skewball’ travelled to America where numerous versions have been documented, the earliest of which was in 1826 (Benton 1826:3). All of the American texts considered are renditions (with minor textual variations) of the Filgate ‘original’, showing that ‘Skewball’ enjoyed a dichotomous existence as both oral folksong and printed ballad on both sides of the Atlantic simultaneously.

In America, the text exhibited further fissure, not regarding its potential classification as either a ‘folksong’ or a ‘ballad’, but rather in terms of performance space. The oral version carried from Ireland splintered from the emigrant population and became quickly embedded as a staple African-American call-and-answer work song on slave plantations and later, on prison chain-gangs (Jackson 1972:102; Lomax and Lomax 1934:68-71), after which it was recorded and popularised by American blues singer Leadbelly on his 1940 album, *The Midnight Special*. ‘Skewball’ — now known widely as ‘Stewball’ — went on to re-emerge in white folk tradition and was subsequently recorded by a diversity of artists which included Woodie Guthrie, Lonnie Donegan, The Hollies, Peter, Paul & Mary, Joan Baez and later in the 1980s by Doris Day, among others. Even the musical score saw cultural shift during this phase of the song’s incarnation, when the tune was appropriated wholesale by John Lennon for his 1971 hit, ‘Happy Xmas (War is Over)’ (Hajdu 2016:281). The narrative had by this point diverged significantly from earlier versions, but the overall trajectory of Skewball/Stewball surpassing overwhelming odds to defeat a favoured opponent remained universally intact.

‘Skewball’ permanently re-embedded itself in Irish folk repertoire following Andy Irvine’s 1976 recording of the ballad which he entitled, ‘The Plains of Kildare’.⁷

⁷ Irvine, Andy and Paul Brady (1976) *Andy Irvine/Paul Brady* (Mulligan).

Irvine's interpretation of 'Skewball' (in which he retained the American name of "Stewball") strongly draws upon A.L. Lloyd's 1962 rendition,⁸ along with two versions collected from Derry folksinger and storyteller, Eddie Butcher in 1964 (Shields 1988:16-7) and in 1979 (Shields 2011:58-9), respectively. Due to the clear similarities that they bear to the Mayne (Belfast) broadside printing of the late nineteenth-century in terms of style and content, Butcher's versions are of particular interest in tracing the song's journey, in that they demonstrate that the oral tradition of 'Skewball' had also survived in tandem with the printed form in Ireland. The retention of the speaking horse in Butcher's recordings, coupled with the very distinctive interpolation of "Miss Grizzel" as Skewball's opponent, point unmistakably towards the Mayne broadside with which it shares these narrative features. However, unlike the established oral (Filgate MS) to printed (broadside) transition which can be confirmed by chronological timeline, the source text in this case cannot be satisfactorily proven. Consequently, whether Mayne siphoned an existing oral version from a predecessor of Butcher, or simply reprinted an English broadside which was in due course appropriated by a folksinger — thus becoming reconstituted as an 'oral' text in the process — can never be determined with any degree of certainty. The exclusivity of a linear oral-to-written/printed transmission in traditional song has been questioned by Wehse (1975) among others, who notes that any given oral folksong which began its existence in an intimate, domestic setting may well have easily ended up in a music hall and from there to a popular songbook, whereupon after its adoption by a broadside publisher, may have re-entered the oral tradition in a wholly unrecognisable format from its 'original' incarnation (1975:329). We have no way of knowing if 'Skewball' ever successfully

⁸ Lloyd, A.L. and Ewan McColl (1962) *Gamblers and Sporting Blades* (Topic).

made it to the music halls, but the Butcher versions — if sourced from the Mayne printing — show evidence of such an oral-to-written-to-oral trajectory. Therefore, in terms of an oral *versus* printed textual authority, the traffic in the case of ‘Skewball’ would appear to have been moving in several directions simultaneously.

Therefore, if one single text can convey such a diverse patchwork of narrative constructions, the definitive ‘categorisation’, ‘location’ or ‘ownership’ of any given song can potentially generate an endless array of academic speculation and contention, and is in all reality next to impossible to achieve. The vagueness in origins previously highlighted by the Irish Lass/Skewball dichotomy provides an illustrative example of the fragility of such academic endeavour. Such methodological approach can often result in an inconclusiveness similar to that encountered in overly-prescriptive efforts at genre classification. Indeed, while seeking to ‘explain’ the diversity between multiple renditions of the same text in a linear, chronological manner, such methodology regularly ignores the role of the audience in influencing such narrative shift. Atkinson (2014) baldly refutes such efforts, stating simply that “the ballad . . . cannot be treated in one place, for while each documentary text is complete in itself, it also stands in relation to the work of which it is an acceptable realisation. The ballad is both physical document and imaginary conjecture” (2014:22). Therefore, it is largely impossible to speak simply of a definitive or archetype version of any ballad without making due reference to texts of the same name in multiple sources. Amann (1955) reminds us of such futility, stating that “one can never be sure whether a song as found in a collection is actually the ‘original’” (1955:105), adding that such hypotheses are wholly unreliable and will ultimately only ever represent “the viewpoint of the individual scholars” (1955:105), a process labelled by Atkinson as “a largely futile exercise when one is faced with inordinate numbers of potential variables” (2014:19). That Skewball was

preceded by Irish Lass is established by historical fact; but the latter may well also have had a further sporting — and perhaps even musical — precursor, who also slipped through the historical cracks, as indeed the putative ‘The Ballad of Irish Lass’ would itself do in due course. Therefore, the current research is obviously not intended as an argument as to whether ‘Skewball’ is primarily a ‘ballad’ or a ‘folksong’: rather, it is a frank acknowledgment that it is concurrently both. Neither does it argue for its classification as an exclusively ‘Irish’ text, although its origins, in terms of historical narrative, doubtlessly are. As any song evolves through time — and in the case of ‘Skewball’, across continental geography — it will become ever more resistant to any sort of stand-alone classification, regarding genre or location. This is not simply due to the deliberate revisions and interpolations of singer and composer alike, but are rather a natural consequence of constant repetition over a protracted period of time, a process which greatly increases the potential for narrative diversifications. As Atkinson (2014) argues, such “repeatable works are in a fundamental way multifarious” (2014:6), a stand-out feature of the broad catalogue of ‘Skewball’ texts. Given all of the above, ‘Skewball’ is quite simply impossible to classify under any one single descriptor, and therefore each version must necessarily be treated as an individual song in its own right, essentially independent of all other renditions.

Regarding the Republican song tradition, while McCann (2003) argues that “for many Republicans, the music that expresses their politicised culture is traditional Irish music” (2003:928), the distinct sub-genre of Republican song has not always enjoyed a harmonious relationship with the mainstream folk tradition in Ireland. It should be noted that this is not solely a case of musical reservations as to the cultural or ‘folk’ authenticity of such output, which no doubt do exist in some quarters. More often than not, it will emanate from an anxiety within the collective performance space of informal

traditional Irish music sessions, that the participants risk being perceived as supportive — however passively — of the Republican armed struggle (McLaughlin and McLoone 2012:2). The latter is perhaps unsurprising, given the potentially divisive sentiment extolled in such works. For one listener, a Republican ballad may narrate a noble and heroic freedom struggle; for the next, it may simply seek to glorify an unjustifiable campaign of violence.

The cultural positioning of Republican song was to come into particularly sharp focus with the civil uprising of Northern nationalists in 1969 and the subsequent recommencement of Republican armed struggle in 1970. Previously, Republican ballads were very much within the mainstream of national cultural output in Ireland. They were, for example, routinely taught to children in primary schools (Thornton 2016:52) and were regularly played on state broadcaster RTÉ (White 1984:8). This was to change radically in tandem with the escalation of the Northern conflict, at which point such output was effectively banned from the national airwaves. As late as 1993, Shields noted how “current songs expressing extreme republican or ‘loyalist’ views are censored on radio and television, North and South” (1993:176). Regarding the latter, Parfitt (2019) disputes the accusation of censorship *per se*, arguing instead that while RTÉ “never imposed a complete ban”, the organisation did make “attempts to moderate content” (2019:408) during this period – censorship by any other name, surely.⁹ His

⁹ It must be remembered that such “attempts to moderate content” were undertaken against a wider backdrop of official government broadcasting restrictions, in the form of statutory ministerial orders made under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Acts, 1960-1976. A perceived infringement of a 1971 ministerial directive which prohibited the broadcasting of “any matter that could be calculated to promote the aims and activities of any organisation which engages in, promotes, encourages or advocates the attainment of any particular objective by violent means” (quoted in Fisher 2005:64) led ultimately to the sacking of the entire RTÉ governing authority and the imprisonment for contempt of one of the station’s

suggestion that for “mainstream Irish politics, . . . [r]ebel songs seemingly encouraged violence” (2019:408) is disputed by Shields (1993), who contends that the broadcasting restrictions on Republican ballads “suggest not only that these songs are an effective vehicle of subversion but that the views they express are rampant”, adding that “[n]either conclusion is justified” (1993:176). As ever, it is essential that audience attitudes are included when interrogating such contention, due primarily to the pivotal position that Republican ballads occupy in continually re-enforcing the politico-cultural cohesion of the Republican community, but also from the inescapable fact that such output would have almost exclusively had a Republican audience in mind when composed, and later performed. While political songs may well emotionally move the listener, and enjoy a ubiquitous presence at protests, rallies, commemorations, etc., it is something of a leap to suggest that Republicans may have been motivated to commit acts of violence as a result of their performance. In the instance of the Republican audience, it must always be remembered that both composer and singer are effectively preaching to the already converted. Indeed, the suggestion that Irish state authorities may have regarded Republican song as having the potential to incite acts of political violence is not alone dismissive of the obvious commitment necessary to engage in same, but is also singularly reflective of the extent of historical revisionism and cultural paranoia that existed in Ireland throughout the course of the Northern conflict.¹⁰ I would

journalists (Fisher 2005:65-6). This is not to suggest that Republican song fell directly under the remit of Section 31 directives — officially, anyway — but rather is posited as an insight into the prevailing censorious atmosphere that prevailed in Ireland at the time.

¹⁰ It was during this same period that RTÉ amended the attendant footage to ‘Amhrán na bhFiann’ which was broadcast nightly by the station at closedown. The original 1960s sequence — rich with imagery of militancy and nation building — was replaced in the 1970s with a markedly generic pastiche of the Irish countryside and coastline. In 1998, RTÉ ceased playing ‘Amhrán na bhFiann’ altogether, on both radio

argue instead that the almost complete disappearance of Republican song from both RTÉ television and radio was not so much to prohibit and/or discourage the use of violence, but rather to simply ‘denormalise’ such cultural output within wider national discourse.

In terms of the acceptance (or otherwise) of Republican song within official circles, Parfitt’s (2019) argument that “neither musicians, audiences, nor politicians did abandon the ‘rebel stuff’” (2019:402) is somewhat broad in scope and necessitates some additional commentary, particularly in terms of the last group cited. He notes the appropriation of ‘A Nation Once Again’ by Fine Gael at a party conference in 1981, along with Fianna Fáil’s use of both the latter and ‘Kevin Barry’ at a party event in 1976, as examples of the continued use of Republican song in mainstream circles during this period. Here, the respective timeframes are all-important, i.e. the mid-nineteenth-century and 1920, respectively. Both parties may well have been comfortable with past narratives such as ‘A Nation Once Again’, with all of its vague, aspirational rhetoric; however, quite specific contemporary output such as ‘The Men Behind The Wire’, (written about the initial internment without trial arrests of August 1971) or ‘Go On Home, British Soldiers’ (composed in the wake of the Bloody Sunday killings of 1972), would hardly have been deemed appropriate at contemporary mainstream political events. The previously-cited quotation by Shields (1993) is important to re-iterate in this context, i.e. “that *current* songs expressing extreme republican or ‘loyalist’ views are censored” [emphasis added] (1993:176). With Republican ballads, the distant past was

and television, when the station began 24-hour broadcasting. The original 1960s version can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz7bO3f4hgU>. Later versions — notably devoid of all political content — are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krZEfzKAhD4>; and also, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCIFhSv-XVs> (Accessed 24 February 2020).

clearly a safer place, both culturally and politically. In the context of an intensifying IRA campaign of violence, narratives which hitherto had an exclusively historical/commemorative agency, now suddenly had a very tangible contemporary/inspirational capacity, which clearly unsettled state authorities, particularly south of the border. A notable example of the Southern establishment's unease in the face of unfolding events can be seen in relation to the ballad 'Up and Away (The Helicopter Song)', a work which narrates the escape by helicopter of three leading IRA prisoners from Dublin's Mountjoy Prison in late 1973. As an account of an event that caused acute embarrassment to the coalition government at the time, the song was immediately banned from national airplay (Kinealy 2014:114). Despite such restrictions, the song went straight to Number One in the Irish charts where it remained for a full month, an indication, perhaps, that state authorities were considerably out of step with musical — if not political — public sentiment at the time.

It was not solely in the censoring of national airplay that Republican song felt the intrusive presence of the Irish state during this period, as numerous individual musicians also came under suspicion for their perceived support of the IRA's campaign. Folksinger Christy Moore was perhaps the most high-profile musician to attract such attention. In 1977, Moore was contacted by protesting prisoners in Long Kesh requesting that he write a song to highlight their conditions while on the Blanket Protest (Moore 2000:143). His 1978 composition — 'Ninety Miles from Dublin' — was also immediately banned from airplay. Moore subsequently included this work on the multi-artist benefit album *H-Block* (1978), which he produced and released as part of the national campaign in support of the prisoners' demand for political status. At this point, both Moore and many of his associates were under heavy police surveillance (Ballie 2018:167) and the album's official launch in Dublin was raided by the Garda Special

Branch, who took names and questioned all those present and subsequently confiscated all of the albums on sale (Moore 2000:55). Such anxiety among officialdom at this historical-to-contemporaneous thematic shift within Republican song was not solely restricted to Ireland. Moore (1984) noted similar cultural retreat while performing in England during this period. Reflecting on the ballad ‘The Belfast Brigade’, he recalled:

I suspect that I learned this song at a Republican ballad session in Shepherd’s Bush in 1966. In those days it was good fun to hear Paddy sing a rebel song; eighteen years later it could get you seven days at Her Majesty’s Pleasure. (1984:17)

This unofficial silencing conferred a manifest sense of ‘other’ upon the genre. Both musically and culturally, Republican song became increasingly pigeon-holed as a result and was rarely heard outside of fundraising benefit nights within the tightly-knit Republican constituency, or in recordings and performances by avowedly Republican ballad groups who were singularly dedicated to songs of this hue.

Regardless of their almost complete disappearance from the Irish cultural mainstream since the 1970s and 1980s, songs from the canon have retained a widespread popularity ever since, particularly among Republican audiences, at whom, it must always be remembered, they are primarily directed. Republican ballads have always manifested a genuinely contemporary agency by narrating both recent and historical episodes from either a wholly commemorative perspective, or via their retention and deployment as cultural backdrops in the justification of current, or future, armed activity. Historical continuity — the regularly quoted “800 years of resistance to invasion, annexation, absorption [and] settlement” (Galvin 1962:2) — remains a

standard trope of Irish Republicanism and is consistently cited as a fundamental cornerstone of the ideological legitimacy that has proven so central to its more doctrinaire manifestations. Without question, Republican ballads assist such theoretical positioning. For example, the recent protest campaigns of Republican prisoners in Maghaberry Gaol can be contextualised and simultaneously infused with a sharp historical resonance via the performance of ballads such as ‘Joe McDonnell’ or ‘The H-Block Song’ from the 1976-1981 Blanket Protest and hunger strikes period. Similarly, that phase of acute prison protest had songs such as ‘Take Me Home to Mayo’ and ‘Brave Frank Stagg’ — two works written in memory of IRA hunger strikers Michael Gaughan (d. 1974) and Frank Stagg (d. 1976), respectively — as historical and ideological wells from which to draw. Republicans from the 1970s could derive both political and musical inspiration from the 1940s hunger strike ballad ‘Seán MacNeela and Tony D’Arcy’, whose audience could in turn reach back to 1917 to yet another IRA hunger striker Tom Ashe, who himself penned the prophetic ballad ‘Let Me Carry Your Cross For Ireland, Lord!’ while in prison in England. This is not, of course, to suggest that these works were the sole inspiration for subsequent events, but their presence within the canon has unquestionably facilitated a musical continuum to coexist with that of the attendant ideological framework.

Comparable classification difficulties to those discussed previously in relation to ‘Skewball’ similarly emerge in output from the Republican song genre. Inherent nomenclatural ambiguities are evident on several fronts, with the often heavily-essentialised ideological constructs of Irish Republicanism posing additional challenges to the established ‘folksong’ *versus* ‘ballad’ contention. Such output emerged in tandem with the revolutionary upheavals of the late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-centuries, particularly in the aftermath of the United Irishmen insurrection of 1798. Consequently,

the genre does not have a significant non-literate, oral tradition to speak of. Therefore, in seeking to academically house Republican song, the descriptor ‘ballad’ can be safely deployed, as there is scant potential, if any, for classifying such output as ‘folksong’. Importantly, however, it must also be remembered that Republican ballads serve primarily as a propagandistic adjunct to the attendant political ideology. By equally encompassing both commemorative and inspirational agency, such works successfully re-enforce the wider ideological belief structure of the Republican constituency on a continual basis, with Republicans themselves regularly self-referencing with terms implying a unified collectivity, such as ‘Republican Movement’, ‘Republican community’, ‘Republican family’, etc. Such output, therefore, emerges from — and is thus, directed at — a very specific, often quite insular demographic. Republican ballads consequently transmit a powerfully binding cultural agency as the musical representation of a distinct community which has regularly found itself isolated from both the political and cultural mainstream, while simultaneously coming under sustained physical attack from agents of the British state. Commenting on ballad sessions in Republican-run social clubs in 1970s Belfast, Coogan (2000) notes “the sense of empathy these and similar songs brought, and bring, to young women and men” within the Republican constituency, creating a “camaraderie [and a] shared sense of being ‘us’ against the hostile ‘them’ outside” (2000:625). Therefore, despite not overtly possessing the specific characteristics of the purist academic definition of oral/folk tradition, the genre does nonetheless display certain noted aspects of idealistic traditional folksong theory, primarily in the area of community cohesion.

Beyond the previously discussed disagreements surrounding the relative suitability of either ‘ballad’ or ‘folksong’, the prefix ‘Republican’ can also present significant challenges when deployed as a musical descriptor, similar to its positioning

within wider political discourse in Ireland. Given its common association with political violence, the appropriation of the term 'Republican' has continually proven to be problematic and has been the source of much friction, depending on respective political or historical worldview. While primarily a reference to those seeking political separation from Britain via the establishment of an independent Irish Republic, the descriptor 'Republican' has also popularly referred to a supporter of (if not an active participant in) armed activity in pursuit of same. In citing the distinction between a 'Nationalist' and a 'Republican', Moloney (2007) describes the former as "someone sympathetic to the peaceful reunification of Ireland" (2007:707), thus indirectly attributing a physical-force element to Republicanism. Connolly (1998) defines the ideology as one of the "more intransigent and or potentially violent forms of nationalism" (1998:508), whereas English (2006) defines an Irish Republican as having, "either specific attachment to a Republican form of government and/or an aggressive pursuit of such an arrangement" (2006:509). Again, such theorising is open to disputation, particularly so from previously armed Republicans who have in due course chosen an exclusively peaceful trajectory. To their mind at least, they are no less 'Republican' for having finally eschewed their armed struggle (Sanders 2011:253).

Such complex nuance and ideological subtleties are also evident within the accompanying song canon. In most independence struggles, for example, the generic descriptor of 'Nationalist' would not, in all probability, create any major ideological difficulties when applied to the attendant song tradition. In Ireland, however, the term is pointedly never deployed by Republicans in relation to themselves, due to the very specific ideological distinctions between a 'Nationalist' and a 'Republican' already highlighted. Given the highly dogmatic ideological constructs underpinning physical-force Irish Republicanism, those who eschew violence in order to embrace a wholly

constitutional approach are effectively no longer regarded as Republicans by their former comrades. Instead, they are routinely disparaged as having ‘become’ Nationalists, a considerable demotion within the intimate world of militant Irish Republicanism. As an insight into such ideological worldview, the constitutional Nationalists of the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) were continually ridiculed by Republicans throughout the Northern conflict as “The Stoop Down Low Party” (Conway 2010:84) due to their resolute opposition to the armed struggle. In more doctrinaire discourse, such ‘former’ Republicans can stand further accused of having even less legitimacy than that of a ‘Nationalist’ and are denounced as “traitors”, “turncoats” and “renegades” (Frampton 2011:67), with some even going to the extent of suggesting that such Republicans “had in fact become Unionist” and were thus, “people who are claiming to be Nationalists, but who are helping to administer the British presence” (Frampton 2011:67).

This ‘Nationalist/Republican’ dichotomy is ideologically complex, and given its resultant appellative representation in traditional song, requires some further analysis. Ideological observations from two well-known Republican voices are informative in this regard. As observed, the descriptor ‘Irish Republicanism’ generally (but not exclusively) implies a physical-force dynamic. IRA ex-prisoner and 1980 hunger striker Tommy McKearney (2011) draws further distinction between “parliamentary Nationalism [and] radical Republicanism”, but concedes that “Republicanism has always had a Nationalist element embedded within it” (2011:93). This subtlety has often led to an understandable blurring in the popular perception of Republicanism between “those who understood it to be a radical and democratic movement that sought to create a democratic republic, while others viewed it exclusively as a militaristic version of nationalism in which struggling for democratic rights was of less importance than

national independence” (2011:94). Similarly, former Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams (1986) distinguishes Republicanism from both “Catholic Nationalism” (1986:113) and what he describes as the anomalous phenomenon of “‘constitutional Nationalism’ . . . a contradiction in terms” (1986:112) due to its operation within a “framework of British constitutionality” (1986:112). He further subordinates Nationalism to Republicanism, describing the latter as composed of the constituent components of “separatism, secularism, anti-sectarianism, nationalism and the radical social dimension” (1986:132-3), adding that if any one of the five is omitted, an entirely different (i.e. a specifically non-Republican) philosophy emerges in its stead. Again, the foregoing remarks are not to imply the complete absence of the term ‘Nationalist’ from popular Republican discourse, musicological or otherwise. Rather, it is to simply highlight the significant ideological hurdles that such terminology continues to create within doctrinaire Republican thinking.

This sense of ideologically ‘pulling up the ladder’ has an instantaneously transformative impact from the opposite perspective as well, creating the phenomenon whereby those once viewed as ‘good Republicans’ are now deemed ‘traitors’ owing to their non-adherence to the dominant political dispensation of the time. In the 1922/23 period, for example, anti-Treaty forces were pointedly never referenced by either Free State Government authorities or by official media sources as ‘Republicans’ and were instead ubiquitously referred to as ‘Irregulars’ (Horgan 2001:9). Parfitt (2019) notes how Republican songs from the preceding War of Independence also became an ideologically contested space during this period, with both sides vying for ‘ownership’ of the musical narrative (2019:402). In more recent times, a comparable revisionism has given rise to such terminologies as ‘dissidents’ or ‘micro-groupings’ as pejorative descriptors for all Republican organisations — both armed and solely political — who

oppose the terms of The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 (Patterson 2011:66). Without question, the most notable *volte face* in this regard came from senior Sinn Féin leader (and former IRA Chief of Staff) Martin McGuinness, who described such Republicans as “traitors to the island of Ireland [who] have betrayed the political desires, hopes and aspirations of all of the people who live on this island”.¹¹ Sanders (2011) observes that there is “much irony” in the application of the descriptor ‘dissident’ by figures within Sinn Féin, given that for opponents of their political trajectory, this is “no longer a pejorative term” (2011:253). While some Republicans may indeed embrace the descriptor of ‘dissident’ as a distinguishing marker from the by now ‘constitutional Nationalists’ of Sinn Féin, others counter its political significance by simply levying the same allegation of ideological divergence in the direction of Sinn Féin themselves. Such sentiment was evident in a 2009 BBC *Newsnight* interview, in which the Republican respondent remarked that “[p]eople could turn around and say that the real ‘dissidents’ are Sinn Féin because they moved away from their original opinion. . . . [They] call other people ‘dissidents’, but they didn’t change their view. . . . Sinn Féin changed their opinion and other people didn’t” (quoted in Sanders 2011:282). Indeed, as yet another example of the ever-shifting and contested ideological space of Irish Republicanism, a recent authoritative academic treatise on the subject outrightly rejects the term ‘dissident’, instead applying the ideological markers of “‘non-mainstream’ and ‘radical Republican’ interchangeably” (McGlinchey 2019:5).

When the at times quasi-theological adherence of Irish Republicans to the tenets of ideological legitimacy is viewed from an ethnomusicological perspective, the issue as to whether or not a given text can be safely demarcated as a ‘Republican’ ballad also reveals predictable complications, similar to those discussed above. By applying the

¹¹ ‘Hardliners Vent Their Fury at Martin McGuinness’, *The Guardian*, 13 March 2009.

unpolluted ideological worldview of doctrinaire Republicans to such output, an inescapable question immediately surfaces: if the personnel in a particular ballad are no longer deemed to be ‘politically’ Republican, then surely neither are they ‘musically’ so? While researching the representation of militant women in Republican song, a telling insight into such ideologically essentialist worldview was revealed to the author in an exchange with a senior member of ‘Republican’ Sinn Féin (RSF), an organisation formed in 1986 following a split within ‘Provisional’ Sinn Féin (PSF), due to the latter’s decision to end their long-standing policy of electoral abstentionism. As this represented a fundamental break with core Republican ideology, RSF immediately regarded PSF — and perhaps more importantly, PIRA members — as no longer Republican, but ‘Nationalist’, or worse still, ‘Free Staters’. (Indeed, the RSF position remains to this day that PSF effectively split from them, and not *vice versa*.) When questioned as to whether output narrating ‘Provisional’ IRA activity post-split — specifically ‘The Loughgall Ambush’, ‘The Streets of Gibraltar’ and ‘The Ballad of Pearse Jordan’¹² — would (i) be regarded as ‘Republican’ songs in the first instance or would be frowned upon from an ideological perspective by RSF members, and (ii) whether such songs would ever be played by ballad groups at an RSF fundraising events or sung at an RSF social gathering, the reply was both highly qualified and revelatory:

¹² ‘The Loughgall Ambush’ relates the killing by the SAS of IRA volunteers Paddy Kelly, Jim Lynagh, Pádraig McKearney, Tony Gormley, Declan Arthurs, Séamus Donnelly, Gerry O’Callaghan and Eugene Kelly, on 5 May 1987. All eight were members of the organisation’s East Tyrone Brigade. The killing of three Belfast IRA volunteers — Mairéad Farrell, Seán Savage and Danny McCann — in Gibraltar on March 6 1988 (again by the SAS) is narrated in ‘The Streets of Gibraltar’. Volunteer Pearse Jordan was shot dead by an undercover RUC unit on the Falls Road, Belfast, on 25 November 1992.

Those songs are about very brave people who *set out* to be Republicans, and certainly *thought* that they were Republicans, but they were in reality misled by a leadership who were themselves, at that point, *no longer Republican*. You would really need to speak to someone in Head Office about that [emphasis added].¹³

Therefore, to such ideologically essentialist Republicans, output from the post-1986 period can simply never be classified as ‘Republican’ song under any circumstances, given the fundamental breach in orthodoxy that the characters therein are deemed to have committed.

Christy Moore (2000) related similar internecine ideological disputations when he was confronted with the very specific requirements (and hostilities) of a Republican audience in West Belfast in the late 1970s. In this instance, he made the considerable *faux pas* of performing a song written in memory of an ‘Official’ IRA volunteer during a concert he gave in a ‘Provisional’ IRA stronghold:

I recorded ‘Joe McCann’ in 1976. I sang it in Ballymurphy one night and it was not at all appreciated. Sections of the audience had to be restrained from coming on stage for instant dialogue. Joe McCann was a soldier, but internecine warfare had tarnished his image in the Provo heartlands and some Free State balladeer

¹³ Interview with member of Republican Sinn Féin, conducted on 1 November 2017 at Republican Sinn Féin office, Parnell Street, Dublin 1.

was not going to sing his praises just anywhere. I learned my lesson. (Moore 2000:210)¹⁴

Joe McCann may well have been “a soldier” to Moore, but through the eyes of a Ballymurphy audience “in the Provo heartlands”, as an ‘Official’ IRA volunteer, McCann was merely another wayward ‘Stickie’, an apostate not worthy of the appellation ‘Republican’.

Another commonly applied descriptor that is worthy of comment is that of ‘rebel songs’. While neatly eliding the ‘Republican’ *versus* ‘Nationalist’ dichotomy (as well as the contested space of Republican legitimacy), it too manages to open up yet further disputation in terms of appropriate classification. By not deploying a specific ideological signifier to the song, the thematic becomes considerably depoliticised. While ‘Republican’ and ‘rebel’ both clearly convey an armed, anti-colonial thematic, only the former represents an obvious trajectory towards a radical, well-defined and long-term political dispensation. This is not to suggest that ‘rebel’ is never used in popular Republican discourse, where terms such as ‘1916 rebels’, ‘Wexford Rebellion’, etc., are often encountered. It must be remembered, however, that these serve only as generic references — more often than not imbued with a certain nostalgic affection — and that those in question remain first and foremost ‘Republicans’ in pursuit of ‘The Republic’. Therefore, by specifying the context of the post-revolutionary scenario (and not merely the revolutionary moment itself), the descriptor ‘Republican’ infuses the

¹⁴ See also, Moore (1984):

‘Joe McCann’: Written by Eamon O’Doherty from Derry. This was a constant number in my repertoire until I sang it one night in Ballymurphy.’ (1984:48)

song canon with a notably more solid political agency than that of ‘rebel’, which is largely unsatisfactory in this regard.

‘Rebel’ is also fundamentally problematic for the Republican audience, given that ‘rebellion’ suggests the usurpation of an established, legitimate political order, something which Republicans would obviously refute as a description of British rule in Ireland. Such politico-musicological sensitivity was revealed in a 1981 interview of renowned Conamara *sean-nós* singer Seosamh Ó hÉanaigh by traditional musician and scholar Mick Moloney:

(Moloney): In the context of the last five years or so, [North American] people of Irish extraction in particular, are expecting all people who are involved in traditional music and song to sing rebel songs, and to sing songs in particular that are very anti-English. How do you deal with that?

(Ó hÉanaigh): A couple of times someone asked me, ‘Why do you never sing a rebel song?’, and I said: ‘To my mind, we never had many rebels; we had patriots. A rebel . . . is someone who stands out against a government elected by his own people. I have patriotic songs.’ (Mac Con Iomaire 2007:362)

Blankenhorn (2010) similarly notes Ó hÉanaigh’s marked reluctance regarding the performance of works of an overtly militant hue during this period:

[I]n later life, Joe [Seosamh] would give a nuanced reply to people who asked him to sing ‘rebel songs,’ referring to himself as a ‘patriot’ rather than a ‘rebel’. While his performance of songs like ‘Skibbereen’, ‘John Mitchel’ and ‘The Glen

of Aherlow’ left no doubt how he felt about the unjust treatment of Irish people at the hands of imperial authorities, his awareness of the ongoing Troubles made him reluctant to throw petrol on fires that were burning hot enough already, and he purposely avoided singing the rabble-rousers that many — particularly in America — requested. (Blankenhorn 2010:5)

It should be noted here, that this was an instance of the somewhat predictable difficulties encountered by an Irish singer performing to an Irish-American audience during the 1970s, rather than Ó hÉanaigh asserting doctrinaire Republican principles. Navigating audience expectations of an incendiary ballad from ‘back home’ would appear to have been the primary motivation for such sentiment, and in doing so, seeking to avoid being unfairly pigeon-holed as a ‘Republican’ singer as a consequence. This was a common anxiety of many traditional Irish musicians from the late 1960s onwards, with noted groups such as The Dubliners deliberately abandoning the more militant sections of their repertoire, such was the censorious and revisionist mindset ascendant in Ireland at the time (Ferriter 2012:270).

To conclude the present work with Seosamh Ó hÉanaigh: as he was never noted as a singer of overtly political material himself, he did not have an extensive catalogue to excise in the first instance. He did, however, pointedly censor his version of ‘Skibbereen’ — one of the ‘big’ songs of the tradition — to accommodate the sensitivity of performing to an English audience. This was highlighted by scholar and song collector Tom Munnely, in his review of a collection of Ó hÉanaigh’s informal recordings from the 1960s:

[I]n verse 4 of ‘Skibbereen’, [Joe] sings of the landlord and the sheriff setting the cottage roof afire ‘with their demon yellow spleen.’ In most cases, this is sung as ‘with their demon English spleen’. I asked Joe why he chose ‘yellow’. He told me: ‘The English have always been good to me and I’m not going to insult them just for the sake of it.’ (Munnelly 2000).

Ó hÉanaigh himself referenced such lyrical nuance in his 1981 interview with Mick Moloney:

(Ó hÉanaigh): You’re singing to an audience; you’re not there to insult anybody in that audience. And I worked in England for years and I never found a bad Englishman. I’m not saying the laws were good, but I found the English very nice people and I sang in English folk-clubs all around the country and I was treated as something authentic. . . . I like to respect an audience; without them, you wouldn’t be there. (Mac Con Iomaire 2007:362)

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Abstract

The well-known horse-racing ballad ‘Skewball’ (hereafter, *SB*) has a well-established oral tradition in Ireland, with versions documented throughout the eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. The latest is a 1979 field-recording of Derry folksinger and storyteller, Eddie Butcher (Shields 2011:58-9).¹⁵ The ballad was also assimilated into African-American oral tradition, in which it was reconstructed and renamed ‘Stewball’ (Scarborough 1925:61-4; Lomax 1994:68-71), and was still being documented in American folk tradition as late as the 1930s (Flanders 1939:172-4). In common with countless other folk songs, *SB* was appropriated by broadside¹⁶ printers and subsequently enjoyed widespread public appeal throughout England in the early- to mid-nineteenth-century, its popularity waning with the later decline of the broadside as a medium of ballad transmission and distribution.

¹⁵ Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456. The ballad is also known variously as ‘Scewball’, ‘Scew Ball’, ‘Screw Ball’, ‘Skewball’, ‘Skew Ball’, ‘Skyball’, ‘Scuball’, ‘Sku-ball’, etc.

¹⁶ For the purposes of the current research, the term “broadside” refers to the practice of printing ballads on single sheets of paper so as to enable their cheap and efficient dissemination over a broad geographical area. For a wider discussion on the vagaries of the word, see Earnest, 2005:11-4.

A comparative analysis of oral and broadside versions reveals clear differences between the two narratives. I argue that these variations were quite deliberate in origin, being a direct result of interpolations and excisions made by broadside ballad printers to the original oral narrative. By drawing comparisons between versions of *SB* collected from both oral and broadside sources, this paper will demonstrate that as a consequence of significant social and cultural advancements in the nineteenth-century, *SB* was deliberately revised with the aim of enhancing its appeal and relevance to an increasingly literate middle-class audience.

Horses for Discourses?: The Transition from Oral to Broadside

Narrative in ‘Skewball’.

Historical Context

The narrative recounted in *SB* centres on an historically documented horse race held in Kildare, Ireland on 30 March 1752 (Heber 1753:106).¹⁷ The race in question was a two-horse challenge between Sir Ralph Gore’s Grey Mare (Pick 1803:504) — the clear favourite — and Arthur Mervin’s Skewball (Pick 1803:91; Harewood 1835:309), a far lesser-known racehorse (if not completely unknown in Ireland), in which the latter unexpectedly triumphs to great acclaim. Unsurprisingly, the narrative of *SB* has changed considerably over time. Such variation is to be expected from a ballad that was based on eighteenth-century events in Ireland, enjoyed widespread popular appeal as a nineteenth-century English broadside printing, became established in African-American slave culture and later appeared as a work song among African-American prisoners, and ultimately became popularised on both sides of the Atlantic in the folk revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁸ There are, however, key narrative features that are common to all documented oral and broadside versions of the ballad, namely:¹⁹

- (i) A two-horse challenge for a considerable purse is arranged to be held on “the plains of Kildare” between Sir Ralph Gore and Arthur Mervin, both of whom

¹⁷ See also: *General Advertiser* (11 April 1752); *London Evening Post* (9-11 April 1752); *Pue’s Occurrences* (27 April 1752).

¹⁸ See, for example: Lomax, Alan (1997) *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from the Parchman Farm, 1947-48 (Volume 2): Don’tcha Hear Poor Mother Calling?* (Rounder).

¹⁹ African-American versions, while clearly sharing common origins with the Irish and English versions under discussion, vary significantly in terms of narrative and characters involved.

were well-known figures in eighteenth-century Irish horse racing circles, and served as presidents of the Irish Jockey Club in the late 1750s (Carpenter 1998:312).²⁰

- (ii) Although fleeting comparative references are periodically made to other racehorses, only two are mentioned as participating in the contest related in the ballad. The race favourite is a grey mare owned by Gore and is referred to variously in the ballads as either “Grey Mare”, “Maid Sportly”, or “Miss Portly/Portsley/Sportl(e)y/Sportsly/Sprightly”, or in later versions as “Miss Grizzle”.²¹ The lesser-known challenger — a skewbald gelding — is owned by Mervin and known as “Skewball” throughout all documented versions.²²
- (iii) Upon hearing of the challenge and the wager that has been put down, the skewbald — the clear second favourite in the contest — instructs his master to place a considerable bet as he is assured of victory. Despite the established

²⁰ Sir Ralph Gore is also referenced as “Sir Francis Gore” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), “Sheriff Moir” (Peter Buchan MS) and “young Mrs. Gore” (Shields 1988:16-7; Shields 2011:58-9). Arthur Mervin is referenced variously in English broadsides as “Arthur Irmin / Irvine / Irving / Irwin / Iwrin / Merlin / Merwin / Mirvin / Morvin”; also, “Arthur O’Mearlin” (Peter Buchan MS), “Arthur Marvin” (MS Filgate), “Arthur Marvel (Benton 1826:3-4), “Arthur Melvin” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), “Artumaro” (Flanders 1939:172-4) and “Spurmurthy” (Thompson 1958:82-4). As well as the pair’s prominence among the racing fraternity, Gore was also a major Fermanagh landowner of Cromwellian planter background, a fact which may well have contributed to the ballad’s broad appeal in Ireland, seeing as his mare was defeated so heavily by an unknown horse of inferior pedigree.

²¹ See Mayne broadside printing, Belfast. Also referenced as “Miss Greazle” (Shields 2011:58-9), “Miss Grissel” (Peter Buchan MS; Flanders 1939:172-4) and “Miss Grizzel” (Shields 1988:16-7).

²² Also referenced variously in English broadsides as “Skew Ball”, “Scewball” and “Scew Ball”; also, “Scuball” (Benton 1826:3-4; Thompson 1958:82-4), “Sku-ball” (Flanders 1939:172-4) and “Skyball” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast).

reputation of the favourite, Skewball wins easily to both the surprise and delight of the assembled crowd.

Despite both oral and broadside versions of *SB* sharing the overall subject matter and common structure shown above, a comparative analysis of the two genres reveals some striking differences. Inconsistencies can be clearly observed among the *dramatis personae* involved and throughout the general narratives related. Without question, the most obvious distinction between oral and broadside versions is the presence of the well-established folklore motif of the speaking horse, found almost exclusively in oral versions. The popular belief in horses possessing human faculties is well-attested to in Irish oral tradition, however, in spite of — or indeed perhaps, because of — this popularity, it failed to make an entirely seamless transition into broadside format in the ballad under review.²³ Such narrative variations show that *SB* has always retained a considerable adaptability to the expectations of its varied audiences, a quality which no doubt ensured its survival in the traditional canon for several centuries. The various revisions provide us with clear examples of the expedient manipulation of ballad narrative by both traditional folksinger and broadside printer alike. Of particular interest is the revision of the earliest documented oral versions for publication as a broadside ballad sheet. I argue that this revision was deliberately undertaken as part of a concerted effort to present *SB* as historical narrative to an increasingly literate and socially advanced (and markedly non-traditionally focused) audience, and in doing so, deflect from the ballad's folkloric origins.

²³ See, for example: Ó Duilearga (1935:153); O'Keefe (1859:69); Ó hÓgáin (1977:199-243; 2006:284).

Market Forces and ‘The Folk’

A ballad is rarely (if ever) performed in isolation and its rendition requires an active recipient in the form of an audience. This holds true for either an oral ballad, related in the intimate surrounds of the fireside or a broadside hawked at a busy city street corner. In either circumstance, the audience assumes an active role in the ballad’s transmission and thus, is an integral party to the performance itself. It can be reasonably argued, therefore, that the audience fulfils as important a role as that of the performer; in its absence, the ballad would effectively cease active transmission. Without a receptive audience, the most well-crafted ballad would very quickly become a defunct artistic endeavour from a contemporary perspective and thus pass quickly into the relative obscurity of cultural history. Consequently, the audience exerts a direct influence on the performer, whether in the actual content of the utterance, or in the personal style of expression (Ferris 1970:439-49; Casey, *et al* 1972:397-403).

In the context of oral ballad recitation, the performer is not simply a singer, but is also a storyteller.²⁴ The folksinger, therefore, enjoys considerable freedoms (in both the content related and the style utilised), yet must always remain cognisant of the requirements of the audience if the transmission of his or her art is to continue. In such a context, the most obscure narrative can be related in as fantastic a style as is demanded (or indeed, expected) by the audience, depending on the storytelling prowess of the individual performer. While oral ballads were quite often based on historical fact,

²⁴ Ewan McColl’s 1964 series of recorded interviews with Irish traditional singer Seosamh Ó hÉanaigh (1919-1984) provides several illustrative examples of this cultural crossover:

(Ó hÉanaigh): Because, as I told you before: before they ask you to sing — they never ask you at home to ‘sing a song’, they say ‘say a song’ — and you tell the story first and then you sing the song. But without a story, the song is useless.

Reproduced at: <https://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/heaney.htm#intro> (Accessed 17 December 2011).

narrative accuracy in the depiction of such events was often of secondary importance to the fundamental entertainment value of the story. Consequently, linear narrative and chronology are quite often not the primary focus of the oral ballad singer. If the historical facts assisted in the development of a ballad's narrative — and in the process, fulfilled the audience's expectations — the performer could utilise them as appropriate. If the audience's expectations remained unfulfilled, the facts and characters involved could always be inflated (or deflated) to meet the requirements of 'the folk'. This finely balanced dynamic between audience and performer is likened by Casey, *et al* (1972) to the relationship between politician and constituency:

A singer interacts with his audiences in the way that a politician interacts with parts or all of his constituency. The 'good singer' is aware of the likes and dislikes of the groups and individuals for whom he performs. He manipulates his repertoire in response to perceived or anticipated performances, giving his constituents what he thinks they would like to hear. He is more or less sensitive to their feedback and thus quick to react in situations in which either his or their expectations are not fulfilled. (1972:397)

Above all other considerations however, the traditional singer was transmitting his or her art, which was always of primary importance over and above how believable the narrative was, or its relevance to the day-to-day existence of 'the folk'. Indeed, as a short-lived antidote to the hardships of everyday life, perhaps the more fantastic the narrative, the better.

Besides obvious differences, broadside ballads differed significantly from their oral counterparts in two major aspects, one cultural, the other economic. One of the

primary cultural distinctions resulted from the simple fact that the narrative freedom of the singer or storyteller was not, and indeed could never be, enjoyed by the broadside publishers, since the flexibility and spontaneity associated with oral folk transmission did not lend itself well to broadside publishing. Broadside ballads were generally more linear and had considerably less narrative flexibility than those of the oral ballad style. As a contemporary form of literature, they were also more reflective of changing contemporary attitudes. Coupled with this, was the fact that the popular height of broadside ballad publishing coincided with the increasing literacy of a burgeoning middle class that was a result of the social and economic progress of the Industrial Revolution (Williams 1981:51). Whereas both the folksinger and his or her audience belonged to a tightly-knit community bound by a shared system of cultural values, the broadside was designed for anonymous consumption across a much wider geographic area. By the nineteenth-century, the folk ballad was fast becoming a relic of times past, and was not in keeping with the social, economic, educational and industrial advances of the period. However, despite the changing mores of the time, it would have been foolish for broadside publishers seeking new material to ignore existing folk ballads, many of which were regularly appropriated for print and sale, as observed by Wehse (1975):

More frequent than the entering of an original broadside text into oral tradition seems the adaptation of orally transmitted folksongs to broadside publication. The reason has to be sought in the economic situation of broadside printing and publishing. . . . Why should the publisher pay a professional writer for a really new and authentic song if it was only necessary to reproduce already existing subject matter and still make a good profit? (1975:328)

The broadside publisher was not transmitting the ballad for the sake of its own particular merit, but simply as an efficient means to a financial gain. Unlike the traditional singer, the broadside publisher was now dependent on ‘the market’, and not simply ‘the folk’. It could be argued, therefore, that the publisher had to be even more aware of the cultural requirements of his audience than the traditional singer. Whereas a traditional singer who ignored his audience’s needs and expectations might simply encounter a public rebuff from his or her audience — an occurrence, to be fair, at which most contemporary folksingers would still recoil in horror — the broadside publisher would suffer financial hardship. In essence, what the traditional singer might endure in terms of a bruised ego, the ballad printer would have to absorb in terms of financial loss. In practice, this meant that broadside publishers and peddlers had to be more than willing to manipulate the subject matter of their printings to accommodate the varied requirements of their audience — something which was clearly undertaken in the case of *SB* — with scant regard for the continuity of the narrative. Broadside publishers published by such editorial manipulation of existing oral ballads were often found wanting, as pointed out by Williams (1981):

Although, in their hunger for material, early broadside publishers did sometimes print relatively untouched versions of oral ballads, the tendency was more often to rewrite them so that they conformed to literate logic and taste. The broadside ballads usually focussed on the narrative to the exclusion of almost everything else. The number of major characters in the stories was frequently reduced (often to one person, the narrator), and their qualities almost disappeared under the weight of descriptive detail, as though the

literate logic and an urban sense of naturalism struggled to fill the gaps in the once skilfully, but sparsely rendered ballad stories. (1981:48)

That the broadside printers “struggled to fill the gaps” when they appropriated *SB* for publishing is evident in their treatment of Skewball’s propensity to speak at key stages of the ballad narrative. The speaking horse — a clear remnant of the now *passé* folklore era — was duly excised so as to present the ballad as historical narrative. However, in their efforts to make the ballad more appealing (or, indeed, fundamentally believable) for what they clearly regarded as a more culturally and intellectually advanced audience — one who we may assume would have scoffed at the prospect of a supernatural, speaking horse — the ballad printers continually fail at their numerous attempts of revision. What remains is a corrupted series of verses that jar significantly with the rest of the narrative and undermine its own chronological sense. Thus, in their haste to revise the unpalatable, mythological aspect of the ballad, the broadside printers produced versions that compromise the credulity of the narrative itself, an ironic twist that would surely have brought a wry smile to the lips of a many a wizened *seanchaí*.²⁵ The traditional singer may well not have had the new-found sophistication of nineteenth-century England, but at least he knew his craft intimately and could still script and deliver a tale to good effect. The corrupted revisions show the narrow social confines in which the ballad printer operated, as well as the practical difficulties involved in overseeing the transition from the oral ballad — with all its associated cultural freedoms — to the more restrictive medium of the broadside.

²⁵ From Modern Irish: “seanchaí, m. (*gs.* ~, *pl.* -aithe). 1. *Lit.*: Custodian of tradition, historian. 2. Reciter of ancient lore; traditional story-teller” (Ó Dónaill 1977:1076). See also Old Irish: “senchaid. m. Later also senchaide . . . a reciter of lore; a historian” (Quinn 1990:536).

Oral versus Broadside Narrative in ‘Skewball’: An Analysis

While *SB* gained prominence and widespread popular appeal as an English broadside printing, the ballad’s oral tradition is also well-established and can be shown to have both pre-existed the first datable printings, and to have long outlived the late nineteenth-century decline in broadside publishing. Oral versions of the ballad were collected in America until the 1930s (Flanders 1939:172-4) and in Ireland until as recently as 1979 (Shields 2011:58-9), suggesting that for some at least, the mythological worldview provided by the oral ballad was not lost quite just yet.

As well as an overall common structure shared with broadside printings, oral versions of *SB* display the following key narrative features:

- i) Skewball speaks to his master before the race and instructs him to bet heavily as his victory is assured;²⁶
- ii) As the race nears its climax, Skewball asks his rider how far his opponent is behind him;
- iii) Without hesitation, his rider confirms that the favourite is considerably behind and that they are to prove victorious;
- iv) Skewball addresses the assembled crowd and calls for a toast to his defeated opponent.

²⁶ In the Peter Buchan MS version, Skewball instructs his rider (and not his master) with the lines, “The wager being laid and the money laid down, / Skewball to his rider began to discourse”, the latter line appearing later in Verse 7 — as in other oral versions — when Skewball converses with his rider. The reader will note that these lines are considerably at odds with the established rhyming pattern of the ballad and would appear to be a revision for the sake of narrative continuity, i.e. to ensure that Skewball speaks only to his rider throughout. This conversation is absent in the truncated P.J. McCall MS version.

Documented oral versions of *SB* are as follows (see Appendix 1 for full text):²⁷

(i) Filgate MS (Louth County Council Archive Collection)

The earliest printed version of *SB* to which a date can be confidently assigned is that found in *The Vocal Library* (hereafter *VL*) (Souter 1818:526), a songbook containing a diverse range of English, Irish and Scottish material stretching back over several centuries.²⁸ The intervening period of some sixty-six years between the publication of *VL* (1818) and the actual date of the race (1752) is not an insignificant amount of time if one considers the later widespread popularity of the ballad. That oral versions of *SB* significantly preceded this printing is attested to by the discovery of a handwritten version which can be dated to 1764, entitled ‘The Noble Scuball’. This previously undocumented version was uncovered as part of the author’s ongoing study of the Filgates of Lisrenny Family Papers, a diverse collection of estate records and personal papers, catalogued and held at the Louth County Council Archives, Dundalk.²⁹ While displaying the common narrative already discussed, Filgate retains the folklore motif of the speaking horse — in this instance, pre-, mid- and post-race. The transcription shows several corruptions that are consistent with oral documentation, yet correctly records Skewball’s owner as “Arthur Marvin”, a name shown to have

²⁷ The author has focused solely on oral versions collected in Ireland and England, or on American versions which are clearly of direct descent from same. African-American oral versions, while strongly retaining the presence of a speaking horse in the narrative, are not included as part of the research undertaken for this paper.

²⁸ Both Flanders (1939:173) and Thompson (1958:83) cite the 1822 edition of *VL* as the earliest printed source for *SB*, quoting Scarborough (1925:62).

²⁹ *Filgates of Lisrenny Papers*: ‘Sale of Farm Stock’, PP00001/002/004/001 (Louth County Council Archive Collection: Dundalk).

undergone widespread revision in the broadsides. Significantly, Verse 4 specifies (correctly) that the race took place at The Curragh, a location which has been universally amended in all subsequent versions to “the Plain(s) of Kildare”. It should also be noted that Filgate accurately records Skewball as racing against “Grey Mare”, whereas in the three later oral versions discussed below, his opponent has been amended to “Miss Greazle/Grissel/Grizzle”.³⁰ The Filgate MS, therefore, is the only version of *SB* hitherto documented which fully agrees with all of the established historical facts of the original race.

(ii) McCall MSs (National Library of Ireland)

Three manuscripts held in the National Library of Ireland — one belonging to the songwriter and ballad collector John McCall³¹ (1822–1902) and two belonging to his son P.J. McCall (1861–1919) — contain fragmentary versions of *SB*, one of which is dated by P.J. McCall to 1890.³² The versions each contain only four verses and were originally collected in the Carlow-Wexford area (Munnely 1985:455-77). The first two lines of the second verse are missing in two of the versions and have clearly been interpolated by P. J. McCall into the third. In all three, it is the singer who bets heavily

³⁰ This change in opponent — along with the presence of a speaking horse — is also evident in the Mayne (Belfast) broadside printing, which would appear to be the source for the Eddie Butcher versions. The Mayne printing is by far the most extensive and manages to successfully combine the various nuances and vagaries of both broadside and oral versions, providing an 11-verse epic in which Skewball converses no less than five times.

³¹ MS 13,849: *A collection of traditional and other songs and ballads made by John Mc Call, mid-19th c., including many from the Carlow-Wexford area* (National Library of Ireland: Dublin):66.

³² *Collection of Ballad Sheets and Cuttings of Songs made by PJ McCall, laid down in 13 volumes* (National Library of Ireland: Dublin), vol. VI:17; vol. VI:122.

on Skewball, but no mention is made of either Gore or Mervin. Again, Skewball wins with ease and speaks to his rider after the race.

(iii) Peter Buchan MS (British Library)

The British Library Manuscript Collection contains an unpublished mid-nineteenth-century manuscript version of *SB* transcribed by the Scottish folksong collector Peter Buchan (1790–1854). This manuscript is of added significance in that it confirms that oral (i.e. specifically non-broadside) versions were not strictly an Irish phenomenon and that identical folklore narratives complete with the speaking horse were still in circulation in Britain even at the height of broadside publishing popularity in the nineteenth-century, thus demonstrating the robust longevity of this particular folklore motif. In this version, Skewball speaks three times to his rider — twice during the race and once before — and not to Mervin, as in other versions. The pre-race remarks (Verse 4: “Skewball to his rider began to discourse”) would appear to have been substituted directly from Verse 7, as the line is at odds with the established rhyming pattern.³³ Like Filgate, the transcription shows corruptions that are consistent with oral documentation, e.g. “Sheriff Moir” (Sir Ralph Gore) and “Arthur O’Mearlin” (Arthur Mervin). A character not found in any other version — “Lord Melville” — is also present, possibly a further corruption of “Mervin”. Furthermore, the first two lines of the final verse in which Skewball calls for a toast to his defeated opponent are missing in this version.

³³ See footnote 26.

(iv) Eddie Butcher Version (Hugh Shields' Field Recordings)

In the 1960s (Shields 1988:16-7) and again in 1979 (Shields 2011:58-9), song collector and folklorist Hugh Shields collected a version of *SB* from Derry folk-singer and storyteller Eddie Butcher (1900-1980), which is unmistakably similar to the Mayne broadside printing. The main structural difference is the omission of Verses 3 and 5 of Mayne. Again, a number of inconsistencies are evident. For example, Verse 1 reads as “great heart of marble,” instead of “brave Arthur Marvin”. In Verse 2, Butcher cites the challenger as “young Mrs. Gore” and also refers to “Miss Grizzel” as “their Monaghan grey mare”. Aside from these tantalising (if unexplained) snippets of locally-influenced ballad revision, Butcher’s version agrees with Mayne in style and content, which would appear to be the singer’s source.³⁴

* * * *

The enduring ubiquity of *SB* in oral tradition over the course of several centuries cannot be examined in isolation from the ballad’s spectacular and marked success as a nineteenth-century broadside, with published versions collected across a wide geographical area throughout England, as far north as Newcastle and as far south as London. Over the course of researching this paper, the author has been able to locate twenty-seven extant printed broadside sources for the ballad (under various titles) from the early-to-mid-nineteenth-centuries (see Appendix 2). Despite this wide appeal among

³⁴ Andy Irvine’s seminal 1976 recording of the ballad as ‘The Plains of Kildare’, draws heavily on the Eddie Butcher version (e.g. “young Mrs. Gore”, “Miss Griesel”, “10,000 gold guineas”, the ubiquitous speaking horse who imbibes, etc.), as well as the 1962 recording by A.L. Lloyd (e.g. “Well, past the winning post, bold Skewball won so handy / And horse and rider both called for sherry, wine and brandy”). A nod is also duly given in the direction of Skewball’s travels across the Atlantic, when Irvine calls the horse by his African-American slave sobriquet of “Stewball” and in doing so, completes the gelding’s epic journey back to Ireland.

the buying public, broadside versions of *SB* began to disappear as the medium declined in the late nineteenth-century. The latest printing examined as part of the current research was not, in fact, English and was published in Belfast by the printer and publisher Alex Mayne. As already stated, the narrative presented in this printing has more in common with earlier oral versions.³⁵

All English broadside printings show a common eleven-verse structure and, with the exception of the wide variations in the spelling of Mervin's name, all show a comparatively similar narrative content which may be summarised as follows:³⁶

Verse 1: The ballad begins with the standard broadside opening of "Come ("Ye" in one instance³⁷) gentlemen sportsmen" and tells of how Skewball was brought to Ireland by Arthur Mervin;

Verse 2: Mervin is challenged by Sir Ralph Gore to race Skewball against his grey mare (of varying title) for the sum of 500 guineas/pounds;

Verse 3: After Skewball hears of the wager, he encourages Mervin to bet heavily on him, as his victory is assured;

Verse 4: Huge crowds assemble for the match, most of whom lay money on the grey mare;

³⁵ Mayne printed at 34 High Street from 1852 and subsequently at 7½ High Street from 1854–67 (Moulden 2006:979). Unfortunately, a premises number is not printed with the address on the broadside, so a more specific date for this printing of *SB* cannot be given beyond this broad timeframe.

³⁶ Exceptions are the Wright printing (Birmingham) which omits Verse 5 and an anonymous, undated printing — Bodleian Library: Harding B 6 (54) — which shows only eight verses, four of which contain only two lines.

³⁷Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1784). Anonymous, undated printing.

Verse 5: A knowing Mervin encourages those with money to lay hundreds on the grey mare, which he will match with some thousands on Skewball;

Verse 6: Mervin disperses the crowd and informs all to be ready for the contest the following day;

Verse 7: On the day of the race, Mervin — who now seems to be dictating proceedings — orders his rider to mount Skewball and clears the spectators from the path of the horses;

Verse 8: The race begins and Skewball immediately takes what will prove to be an unassailable lead;

Verse 9: As the race nears its climax — while both horses are in “the midst of the sport” — Mervin asks his jockey what distance the grey mare is behind. (At this same stage in the oral versions, it is in fact Skewball who asks this of the rider);

Verse 10: The jockey replies that he is well ahead of the grey mare and will win easily. However, as a result of the deliberate revisions already referred to, both this and the preceding verse display several corruptions and inconsistencies of note;

Verse 11: The race ends with Skewball winning easily, as predicted by the horse himself. An ecstatic crowd cries out that this is Skewball’s first race in Ireland and by winning, he has “broke Sir Ralph Gore”.

As this analysis demonstrates, the ubiquity of the mythological, speaking horse is central in traditional, oral versions of *SB*, with the motif being ultimately utilised to facilitate progression of the ballad narrative. The ubiquity of this motif suggests that *SB* may well have enjoyed an oral existence for a considerable period before the popular

nineteenth-century broadside versions, and that the events surrounding the famous 1752 triumph of Skewball may simply have been grafted onto a pre-existing folklore narrative.

Despite only one reference to Skewball's gift of speech (Verse 3) surviving in the English broadsides — perhaps more an editorial oversight than by actual design — the ballad has clearly been revised in order to present it in an historical (and consequently more 'credible') format for the benefit of a specific target audience. Thus, broadside *SB* is no longer the quasi-mythical tale of a horse with the supernatural gift of speech, as recounted in the oral versions. Instead, a clear attempt has been made at transforming the long-established folklore narrative of *SB* into a simple historical account of a documented sporting event which relates the considerably more sober narrative of an unfavoured horse triumphing against all odds.

A Ballad in Transition: From Filgate to the Broadside

The earliest documented oral version of *SB* is the handwritten transcription found among the Filgates of Lisrenny Family Papers, which can be dated to the year 1764 — a mere twelve years after the actual race upon which the ballad was originally based — with the earliest datable broadside version being *VL*.³⁸ Both versions present similar narratives. A comparison of the two, however, shows some notable differences which are illustrative of the general transition from oral to broadside:

³⁸ The author concedes that other broadside printings may well have been published and in circulation before that of *VL*. Due to the inherent difficulties involved in dating certain broadside material, however, it has been decided to construct the comparative analysis on a version to which a definitive date can be readily assigned.

MS Filgate (1752)

Come all you brave gallants and listen to all,
And I will sing you the praise of Noble Scuball,
Who is lately come oover [?] as I understand,
By brave Arthur Marvin the peer of the land.

And of his brave actions you heard of before,
How he was challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore.
Five hundred guineas on the course of Kildare,
To run with the sporting gallant grey mare.

When Scuball he heard of the wager being laid,
He said to his master 'Be not afraid.
Five hundred guineas you may lay on the course,
And I will cover your castle with red matches of gold.'

Brave Arthur Marvin, smiling did say:
'Get ready, brave nobles, for tomorrow is the day.
Get ready your horses and saddles prepare,
For we we [?] must away to the Curroh [*sic*] of Kildare.'

The Vocal Library (1818)

Come gentlemen sportsmen, I pray listen all,
I will sing you a song in the praise of Skew Ball;
And how he came over, you shall understand,
It was by Squire Mervin, the pearl of this land.

And of his late actions as you've heard before,
He was lately challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore,
For five hundred pounds, on the plains of Kildare,
To run with Miss Sportly, that famous grey mare.

Skew Ball then hearing the wager was laid,
Unto his kind master said — 'Don't be afraid;
For if on my side you thousands lay would,
I would rig on your castle a fine mass of gold!'

The day being come, and the cattle walk'd forth,
The people came flocking from East, South and North,
For to view all the sporters, as I declare,
And venture their money all on the grey mare.

Squire Mervin then, smiling, unto them did say,
'Come, gentlemen, all that have money to lay;
And you that have hundreds I will lay you all,
For I'll venture thousands on famous Skew Ball.'

Squire Mervin then smiling, unto them did say,
'Come gentlemen sportsmen, tomorrow's the day,
Spurs, horses and saddles and bridles prepare,
For you must away to the plains of Kildare.'

The day being come, and the cattle walk'd out,
Squire Mervin order'd his rider to mount,
And all the spectators to clear the way,
The time being come not one moment delay.

The cattle being mounted away they did fly,
Skew Ball like an arrow pass'd Miss Sportly by;
The people went up to see them go round,
They said in their hearts they ne'er touch'd the ground.

When Scuball he came to the middle of the course,
He and his rider began to discourse.
'Come my brave rider and tell unto me,
How fare is my disting [distance?] post is from me.'

The rider look'd back and this he did say:
'You may go very easy for we will win the day.'
Such leaping and josting the [they?] had for a while,
The more she stood back law full [?] a mile.

When Scuball came to the winning post,
He bid all his nobles for to drink a toast.
'Now since you laid all your purses on the grey mare,
Now she is bet and the sorrow ma care [Sir
Ralph Gore?].'

But as they were running in the midst of the sport,
Squire Mervin to his rider began his discourse:
'O! loving kind rider, come tell unto me,
How far at this moment Miss Sportly's from thee?'

'O! loving kind master, you bear a great style,
The grey mare's behind you a long English mile,
If the saddle maintains me, I'll warrant you there,
You ne'er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare.'

But as they were running by the distant chair,
The gentlemen cry'd out — 'Skew Ball never fear:
Altho' in this country thou was't ne'er seen before,
Thou hast beaten Miss Sportly, and broke Sir
Ralph Gore.'

The most obvious distinction between the two versions is the interpolation into *VL* of four additional verses, a feature found in all English broadside printings with the exception of two.³⁹ These verses do not in themselves significantly alter the basic narrative of the ballad and essentially function as dramatic devices in order to heighten

³⁹ See footnote 36.

the pre-race suspense, thus making the ballad more appealing to its audience. The interpolated verses are also significant: by placing emphasis on the race itself, they fundamentally dilute the significance of the speaking horse, the essential component of the folklore narrative. Further proof of the editor's hand is in the fact that all four interpolated verses (4, 5, 7 and 8, respectively) are practically sequential, constructed as they are around a verse that lends itself perfectly to their pre-race, suspense-building narrative. It is also worth noting that the opening address of the first verse has been corrected from "brave gallants" to "gentlemen sportsmen". This subtle revision provides further evidence of the broadside publishers' efforts to tailor the ballad to a specific niche audience (i.e. the horseracing fraternity), their target sales market.⁴⁰ A further interesting revision of *VL* is the amendment of the actual race location from "the Curroh [*sic*] of Kildare" (Verse 4, MS Filgate) to "the Plains of Kildare" (Verse 6). This was presumably made for the sake of rhythmic continuity, a feature present in all other broadside versions of the ballad.

Skewball, His Rider and His Master: Divergent Discourses

With the exception of some minor differences in wording and phraseology, English broadside versions of *SB* all share a common structure and narrative until the final three verses. Between these verses there are several distinct narrative streams, distinguished mainly by the changing identities of the characters. In addition to these

⁴⁰ Cox (1857) recounts that "the praises of Skewball, or the gallant Skyball as he was called, have been heard sung on Irish Race-courses within the last twenty years" (1857:116), a fact which would further illustrate the economic expediency — and, of course, the resultant marketing acumen — displayed by both broadside publishers and peddlers in their pursuit of market share. Performances of *SB* on English racecourses during this period are also documented. See *The Sporting Magazine* (vol. 8, January 1834:258).

variations, the broadside publishers have made numerous attempts to excise the mid- and post-race utterances; it is now Mervin, not Skewball, who speaks to the rider as the race reaches its climax. These clear narrative inconsistencies were duly appreciated by publishers at various stages in the ballad's broadside incarnations and consequently, several attempts were made at revision and correction. But in their haste to present the ballad in a markedly less folkloric style, the broadside publishers ultimately do not succeed: what remains are corrupted verses containing narratives distorted to the point of absurdity, as the following analysis will show.

In thirteen broadside versions, Skewball races against a grey mare known as "Miss Sportly".⁴¹ Of these, eleven were printed in London, with the remaining two (Wright and Walker) printed by publishing houses in Birmingham and Durham, respectively. Walker and Birt are identical, as are Batchelar and Jennings. Wright omits Verse 5, and Ryle is identical to two of the Pitts printings.⁴² In Verse 9 of *VL*, Mervin asks the rider:

'How far at this moment Miss Sportly's from thee?'

The rider replies in Verse 10:

'O! loving kind master, *you* bear a great style,
The grey mare's behind *you* a long English mile,
If the saddle maintains *me*, I'll warrant you there,

⁴¹ Wright reads "Miss Sportley".

⁴² Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (73) and Harding B15 (289b).

You ne'er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare [emphasis added].⁴³

The reader will note the obvious difficulty presented by the rider telling Mervin — a spectator, and not an actual race participant — that *he* bears a great style and that *he* (i.e. Mervin) will never be beaten, a remnant of the rider's original remarks to Skewball which always seem to successfully resist correction. The same difficulty is repeated in all of the Ryle and Pitts printings, which also contain what is, perhaps, the starkest narrative corruption found in any of the broadsides, when Mervin asks the rider:

'O! loving kind rider, come tell unto *me*,
How far at this moment Miss Sportly's from *me*?'

The Batchelar, Birt, Howard & Evans, Jennings, Walker and Wright printings all attempt to correct this inconsistency, as the rider now says that the grey mare is behind *him* (note the excision of Verse 10 "me" in all except Jennings), but the verses still lack the narrative continuity afforded by the oral versions:

But as they were running in the midst of the sport,
Squire Mervin to his rider began his⁴⁴ discourse:
'O! loving kind rider, come tell unto *me*,
How far at this moment Miss Sportly's from *thee*?⁴⁵

⁴³ Italics have been added to the following verses as appropriate.

⁴⁴ Howard & Evans reads "this".

⁴⁵ Birt and Walker read "How far is Miss Sportly from catching of thee?"

‘O! loving kind master, *you* bear a great style,
The grey mare's behind *me* a long English mile,
If the⁴⁶ saddle maintains⁴⁷, I'll warrant you there,
You ne'er will be beat on the plains of Kildare.’

In Verse 11, all “Miss Sportly” versions excise the post-race speech by Skewball in which he salutes his defeated opponent and often partakes in a celebratory toast. Instead, it is now “the gentlemen” who speak in unison, proclaiming Skewball’s debut victory. In doing so they further emphasise the ballad’s transition from a mythological tale of a supernatural speaking horse to a recounting of the considerably less fantastic narrative of an unexpectedly triumphant sporting underdog:

But as they were running by the distant chair,
The gentlemen cry’d out — ‘Skew Ball never fear:
Altho’ in this country thou was’t ne'er seen before,
Thou hast beaten Miss Sportly, and broke Sir Ralph Gore.’⁴⁸

Seven broadsides, all appearing to stem from the same common source, record Skewball’s opponent as “Maid Sportly,” and refer to Mervin as either “Irving,” “Irwin” or “Iwrin”. In all seven versions, Mervin again asks the rider:

⁴⁶ Birt and Walker omit “the”.

⁴⁷ Jennings adds “me”.

⁴⁸ Verse 11 of *VL* is reproduced above. Other “Miss Sportly” versions show very minor variations in spelling, but otherwise agree fully with the wording of *VL*.

‘O loving kind rider come tell unto me,
How far is Maid Sportly this moment from thee?’

Verse 10 of the Ford, Forth, Jackson and Harding B15 (290) printings all display the by now familiar pattern of narrative discontinuity:

‘O loving kind master *you* bear⁴⁹ a great stile,
The grey⁵⁰ mare is behind *me* a great English mile,
If *your*⁵¹ saddle maintains *me* I’ll warrant you there,
*You*⁵² ne’er shall⁵³ be beat on the plain of Kildare.’

In Eyres and in both Harkness printings, an attempt has clearly been made at addressing the above inconsistencies along with those of the “Miss Sportly” versions, by presenting lines 3 and 4 as a straight reply by Mervin to the rider. What results is perhaps the most successful attempted revision of the verse, but we are still left with the inconsistency of the rider’s reply to Mervin in line 1, as already discussed:

‘O loving kind master *you* bear a great stile,
The grey mare is behind *me* a large English mile.’
‘If *your* saddle maintains *you* I’ll warrant you there,
You ne’er will be beat on the plain of Kildare.’

⁴⁹ Jackson reads “beor”.

⁵⁰ Jackson reads “grew”.

⁵¹ Jackson reads “you”.

⁵² Jackson reads “yuo”.

⁵³ Ford reads “will”.

As in the “Miss Sportly” versions, Verse 11 also excises Skewball’s victory comments, and interestingly refers to him as a mare:

But as she was⁵⁴ running by the distance chair,
The gentlemen cried⁵⁵ out ‘Scew Ball never fear:
Altho’ in this country thou wast⁵⁶ ne’er seen before,
Thou hast beaten Maid Sportly and broke Sir Ralph Gore.’

One broadside — Sergent — records Gore’s grey mare as “Miss Sprightly,” but once again struggles with the excision of the Skewball/rider conversation in the final verses:

But as they were in the midst of their sport,
[?] Squire Mervin began this discourse:
Saying, ‘O loving rider, come tell unto *me*,
How far is Miss Sprightly now distant from *thee*?’

Says he, ‘my dear master, *you* bear a great stile,
The grey mare’s behind *me* a full English mile,
If the saddle remains, I’ll warrant you here,
You ne’er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare.’

⁵⁴ Jackson reads “wrs”.

⁵⁵ Evers, Ford and Jackson read “cry’d”.

⁵⁶ Forth reads “wert”; Jackson reads “want”.

But as they were running by the distance chair,
The gentlemen cry'd out, 'Skew Ball never fear:
Altho' in this country thou ne'er was before,
Thou's beaten Miss Sprightly, and broke Sir Ralph Gore.'

"Miss Sprightly" appears in *SB* on just one other occasion, this time in an oral version collected in New York in the mid-nineteenth-century. In common with other oral versions, horse and jockey speak in the final verses. Interestingly, the shouts of the gentlemen in the broadsides have now been inserted into the mouth of Skewball himself, thus further strengthening the speaking horse motif present across all oral versions:

'Although *I* was never in this country before
I've beat Miss Sprightly and broke sorrow four [Sir Ralph Gore].' (Thompson
1958:82-84)

Three versions — Croshaw, Hoggett and Harding B25 (1784) — list the opponent as "Miss Sportsly", and again attempt to circumvent the chronological difficulty posed by the original revision of these verses, primarily by the insertion of "we" and "us" into Verse 10. Again, it is "the gentlemen" who speak after the race and not our hero:

And as they were just in the midst of their sport,
Squire Mirvin to his rider begun this discourse:
'O loving kind rider come tell unto *me*,

How far is Miss Sportsly this moment from *thee*?’

‘O loving kind master *you* bear a great style,
The grey mare is behind *us* a full English mile,
If the saddle maintains *us*⁵⁷ I warrant you there,
We ne’er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare.’

And as they were running⁵⁸ past the distance chair,
The gentlemen cry’d⁵⁹ ‘Skewball never fear:
Although⁶⁰ in this country thou wast ne’er seen before,
Thou by beating Miss Sportsly has broke Sir Ralph Gore.’

Most noteworthy of all the English broadsides is the Stephenson printing, which, while showing some clear signs of revision, nonetheless retains Skewball’s mid-race conversation with his rider:

And when they were just in the middle of their course,
Skewball to his rider began this discourse:
‘Oh loving kind rider pray tell unto *me*,
How far is Miss Portsley this moment from *thee*?’

⁵⁷ Hoggett reads “as”.

⁵⁸ Hoggett reads “coming”.

⁵⁹ Hoggett reads “cri’d”.

⁶⁰ Hoggett reads “Altho”.

Verse 10 presents an unclear dialogue, one that would appear to be between rider and Mervin, as in the Eyres and Harkness printings:

‘Oh loving kind master *you* bear a great style,
The gray mare’s behind *me* a large English mile.’
‘Then stick close to *thy* saddle, my boy, never fear,
Thou ne’er shall be beat by this charming gray mare.’

The final two lines above provide a further echo of the folkloric origins of *SB*; similar lyrics appear in two oral versions collected in America, both of which display common ancestry with earlier oral versions of the ballad. In both, it is Skewball who speaks to his jockey:

‘Stick close to your saddle, my boy, never fear,
We ne’er shall be beat by the gallant Gray Mare.’ (Benton 1826:3)

‘Stick tight to your saddle my boy never [fear]
For you ne’er shall be beat on the plains of ki[ldeer.]’ (Thompson 1958:84)

The final verse of Stephenson shows similar content to all versions previously discussed:

And when they were running by the distance chair,
All the gentlemen called, ‘Skewball [?] fear:
Although in this country you ne’er run before,

By beating Miss Portsley you've broke Sir Ralph Goer.'

It is worth noting that the pre-race remarks between Mervin and Skewball (Verse 3) are the only remnants of the gelding's propensity to speak that have survived in the English broadsides. Perhaps an intimate understanding between master and animal was one thing; however, a horse engaging in conversation with his rider mid-race, and subsequently calling for a toast to his defeated opponent and drinking to her health was clearly a step too far for the ballad printers.

An interesting insight into early nineteenth-century attitudes — and by extension, the cultural restrictions encountered by ballad printers in their relentless pursuit of market share — can be found in a letter from one C.H. Chester to the periodical *The Sporting Magazine* (vol. 8, January 1834:258). Here, the contributor recounts “about thirty-five years ago singing this song at Hambledon after a racing dinner.” Chester includes a version of the ballad with only seven verses — pointedly omitting Verse 3, along with Verses 5, 6 and 7 — thus, making no mention whatsoever of the speaking horse. He goes on to describe the mid-race conversation between the jockey and Mervin as “the ludicrous circumstances detailed at the three-mile post, which it must be admitted the author had largely availed himself of poetical licence in relating.” If such an event seemed somewhat incredible to the contributor — albeit, justifiably so — one can only imagine what such a learned gentleman would have thought of a horse that could not only speak, but could also accurately predict a race result, advise his owner on the amount to bet, encourage his jockey and advise him to “stick close to the saddle,” ask his jockey mid-race as to where his opponent currently was, win the race with some ease and finally, call for a toast to his defeated opponent. Indeed, what had long been popular around the Irish fireside was clearly no longer best-

suiting to the more genteel surroundings of a nineteenth-century English post-race gathering.

Interestingly, in a London publication from 1823 (*The London Magazine*, vol. 8, 1823:72), a fragmentary version of the ballad in which Skewball speaks to his rider is included in the short story, “The Yorkshire Alehouse”. Unlike the Stephenson printing, the verse which follows has not been edited, which would strongly suggest that printed versions of the ballad containing Skewball’s various conversations with his rider had successfully avoided revision having travelled intact to England. The dating of this verse to 1823 further shows that such versions were still in circulation for some considerable time after the narrative was initially edited in the earliest broadsides. Unlike Mr. Chester, the author of this particular short story was clearly not squeamish about employing either folklore or poetic licence, as we are informed that Skewball “was begotten by Belzebub, and could speak like a Christian.” The contributor proceeds to quote the following two verses:

And when that they came to the middle of the course,

Cubal [*sic*] to his rider began to discourse:

Saying, ‘Come, pretty rider, pray tell unto me

How far in the distance Miss Sportly may be?’

The rider look’d back, and replied with a smile,

‘I think she’s about the space of half a mile.’

‘So — stick to your saddle, my boy, never fear;

You’ll never be beat by the gallant grey mare.’

The various excisions and interpolations by the broadside printers all contribute towards the dilution of the ballad's folkloric origins, thus reducing the speaking horse motif to fulfilling a role subordinate to the victory of the underdog of the race. The opposite can be observed in the oral versions where the speaking horse motif is ubiquitous to the narrative progression, and proves to be of equal — if not greater — importance than Skewball's unexpected broadside triumph. Due to the folkloric, mythological origins of the oral versions, the audience seems to instinctively know that Skewball will win, and could be forgiven for expecting nothing less than a stunning victory from a horse of such supernatural prowess. Not so with the broadsides, in which the context of Skewball's victory as underdog is all-pervasive and is continually accentuated by numerous literary devices and suspense-building mechanisms — more often than not with scant regard to the overall chronological continuity of the ballad itself. When all of the above textual re-workings are considered, it is difficult to dismiss them as only casual editorial oversights. Rather, they are quite deliberate manipulations undertaken in order to satisfy the cultural expectations of a niche audience; they thus provide a useful insight into the changing sensibilities of the increasingly educated and socially advanced classes of nineteenth-century English society.

Conclusions

I have established that the ballad *SB* (Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456) is based on a two-horse match held on The Curragh of Kildare on 30 March 1752, between a previously unknown skewbald gelding (Skewball, b. 1741) and a grey mare of considerable repute (Grey Mare, b. 1745), owned by Arthur Mervin and Sir Ralph Gore, respectively. While *SB* enjoyed broad popular appeal as a nineteenth-century English broadside ballad, it has a well-established oral tradition in Ireland, stretching back into the mid-eighteenth-

century and long outliving the late nineteenth-century decline in broadside ballad publishing. Oral versions have been documented as recently as 1979. That *SB* is of Irish origin and had a previous oral incarnation which circulated for a considerable length of time before its appearance as a nineteenth-century English broadside, is supported by a version dated to 1764, uncovered by the author as part of an ongoing study of the *Filgates of Lisrenny Papers* (Louth County Council Archive Collection).

I have focused on some of the practical difficulties encountered by broadside publishers as they sought to appropriate folksongs from the traditional canon and reproduce them in broadside ballad format. As a form of contemporary literature, the broadside was representative of nineteenth-century society and consequently, sought to reflect the transition from the traditional folklore setting to a more modern, sophisticated and above all, literate era. As well as reflecting these social and educational advances, broadside publishers were also compelled in no small part by economic necessity and consequently, regularly manipulated the narrative of existing folksongs to suit the requirements of their target sales market. In the case of *SB*, the transition from folksong to broadside is inhibited by the seeming inability of the broadside publishers to successfully oversee the excision of Skewball's gift of speech, a folklore motif ubiquitous throughout all oral versions. A comparative analysis of all extant broadside printings has shown that several attempts were made at excising this oral narrative feature, but that all fail to do so without significantly compromising the ballad's narrative chronology. It has been shown that these revisions — combined with the four additional verses interpolated by broadside publishers into the earliest documented oral version of *SB* — were deliberately undertaken with a view towards obscuring the mythological significance of the ballad's folkloric narrative. In doing so,

they present the ballad simply as an historical account detailing the unexpected —
albeit, heroic — triumph of a sporting underdog.

Appendix 1

(i) Filgate MS (Louth County Council Archive Collection)

Come all you brave gallants and listen to all,
And I will sing you the praise of Noble Scuball,
Who is lately come oover [?] as I understand,
By brave Arthur Marvin the peer of the land.

And of his brave actions you heard of before,
How he was challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore.
Five hundred guineas on the course of Kildare,
To run with the sporting gallant Grey Mare.

When Scuball he heard of the wager being laid,
He said to his master 'Be not afraid.
Five hundred guineas you may lay on the course,
And I will cover your castle with red matches of gold.'

Brave Arthur Marvin, smiling did say:
'Get ready, brave nobles, for tomorrow is the day.
Get ready your horses and saddles prepare,
For we we [?] must away to the Curroh [*sic*] of Kildare.'

When Scuball he came to the middle of the course,

He and his rider began to discourse.

‘Come my brave rider and tell unto me,

How fare [?] is my disting [distance?] post is from me.’

The rider look’d back and this he did say:

‘You may go very easy for we will win the day.’

Such leaping and josling the [they?] had for a while,

The more she stood back law full [?] a mile.

When Scuball came to the winning post,

He bid all his nobles for to drink a toast.

‘Now since you laid all your purses on the grey mare,

Now she is bet and the sorrow ma care [Sir Ralph Gore?].’

Francis Lucas Lee, Tullymeela,

March the 9th 1764 four [?]

Fryday [*sic*] evening within six minutes of six o clock.⁶¹

⁶¹ Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.

(ii) McCall MS (National Library of Ireland)

Skew Ball: A Sporting Song

I'll sing of the match that with Skewball I made,

And of all the wages that on him was laid;

To run with Miss Grizzle that bonny grey mare,

For five hundred pounds on the Plains of Kildare.

Bold Skewball set off with a terrible pace,

And bonny Miss Grizzle kept well in the race,

So when that they had come to the middle of the course,

Skewball and his rider began to discourse.

Saying: 'Skewball you are going at a wonderful style,

Miss Grizzle is distanced an English half-mile.

And if you run this round as you have run before,

Neither Nimrod nor Tiger could ever do more.'

But when that they came unto the winning post

Skewball bid his rider to drink just one toast,

'Here's a health to Miss Grizzle, that bonny grey mare,

That emptied their purses on the plains of Kildare.'

Supplied from memory by Mr. John McCall. The song is fragmentary.⁶²

⁶² McCall, P.J., *ibid.* vol. VI:122. Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.

(iii) Peter Buchan MS (British Library)

Miss Grissel, the famous Gray Mare

Come nobles and gentlemen all,⁶³

I'll tell you a story concerning Skewball.

How he was brought over ye may understand,

By Arthur O'Mearlin the pearl of the land.

The glorious action ye've oft heard before,

The time he was challeng'd by the young Sheriff Moir,

To ride with Miss Grissel the famous grey mare,

For nine thousand pounds on the plains o' Kildare.

How the day was appointed the cattle brought forth,

And all the whole nobles both east, south and north,

Came there a-viewing and on them to stare,

And laid all their purses on the famous grey mare.

The wager being laid and the money laid down,

Skewball to his rider began to discourse:

'These nine thousand pounds by me ye shall hold,

And your castle well covered with silver and gold.'

⁶³ Revised in MS to "and listen all".

Lord Melville he paid down his money in count,
And ordered the jockies that moment to mount,
And all the spectators for to clear the way,
For now is the moment no longer delay.

The orders then given, they quickly did fly,
Skewball like an arrow Miss Grissel pass'd by,
And had you but seen him as he turn'd them around,
You scarce would have thought that one foot touched the ground.

But as they were riding in the midst of the course,
Skewball to his rider began to discourse.
Says, 'Without hesitation could you tell to me,
How far before Miss Grissel we be.'

The rider then turned and gave a smile,
Said, 'I think we're before her, about full ten mile.'
'Keep close to your saddle, boy, ye need not fear
That e'er ye'll be beat by the famous grey mare.'

'If ye turn this way as ye've done before,
No chieftain or hero could ever do more.'⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.

(iv) Eddie Butcher Version (Hugh Shields' Field Recordings)

Come all you noble gentlemen, I pray listen all,
To I sing the praises of noble Skewball;
He is lately come over as we understand,
He's the great heart of marble and the pearl of the land.

His valours and actions we have heard of before,
But now he is challenged by young Mrs. Gore,
For to run with Miss Grizzel, the handsome grey mare,
For ten thousand guineas on the plains of Kildare.

'Oh, Sir Arthur' in his stable to his master did say,
'Noble master, dear master, be you not afraid,
For if it's some thousands upon your side hold,
I will rig in your castle to the topmast in gold.'

The gentlemen from England from East, North and South,
They all came there the cattle to view.
And in viewing the cattle just as they came there,
Sure, they all bet their money upon the grey mare.

The money was paid down in good ready count
When the riders got orders that moment to mount,
When the word of spectator was to clear the way,
For the hour is approaching, no longer can stay.

By the word of command then away they did fly,
Skewball like an arrow the grey mare passed by
And if you had a-been there to have seen them going around,
You'd have thought in your heart their feet ne'er touched the ground.

When that they came to the middle of the course
Skewball to the rider began to discourse:

'Noble rider, dear rider, can you tell to me,
How far is the grey mare this moment from me?'

Says the rider to Skewball: 'You ran in great style,
For the grey mare's behind you one English half-mile.
And if you stand your running I vow and I'll swear
That you ne'er will be beat by their Monaghan grey mare.'

Oh, when that they came to the last winning post,
Skewball to the rider will drink a long toast:
'Drink a health to Miss Grizzel, the handsome grey mare,
For she emptied their purses on the plains of Kildare.' (Shields 1988:16-7)

Appendix 2

Broadside Printings

Bathcelar (London)	[Madden Collection: London Printers 1, no. 630].
Birt (London)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 19(78)].
Croshaw (York)	[Bodleian Library: B29 24/2].
Eyres (Warrington)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no. CW3316680623].
Ford (Chesterfield)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 5, no. 25].
Forth (Pocklington)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (4021)].
Harkness (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 26(51)].
Harkness (Preston)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 1, no. 721].
Hoggett (Durham)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 1, no. 613].
Howard & Evans (London)	[Madden Collection: Slip Songs O-Y, no.1682].
Jackson (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 1406].
Jennings (London)	[Madden Collection: London Printers 1, no. 479].
Mayne (Belfast)	[Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 999].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (73)].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (3533)].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289b)].
Pitts (London)	[Madden Collection: London Printers 1, no. 725].
Ryle (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289a)].
Sergent (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no. CB3330619539].
Stephenson (Gateshead)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1785)].
<i>The Vocal Library</i>	[London: 1818].

[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B6 (54)].
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1784)].
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (290)].
Walker (Durham)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 1, no. 676].
Wright (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B28 (274)].

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Filgate MS	PP00001/002/004/001: <i>Filgates of Lisrenny Papers</i> (Louth County Council Archive Collection: Dundalk).
John McCall MS	MS 13,849: <i>A collection of traditional and other songs and ballads made by John Mc Call, mid-19th c., including many from the Carlow-Wexford area</i> (National Library of Ireland: Dublin).
P.J. McCall MS	<i>Collection of Ballad Sheets and Cuttings of Songs made by PJ McCall, laid down in 13 volumes</i> (National Library of Ireland: Dublin).
Peter Buchan MS	MS 29,408/29,409: <i>Collection of ancient Scottish and English ballads, formed by Peter Buchan, corresponding member of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and used by him as the foundation of his 'Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland, hitherto unpublished'</i> (British Library: London).

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Abstract

The well-known horseracing ballad ‘Skewball’⁶⁵ has been widely documented in oral tradition on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as on numerous English broadside printings. It recounts the tale of a mid-eighteenth-century horserace held at The Curragh of Kildare, in which a heavily-backed mare is comprehensively beaten by a relatively unknown skewbald gelding leaving the mare’s owner — along with much of the assembled onlookers — significantly out of pocket. The ballad became widely popularised in North America where it was first published in a song book in 1826 (Benton 1826:3-4). It was later subsumed into African-American song tradition, whereupon it was reconstructed in numerous versions as a ‘call-and-answer’ work anthem sung by slaves who gave it the new title of ‘Stewball’. Alan Lomax has also documented African-American chain-gang versions of the ballad in his various prison recordings (Lomax 1994:68-71; Scarborough 1925:61-4).⁶⁶ Versions bearing distinctive similarities in style, form and content to the earliest collected versions of ‘Skewball’, were widely collected throughout North America as late as the 1930’s (Flanders 1939:172-4), while oral versions have been documented in Ireland throughout the

⁶⁵ Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456. The ballad is known variously as ‘Skew Ball’, ‘Scewball’, ‘Scew Ball’, ‘Screw Ball’, ‘Skyball’, ‘Scuball’, etc.

⁶⁶ See also, Lomax, Alan (1997) *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from the Parchman Farm, 1947-48 (Volume 2): Don’tcha Hear Poor Mother Calling?* (Rounder).

eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, the latest being in March 1979 (Shields 2011:58-9).

While always retaining a certain degree of continuity in terms of the general narrative recounted, the ballad has undergone numerous metamorphoses over time — particularly with reference to the *dramatis personae* involved — which has often resulted in the obfuscation of the original race detail. By closely examining contemporary records, as well as drawing relevant comparisons with a diverse range of collected versions of the ballad, the author has sought to establish the historical facts which lie behind the narrative recounted in ‘Skewball’. The earliest version of the ballad to which a date has been definitively assigned is that published in the songbook, *The Vocal Library* (Souter 1818:526). Due to the significant timeframe between this publication and the actual mid-eighteenth-century horserace recounted in ‘Skewball’, the author has also examined the preceding period with a view towards unearthing possible earlier sources for the ballad and will present a recently discovered MS version which provides further evidence of the historical origins of the ballad under review.

In Search of the Original ‘Skewball’

Differing Narratives

The central narrative recounted in ‘Skewball’ has changed considerably over the centuries and has continually proven to be quite flexible and adaptable to the expectations of its varied audiences. Such narrative malleability is to be expected in a folk ballad that was based on eighteenth-century events in Ireland, gained prominence as a nineteenth-century English broadside print, became subsumed into African-American slave culture and ultimately became popularised on both sides of the Atlantic in the folk revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, from the most cursory comparisons between (and, indeed, within) the respective oral and broadside genres of ‘Skewball’, clear divergences can readily be observed in terms of certain aspects of the general narrative recounted, the presence of specific folklore motifs and in particular, the *dramatis personae* cited within the ballad. There remain, however, key narrative features that are common to all documented oral and broadside versions of the ballad, namely:

- (i) Following a direct challenge, a horserace for a considerable purse is arranged to be held in Kildare;
- (ii) Only two horses — both owned by Englishmen — are mentioned as partaking in the contest;
- (iii) Of the competing horses, one is a grey mare of considerable repute, the other being a comparatively unknown skewbald gelding;⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Mackay (1888) offers the following etymology for the word ‘skewbald’: “*Skybald*, apparently the same as the English *skewbald* and *piebald*, terms to designate a horse of two colours, marked as cows and oxen

- (iv) Upon hearing of the challenge and the wager that has been laid, the skewbald — the clear second favourite in the contest — instructs his master to bet heavily upon him, as he is assured of victory;
- (v) The skewbald wins easily, to both the surprise and delight of the assembled crowd.

The race favourite is known variously as either “Grey Mare”, “Maid Sportly” or “Miss Sportl(e)y/Portsley/Sportsly/Sprightly”, or in later versions as “Miss Grizzle”, and is owned by Sir Ralph Gore.⁶⁸ The lesser-favoured horse, known as “Skewball”⁶⁹ throughout all versions — the sole continuity found among any of the characters

more usually are. Both *skybald* and *piebald*, as well as the English *skewbald*, have their origin in the Gaelic. *Sky* and *skew* are corruptions of *sgiath*, a shade, a dark shade; *pie* comes from *pighe*, a *pie*, or *magpie*, a bird whose black plumage is marked with a white streak; *bald* is derived from the Gaelic *ball*, a mark or spot; whence, *skybald* is shade-marked and *piebald* is marked like a bird. Jamieson says that, in Scotland, *skybald* signifies a base, mean fellow, a worthless person, and that it is also applied to a man in rags and tatters. Possibly this metaphorical use of the word arises from the fact that the rags of such a person are often of various colours. Locke, the celebrated English metaphysician, uses *pie-bald* in a similar sense, “a piebald livery of coarse patches.” In Yorkshire, according to Wright’s Provincial Dictionary, *skel’d* signifies *parti-coloured*, which is apparently from the same Gaelic root as *sky* and *skew*.” (1888:96)

⁶⁸ The mare is referenced as “Miss Grizzle” in both the Mayne (Belfast) broadside printing and in the P.J. McCall MS (National Library of Ireland). Also referenced as “Miss Greazle” (Shields 2011:58-9), “Miss Grissel” (Peter Buchan MS; Flanders 1939:172-4) and “Miss Grizzel” (Shields 1988:16-7). Sir Ralph Gore is variously referenced as “Sir Francis Gore” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), “Sheriff Moir” (Peter Buchan MS) and “young Mrs. Gore” (Shields 1988:16-7; 2011:58-9).

⁶⁹ Alternative spellings in English broadsides include: “Skew Ball”, “Scewball” and “Scew Ball”; also, “Scuball” (Benton 1826:3-4; Thompson 1958:82-4), “Sku-ball” (Flanders 1939:172-4) and “Skyball” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast).

involved — is in the charge of Arthur Mervin.⁷⁰ Both Gore and Mervin were well-known figures in Irish horse racing circles at the time and both served as presidents of the Irish Jockey Club in the late 1750s (Carpenter 1998:312).⁷¹ Despite the overall subject matter of both oral and broadside versions broadly sharing the common structure shown above, there is one major distinction between them, that is, Skewball's propensity to speak at key intervals, a motif that has been almost completely excised from all broadside versions with the exception of two.⁷²

Historical Context

The accurate historical identification of racehorses in popular culture, along with the dating of their various feats, can prove somewhat haphazard for a number of reasons. Firstly, before the advent of centralised racing authorities, it was not uncommon for different horses to share the same name.⁷³ Secondly, racehorses were quite often known by a nickname, as well as their official studbook title, e.g. the 1745 and 1748 Curragh Royal Plate winner 'Irish Lass', was popularly known as 'The Podareen Mare' (Cox 1897:107); her contemporary, 'Othello', was known as 'Black-

⁷⁰ Mervin is referenced variously in English broadsides as "Arthur Irmin / Irvine / Irving / Irwin / Iwrin / Merlin / Merwin / Mirvin / Morvin"; also, "Arthur O'Mearlin" (Peter Buchan MS), "Arthur Marvin" (MS Filgate), "Arthur Marvel (Benton 1826:3-4), "Arthur Melvin" (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), "Artumaro" (Flanders 1939:172-4) and "Spurmurthy" (Thompson 1958:82-4).

⁷¹ As well as the pair's prominence among the racing fraternity, Gore was also a major landowner in Fermanagh and of Cromwellian planter background, a fact which may well have added to the ballad's broad appeal in Ireland, especially when his mare was defeated so heavily by an unknown horse of inferior pedigree.

⁷² See broadside printings Stephenson (Gateshead) and Mayne (Belfast).

⁷³ Cheny (1729:54), for example, records a horse named Skewball running in Durham in 1728. Likewise, Weatherby (1858:377) lists another Skewball as having been foaled by Tandem in 1786.

and-all-Black’ (Pick 1803:97), etc. Regarding the name Skewball, there is yet further potential for confusion. As already discussed, along with being the actual name of the horse under discussion, “skewbald” was also used as a description for horses of chestnut or bay colour that had significant white markings, which very often lead to ambiguity in accounts of races. Notwithstanding the above, it would appear certain that the Skewball of ballad fame was a bay gelding bred by Sir Francis Godolphin of Cambridgeshire, and was foaled in 1741 at the stud of Sir John Dutton of Sherborne (Pick 1803:91; Harewood 1835:309). In 1743, Skewball began his racing career in England and had several owners throughout the 1740s, all with varying levels of success. He was brought to Ireland in mid-1751, following his sale to Arthur Mervin after a successful outing at the Huntingdon races. According to the *London Evening Post* (27 July 1751):

Mr. Elston’s bay Gelding Skewball, got by the Godolphin Arabian. . . . The betts [*sic*] were Two to One on the field, against a horse and considerable sums laid even between Skewball and Little John; the Gelding won very easy, and was immediately sold to Mr. Mervin for Ninety Guineas, to run in Ireland.

As already mentioned, significant narrative variations are evident among versions of ‘Skewball’ collected in both broadside and oral traditions, respectively. Notwithstanding this, it can be established that a horse race of some importance did in fact take place at The Curragh, upon which the ballad under review was based. Similar to the ballads, contemporary records also disagree as to key aspects of the race itself, particularly in terms of the dates and characters involved. The confusion mentioned above with regard to the name Skewball is not helped by further ambiguity with his opponent’s name, as it can be established that the name of the grey mare mentioned in

the ballad was, in fact, Grey Mare (Pick 1803:504). Both the *General Advertiser* (11 April 1752) and the *London Evening Post* (9-11 April 1752) state:

Ireland . . . Dublin, April 4. On Monday last [i.e. 30 March] the Races began at the Curragh of Kildare, when the Grand Match for 300l between Sir Ralph Gore's Grey Mare and Arthur Mervin Esqr.'s Horse, Scuball, was run which was won with great ease by the latter.

The Irish-published newspaper *Pue's Occurrences* (27 April 1752)⁷⁴ records the event as follows:

Last Monday [i.e. 30 March] a match was run at the Curragh by Sir Ralph Gore's grey mare, and Arthur Marwin's Esq., bay horse, Scuball, which was won with great ease by the latter; the odds before starting were 6 to 4 on the grey mare, so the knowing ones were greatly taken in.

Similarly, in Heber (1753):

On the thirtieth of March, Mr. Marvin's bay Gelding, Skew-Ball, got by the Godolphin Arabian, weight eight stone seven pound, beat Sir Ralph Gore's Grey Mare, got by Victorious, weight nine stone, four miles, three hundred guineas each. (1753:106)

⁷⁴ Covering the fortnight of Tuesday 31 March — Monday 13 April.

Pond's *Sporting Kalendar* (1752:97) incorrectly dates the race two days earlier to 28 March, but again the challenge is run between Skewball and Grey Mare.

In an interesting development, some later published references to the race from the late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century, while retaining continuity with the date of 30 March, now erroneously record the match as being between Skewball and Miss Sportl(e)y. *The Sporting Magazine* (1795) states:

1752, March 30. Mr. Arthur Mervin's bay gelding, Skew Ball, got by the Godolphin Arabian, weight 1st. [*sic*] 7lb. beat Sir Ralph Gore's grey mare, Miss Sportley, got by Victorious, weight 9st. for 300gs each, four miles in the Curagh of Kildare. Skew Ball ran the four miles in seven minutes and fifty-one seconds. (1795:187)

Brown (1830) records the match as follows, the reference being repeated ten years later by Whyte (1840:490):

1752, March 30th. Mr Arthur Mervin's bay gelding, Skew Ball, got by the Godolphin Barb [*sic*], with a weight of eight stone seven pounds, beat Sir Ralph Gore's gray [*sic*] mare, Miss Sportly, got by Victorious, with a weight of nine stone, for three hundred guineas each, four miles on the Curragh of Kildare. Skew Ball ran the four miles in seven minutes and fifty-one seconds. (1830:277)

At this point, versions of the ballad — which was by now enjoying a wide circulation in broadside format — also incorrectly cited Skewball's opponent at The Curragh in March 1752 as being either “Maid Sportly” or “Miss

Sportl(e)y/Portsley/Sportsly/Sprightly” and would appear to provide evidence of the use of broadsides as historical reference points by sports journalists of the time. It should be noted that no news or sports journals record Skewball as ever racing against an opponent known either officially or colloquially as “Miss Grizzle”, as recorded in the Mayne (Belfast) broadside, along with several later oral versions of the ballad.⁷⁵ It is the author’s contention that these name substitutions functioned simply as expeditious literary devices employed by ballad printers in an effort to contemporise their wares for specific local considerations.

Following his ballad-inspiring defeat of Grey Mare at The Curragh in March, for the remainder of 1752 Skewball went on to enjoy the following series of victories in Ireland:

29 May at Trim — £40; 29 July at Rathoath — £30; 12 August at Navan — £20;
27 August at Luttrellstown — £50; 23 September at The Curragh — 50g. (Heber 1753:109;115;116;119;122)

Skewball’s last recorded outing in Ireland was an uncontested match on 18 April 1755 at The Curragh, where he “won . . . starting alone.” (Heber 1756:90)

⁷⁵ A single verse with the name “Miss Grizzle” is cited by Scarborough (1925) quoting a communication sent to her by Professor Kittredge, who attributed the verse to “Manchester (England) broadside (Bebbington, No. 206)”. The author has been unable to locate extant evidence of this printing in any of the collections or archives examined as part of this paper. The verse is quoted as follows:

When that they came to the middle of the course,
Skewball and his rider began a discourse,
‘Come, my brave rider, come tell unto me,
How far is Miss Grizzle this moment from me?’ (Scarborough 1925:61-2)

Towards Locating an ‘Original’ Version

While ‘Skewball’ has always enjoyed a well-established position within the oral canon in Ireland, it has been more popularly documented on broadside ballad sheets in England. Over the course of the current research, the author has located twenty-seven printed broadside sources for the ballad, under various titles, from the early-to-mid-nineteenth-centuries.⁷⁶ The earliest printed version of ‘Skewball’ to which a date can be definitively assigned is that found in *The Vocal Library* (Souter 1818:526), and is referenced as such by Flanders (1939:173) and Thompson (1958:83).⁷⁷ Having dated the race to March 1752 however, we are left with the obvious quandary as to what versions, if any, were in circulation in the years immediately following the race itself. An examination of various ballad collections reveals other printed versions that may well have been in circulation before this date, but due to the inherent difficulties involved in the accurate dating of broadside material from this period, we are unfortunately not in a position to date them to a specific year with any degree of certainty.⁷⁸ Due to the later popularity and broad geographical spread of the ballad, however, it would seem fairly unlikely that versions were not in circulation in the

⁷⁶ See Appendix.

⁷⁷ Both Flanders and Thompson cite the 1822 edition of *The Vocal Library* as the earliest printed source for ‘Skewball’.

⁷⁸ See for example, two song garlands printed in the North-West of England during this period, namely: *A New Garland Containing Three Choice Songs. 1. Nancy’s Love for her Serjeant [sic]. 2. Skew Ball. 3. The Oxford Scholar* (E. Sergent, Preston); and also, *William and Susan’s Garland; Containing four good songs, viz. 1. Sweet William and Black Ey’d Susan. 2. Sweet William’s happy return to Susan. 3. Sweet Susan’s loyalty rewarded. 4. The famous Scew Ball* (Eyres, Warrington). The inclusion of ‘Skewball’ in the latter would seem to have been as an afterthought by the publisher. ECCO tentatively dates these printings to “[?]1790” and “[?]1760” respectively, but this cannot be conclusively proven to any satisfactory degree.

intervening years between the actual race date of March 1752 and the publication of *The Vocal Library* in 1818.

As part of ongoing research of the *Filgates of Lisrenny Papers* — a diverse collection of estate records and personal papers, catalogued and held at the Louth County Council Archives, Dundalk — the author has uncovered a previously undocumented manuscript version of the ballad entitled, ‘The Noble Scuball’.⁷⁹ The Filgate version of ‘Skewball’ displays some notable distinctions when compared with later broadside printings, particularly in terms of the length of the ballad, and also the presence of an underlying folklore motif, but otherwise retains the common narrative evident elsewhere, i.e. Skewball is brought to Ireland by Mervin; Gore challenges Mervin at The Curragh; Skewball’s opponent is the much-favoured, Grey Mare; Skewball wins easily, ensuring heavy losses for Gore and the assembled crowd. Filgate shows the same general syllabic pattern per line as that of the broadsides, however it does display several inconsistencies in this regard, which would tend to suggest documentation via oral transmission. It will also be noted that Filgate is in agreement with the established historical facts regarding the actual 1752 race and does not show the broad narrative variations evident in later broadside printings. The Filgate MS reads as follows:⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Filgates of Lisrenny Papers*: ‘Sale of Farm Stock’, PP00001/002/004/001 (Louth County Council Archive Collection: Dundalk).

⁸⁰ Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.

Come all you brave gallants and listen to all,
And I will sing you the praise of Noble Scuball,
Who is lately come oover [?] as I understand,
By brave Arthur Marvin the peer of the land.

And of his brave actions you heard of before,
How he was challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore.
Five hundred guineas on the course of Kildare,
To run with the sporting gallant grey mare.

When Scuball he heard of the wager being laid,
He said to his master, 'Be not afraid.
Five hundred guineas you may lay on the course,
And I will cover your castle with red matches [?] of gold.'

Brave Arthur Marvin, smiling did say:
'Get ready, brave nobles, for tomorrow is the day.
Get ready your horses and saddles prepare,
For we we [?] must away to the Curroh [*sic*] of Kildare.'

When Scuball he came to the middle of the course,
He and his rider began to discourse:
'Come my brave rider and tell unto me,
How fare is my disting [?] post is from me.'

The rider look'd back and this he did say:
'You may go very easy for we will win the day.
Such leaping and josling the [?] had for a while,
The more she stood back law full [?] a mile.'

When Scuball came to the winning post,
He bid all his nobles for to drink a toast.
'Now since you laid all your purses on the grey mare,
Now she is bet and the sorrow ma care [?].'

Francis Lucas Lee, Tullymeela,
March the 9th 1764 four [?]
Fryday [*sic*] evening within six minutes of six o'clock.

As shown above, Filgate contains seven verses as opposed to the eleven-verse structure found in all broadside printings with the exception of two.⁸¹ The following verses — absent in Filgate — are taken from *The Vocal Library* and are common to all English broadside printings, with the exception of some minor changes in phraseology⁸²:

⁸¹ Exceptions are the Wright printing (Birmingham) which omits Verse 5 and an anonymous, undated printing — Bodleian Library: Harding B 6 (54) — which shows only eight verses, four of which contain only two lines.

⁸² Verses 4 and 5 above read after Verse 3 in Filgate. Verses 7 and 8 above read after Verse 4 in Filgate.

Verse 4:

The day being come, and the cattle walk'd forth,
The people came flocking from East, South and North,
For to view all the sporters, as I do declare,
And venture their money all on the grey mare.

Verse 5:

Squire Mervin then, smiling, unto them did say:
'Come, gentlemen, all that have money to lay;
And you that have hundreds I will lay you all,
For I'll venture thousands on famous Skew Ball.'

Verse 7:

The time being come, and the cattle walk'd out,
Squire Mervin order'd his rider to mount.
And all the spectators to clear the way,
The time being come not a moment delay.

Verse 8:

The cattle being mounted away they did fly,
Skew Ball like an arrow pass'd Miss Sportly by;
The people went up to see them go 'round,
They said in their hearts they ne'er touched the ground.

It will be noted that these verses do not in themselves significantly alter the basic narrative of the ballad and are essentially dramatic devices which serve to heighten the pre-race suspense, thus making the ballad more appealing to its prospective audience. With this in mind, we may somewhat safely assume that they were later interpolations for which a ballad printer was responsible and that Filgate is closer to what may constitute an ‘original’ of ‘Skewball’. The significant corruptions evident within the MS would lend further support to the suggestion that this particular version was transcribed from an oral source.⁸³ Significantly, Filgate also contains the folklore motif of the speaking horse (pre-, mid- and post-race), which has been all but excised in the English broadside prints. The popular belief in horses possessing human faculties is well-attested in Irish oral tradition and would provide further evidence to suggest that the ballad enjoyed an oral existence for a considerable period before the popular nineteenth-century broadside versions, and that the narrative for ‘Skewball’ may simply have been grafted onto a well-established, pre-existing folklore narrative.⁸⁴

Perhaps most significantly, the MS transcription is dated to “March 9th 1764”, making this the earliest complete version of ‘Skewball’ yet for which a date can definitively be given. The back of the sheet also cites the year 1764 and states, “This is

⁸³ Possible suggestions for some of the more notable corruptions evident in Filgate may be arrived at by drawing comparisons with the *Vocal Library* printing, which show the following similarities:

Filgate (1752)	<i>The Vocal Library</i> (1818)
Verse 3: “red matches of Gold”	Verse 3: “fine mass of Gold”
Verse 5: “my disting post”	Verse 11: “the distant chair”
Verse 7: “Sorrow Ma Care”	Verse 11: “broke Sir Ralph Gore”

The above comparisons can be readily made with several other broadside printings.

⁸⁴ For examples of the prevalence of speaking horses within Irish folklore, see O’Keefe (1859:69); Ó Duilearga (1935:153); Ó hÓgáin (1977:199-243; 2006:284).

for Miss Elinor Filgate of Lisrenny”, along with what appear to be monetary calculations.⁸⁵ In dating the transcription to 1764, it can be stated definitively that within twelve years of the race itself, a well-established oral version was in circulation in Ireland, some fifty-four years before the first English broadside printing to which a printing date has hitherto been definitively assigned, i.e. that of *The Vocal Library* (1818). This key evidence refutes an English origin for ‘Skewball’ which the ballad’s popularity and ubiquity within the nineteenth-century English broadside canon might otherwise suggest.

Conclusions

It can be established that the ballad ‘Skewball’ (Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456) contains a historical narrative which recounts the tale of a two-horse match held at The Curragh of Kildare, on 30 March 1752, in which a heavily-backed favourite is resoundingly defeated. The contest was held between a previously unknown skewbald gelding (Skewball, b. 1741) and a grey mare of considerable repute (Grey Mare, b. 1745), owned by Arthur Mervin and Sir Ralph Gore, respectively. Both of these men were well-known figures among the Irish and English horseracing fraternities of the mid-eighteenth-century. Collected versions of the ballad examined as part of this paper, while displaying at times considerable variations in terms of the general narrative recounted, certain folklore motifs, and particularly the *dramatis personae* involved, all retain Skewball’s triumph as central to the progression of the narrative.

The earliest version of ‘Skewball’ for which a printing date and location has been definitively assigned hitherto is that found in *The Vocal Library*, a songbook published in London in 1818 — some sixty-six years after the race itself. That ‘Skewball’ is of

⁸⁵ Elinor Filgate (née Byrne) died in 1799.

Irish origin and had a previous oral incarnation which circulated for a considerable length of time before its appearance in *The Vocal Library* (along with the numerous broadside printings of the nineteenth-century) is supported by an MS version dated to 1764, discovered among the *Filgates of Lisrenny Papers* (Louth County Council Archive Collection). The significant corruptions evident in this MS would further suggest that this version was documented via oral transmission. All broadside printings (with the exception of two) show a common eleven-verse structure, as opposed to the seven verses found in Filgate, the additional four verses being later interpolations for the sake of dramatic effect. Filgate also retains the folklore motif of a horse possessing human faculties — a feature more in keeping with oral tradition — and would suggest that such an oral incarnation of the ballad existed well before the popular nineteenth-century English broadside versions, from which this motif has been almost completely excised.

Appendix

Broadside Printings

Bathcelar (London)	[Madden Collection: London Printers 1, no. 630].
Birt (London)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 19(78)].
Croshaw (York)	[Bodleian Library: B29 24/2].
Eyres (Warrington)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no. CW3316680623].
Ford (Chesterfield)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 5, no. 25].
Forth (Pocklington)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (4021)].
Harkness (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 26(51)].
Harkness (Preston)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 1, no. 721].
Hoggett (Durham)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 1, no. 613].
Howard & Evans (London)	[Madden Collection: Slip Songs O-Y, no.1682].
Jackson (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 1406].
Jennings (London)	[Madden Collection: London Printers 1, no. 479].
Mayne (Belfast)	[Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 999].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (73)].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (3533)].
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289b)].
Pitts (London)	[Madden Collection: London Printers 1, no. 725].
Ryle (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289a)].
Sergent (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no. CB3330619539].
Stephenson (Gateshead)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1785)].
<i>The Vocal Library</i>	[London: 1818].

[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B6 (54)].
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1784)].
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (290)].
Walker (Durham)	[Madden Collection: Country Printers 1, no. 676].
Wright (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B28 (274)].

MS Versions

Filgate MS	PP00001/002/004/001: <i>Filgates of Lisrenny Papers</i> (Louth County Council Archive Collection: Dundalk).
P.J. McCall MS	<i>Collection of Ballad Sheets and Cuttings of Songs made by PJ McCall, laid down in 13 volumes</i> (National Library of Ireland: Dublin).
Peter Buchan MS	MS 29,408/29,409: <i>Collection of ancient Scottish and English ballads, formed by Peter Buchan, corresponding member of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and used by him as the foundation of his 'Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland, hitherto unpublished'</i> (British Library: London).

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“Then to Death Walked, Softly Smiling”: Violence and Martyrdom in Modern Irish Republican Ballads’, *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 61, no. 2 (Summer 2017), pp. 262-86 (University of Illinois Press: Champaign, IL).

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Abstract

This article critically considers the representation of death within the song tradition of modern Irish Republicanism. I explore how such representations have changed in parallel with the various ideological metamorphoses that Irish Republicanism has undergone, specifically in the twentieth-century. I argue that the centrality of self-sacrifice has resulted in the development of ballad narratives that deliberately obfuscate on the issue of Republican violence, resulting in the deaths of all Republican militants — regardless of cause or context — ultimately portrayed as a form of heroic self-martyrdom.

“Then To Death Walked, Softly Smiling”:

Violence and Martyrdom in Modern Irish Republican Ballads⁸⁶

Introduction

Since the late eighteenth-century, the political ballad has proven to be one of the most enduring and popular genres within the traditional song canon in Ireland, with output documenting the national struggle displaying both longevity and ubiquity (Zimmerman 1967:9-10; McGimpsey 1982:7; McCann 1995:52-4; McLaughlin and McLoone 2012:2). Historically, such narratives have displayed a broad and diverse sociocultural and political scope, with works documenting the deaths of militants occupying a notably prominent position within the tradition. This article examines how specific ideological tropes evident within modern Irish Republicanism have been represented and interpreted within the broad canon of Republican death ballads.⁸⁷ An

⁸⁶ Quotation taken from the ballad, ‘Kevin Barry’.

⁸⁷ Within the Irish political context, the term ‘Republican’ is frequently encountered as a generic descriptor for those seeking political separation from Britain. Through time, it has been applied to such disparate socio-political groupings as communists, antiquarians, cultural nationalists and language revivalists, among others. Thus, the descriptor has more diverse connotations than functioning solely as a reference for those who adhere to the doctrine of classic Republicanism, as it will also popularly describe a supporter of (if not an active participant in) armed activity in pursuit of an Irish Republic (McGarry 2003:10). English (2006) defines an Irish Republican as having “either specific attachment to a Republican form of government and/or an aggressive pursuit of such an arrangement” (2006:509). Connolly (1998) distinguishes twentieth- and twenty-first century Irish Republicanism from the late eighteenth-century manifestation, highlighting “a narrowing of the term to denote the more intransigent or potentially violent forms of nationalism . . . evident in the contemporary Northern Ireland use of ‘republican’ to describe Sinn Féin and the IRA, as distinct from the ‘Nationalist’ SDLP” (1998:508). Consequently, the term is not one that has always been readily embraced by the mainstream political

overview of some of the more dominant ideological tenets of Irish Republicanism is presented in order to provide a framework within which these death narratives may be contextualised. An analysis of a diverse body of musical work is undertaken so as to evaluate the representation of these ideological tropes via the medium of the popular political ballad in Ireland. Particular attention will be paid to time frames in which the motifs of martyrdom and self-sacrifice have predominated in Irish Republicanism, such themes being particularly prevalent during the various periods of Republican hunger strikes. The research will also demonstrate that such representations of sacrificial death are not solely restricted to ballads that detail acts of self-immolation; instead, these representations enjoy a significantly broader commonality across the canon, thus reflecting the widespread elevation of the tropes of sacrificial endurance and heroic martyrdom within the modern militant Republican tradition.

From Disaster to Triumph: “The Perverse Psyche of Republicanism”

While established commercial, social and cultural links between the islands of Ireland and Britain have been documented from the fourth-century onward (English 2006:29), the landing of Anglo-Norman forces in 1169 is traditionally regarded within popular Republican narrative as marking the initiation of a protracted campaign for the overall conquest of the entire island (Jackson 1971:23;36-40; Boyle 2011:93).⁸⁸ The

establishment in Ireland, despite oft-proclaimed adherence to the principles of *res publica*. For an interesting treatise on some of these complexities, see Jones (2005).

⁸⁸ Connolly (1998) describes how “an enduring link was forged between the English Crown and Ireland” subsequent to this date (1998:19). Thus, for doctrinaire Republicans this twelfth-century landing marks the effective ‘Year Zero’ of the oft-quoted “800 years of occupation” by Britain. Such rhetoric can also be found in more mainstream discourse, with similar sentiments expressed — albeit couched in considerably more diplomatic language — in the Irish government publication *Facts about Ireland*:

centuries of war and plantation that ensued would ultimately lead to the complete displacement of the old Gaelic *clann* structures and the consolidation of British rule throughout Ireland.⁸⁹ Campaigns — armed and otherwise — in opposition to the British politico-military presence in Ireland have been well documented within scholarly discourse and do not require further attention within the parameters of the current research. However, such campaigns (particularly those from the early twentieth-century onward), along with the intervening periods of relatively uneasy peace, have been regularly characterised by ideological splits within the armed groupings involved, which in turn have been mirrored by fissures in their respective political wings. The pervasiveness of such organisational fracturing is noteworthy in that in the majority of instances, it has not been on the basis of tactics employed; instead, it has primarily stemmed from the perceived “abandonment” — imagined or genuine — of what have come to be regarded as core ideological principles (Tonge 2011:98-103; Sanders 2011:1-17).⁹⁰ Despite such metamorphoses, Irish Republicanism has always retained as fundamental, the pursuit and establishment of an independent all-island republic, free from all external political and military involvement. This objective is to be pursued by all means available, up to and including the use of physical force. While armed struggle

Thus began the political involvement of England in Ireland which was to dominate the country’s history in the succeeding centuries (Government of Ireland 1995:22).

Like so many other aspects of Irish history, the precise nature of this relationship is widely contested. For example, English (2006:24) disputes the notion of conquest *per se* and questions whether the Irish-British relationship was or is, in fact, colonial. Ó Broin (2009), however, describes it as “a relationship undeniably colonial” (2009:19).

⁸⁹ For further reading on the socio-political structure of early Irish society, see Ó Corráin (1972).

⁹⁰ For an account on the markedly fractious nature of certain armed Republican organisations, see Holland and McDonald (1994).

is described by Republicans as “an option of last resort” (B. O’Brien 1995:358), it has through time come to be regarded by some as constituting a *de facto* component of Republican ideology.⁹¹ Thus, for its more essentialist practitioners and advocates, political violence transcends mere tactic and has become an integral ideological principle in itself (Tonge 2011:103), a phenomenon that has infused the ideology with what English (2006) has termed, “a militancy proving more a matter of intense commitment than of practical fruitfulness” (2006:122).⁹² In tandem with these objectives and tactics, Irish Republicanism also exhibits a deeply rooted, quasi-theological adherence to self-sacrifice as an elementary prerequisite of national liberation, an ideological construct most famously extolled by Patrick Pearse at the graveside of Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa in 1915.⁹³

⁹¹ Armed struggle is described in the IRA’s training manual as follows:

[Republicans] do not employ revolutionary violence as our means without being able to illustrate that we have recourse to no other means (quoted in O’Brien 1995:353).

See also, Sinn Féin policy document *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland* (1992):

Armed struggle is recognised by Republicans to be an option of last resort when all other avenues to pursue freedom have been attempted and suppressed (quoted in O’Brien 1995:358).

⁹² McKearney (2011) has described this ideological position, thus:

Armed struggle is . . . fetishised and given prominence over wider political, social and economic struggles (2011:x).

See also O’Dowd (2003):

Critics of Irish Republicanism emphasize its history of political failure, its tendency to split, its elitist and militarist aspects, and its quasi-theological preoccupation with the abstraction of ‘the Republic’ (2003:927).

For further insight into Republicans’ view of armed struggle as a principle in itself, see ‘The Keeper of the Flame: Timeless Republicanism’ in Frampton (2011:43-9).

⁹³ Patrick Pearse (1879-1916) was a Dublin-born barrister, poet, playwright, educationalist, Irish-language revivalist and Republican militant. On 3 May 1916, he was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol,

Such essentialism gained popularity from the late nineteenth-century onward (Zimmerman 1967:66;69; Sweeney 2004:338), but became deeply calcified within the Republican belief structure in the aftermath of the Easter 1916 Rising, following the execution of all sixteen of the principal leaders.⁹⁴ Easter Week proved a totemic event in the Irish national struggle that for Republicans, had “all the sacrificial significance of High Mass” (Coogan 2005:3), thus forever cementing the role of the sacrificial martyr within the physical-force tradition.

Dublin, for his role in the Easter Rising of that year. The themes of self-sacrifice and martyrdom are pervasive in much of Pearse’s literary works and speeches, particularly in the years immediately preceding the Rising. For further reading, see Higgins and Uí Chollatáin (2009). Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa (1831-1915) was convicted in 1865 on conspiracy and treason charges and sentenced to penal servitude for life. He was released and exiled under a general amnesty in 1870 and died in New York in 1915. Pearse’s famous 1915 polemic at Rossa’s graveside reads as follows:

Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. The defenders of this Realm have worked well in secret and in the open. They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have purchased half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything, but the fools, the fools, the fools! They have left us with our Fenian dead and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace” (Pearse 1916:133-7).

It should be noted that the ‘blood- sacrifice’ thesis within Irish Republicanism has not gone unchallenged and is by no means universally accepted within scholarly discourse. For further reading, see Greaves (1991).

⁹⁴ Similar to previous and subsequent insurrections, the Easter Rising was carried out by its leaders in spite of a marked absence of any realistic prospects of outright military victory, again pointing to the primacy of self-sacrifice and political rebirth within physical-force Irish Republicanism. Connolly (1998) refers to “the sketchy nature of their planning suggest[ing] that most were driven less by a real hope of victory than by the idea of reviving nationalist militancy through a bold gesture.” (1998:514)

The predominance of, and rigid adherence to, such an essentialised ideological construct has regularly obfuscated — and, indeed, often superseded — the politico-military activity actually engaged in by Republicans. Thus, to the most doctrinaire and dogmatically pure Republicans, military failure via ideological adherence will ubiquitously trump political gain via expedient pragmatism (Ó Broin 2009:13; Frampton 2011:28;83-5; Sanders 2011:9). This paradoxical construct has created what Bishop and Mallie (1987) have observed to be “[t]he perverse psyche of Republicanism . . . turn[ing] disaster into an emotional triumph” (1987:455), a trope that predominates in the musical works under review.

The concept of national freedom requiring a symbolic ‘cleansing of the nation’s soul’ is not restricted to the actual death itself but is also evident within the hagiographic treatment of protracted endurance and suffering within Republican popular culture. Coogan (1980) describes this ideological binary as “a dual standard of endurance as well as infliction” (1980:14), citing a speech by IRA hunger striker Terence MacSwiney as typical of the double-edged dynamic that predominates physical-force Republicanism in Ireland.⁹⁵ Similarly, Kearney (1980/1) notes that “the violence of the IRA is unusual in that it is as much a violence suffered as a violence

⁹⁵ Terence MacSwiney (1879-1920) was Lord Mayor of Cork at the time of his arrest for “possession of seditious materials” (Flynn 2011:43) in August 1920. He subsequently died on hunger strike in Brixton Prison, London, on 25 October 1920. MacSwiney’s fast was to last a total of seventy-four days, the longest recorded hunger strike to death by an Irish Republican prisoner. The relevant quotation reads:

The contest on our side is not one of rivalry or vengeance, but of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most who will conquer. . . . It is conceivable that the army of occupation could stop us functioning for a time. Then it becomes simply a question of endurance. Those whose faith is strong will endure to the end in triumph. (Coogan 1980:15)

inflicted”, arguing that Republican armed activity essentially comprises “a violence to end all violence. . . . [It is] ‘sacrificial’, in that it promotes suffering and bloodshed as prerequisite to ultimate justice, freedom and peace” (1980/1:62). Kearney (1980/1) further observes that Republican violence promotes an ideological belief system that “invests their campaign of ‘resistance and suffering’ with the sanctity of an ancestral rite. The sacrificial victim must undergo his passion and crucifixion before arising to liberate his community from its bondage. By commemorating the violence of their Fenian forebears, the IRA seem to be operating on the prerational and atavistic conviction that they can fulfil the redemptive promise of their martyrdom” (1980/1:63).

While there is manifestly a “profoundly religious, Catholic quality” (English 2012:210) to this aspect of Republican ideology, self-immolation does have a well-attested secular tradition in Ireland as far back as the Brehon Laws of the pre-Norman era, during which it had significant legal standing (Coogan 1980:15; Kelly 1988: 41;182-3).⁹⁶ Despite such well-established historical origins, the ideological centrality of self-immolation within Republicanism only came to prominence in the early twentieth-century. It should be noted that the term “self-immolation” can often be the subject of academic subjectivity and reinterpretation and the term is used advisedly within the current research. Biggs (2005) describes the phenomenon of self-immolation

⁹⁶ Under this system, following a legal transgression, redress could be gained for a plaintiff by hunger striking — to death if necessary — outside the transgressor’s home in order to publicly shame him into restorative action. A number of scholars have urged caution regarding any suggestion of an explicit connection between this legal convention and the modern-day Republican hunger strike (Connolly 1998:204; English 2006:379). Nonetheless, the inversion of an opponent’s superior strength as a moral weapon would continually provide a powerful totem for Irish Republicans over the course of several centuries.

as “an individual intentionally killing himself or herself (or at least gambling with death) on behalf of a collective cause”, noting that “although the word ‘immolation’ strictly means ‘sacrifice’, since the 1960s it has become synonymous with fiery death. My definition of self-immolation encompasses other methods of self-inflicted death” (2005:173-4). He further broadens the definition by asserting that “martyrdom can resemble self-immolation” (2005:174). He does, however, stop short of describing hunger striking as such, claiming that such death can be averted by the granting of concessions: “With self-immolation, by contrast, death is not conditional on the opponent’s (in)action” (2005:174). Within academic discourse on Irish Republicanism, the term “self-immolation” is used consistently, often in significantly differing contexts. Hunger striking is referenced as self-immolation by George Sweeney in two separate articles, within both their texts and their titles: “Nor were the ten men who died at the Maze prison [in 1981] the first to do so from self-immolation” (1993:10); “Human sacrifice and self-immolation were prevalent both in Celtic culture and in pagan Irish mythology” (2004:337); “Self-immolation through hunger striking is not a phenomenon peculiar to Ireland” (2004:343). Shanahan (2009) likewise comments that “[s]ome of those who embarked on self-immolation [in 1981] were prevented from carrying out their martyrdoms by family interventions” (2009:51). Moran (1991) goes beyond the parameters of the Irish hunger strike tradition, conflating self-immolation with the British execution of sixteen Republicans in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising: “[Patrick] Pearse recognised that this theology led to self-immolation, exchanging a wretched existence for everlasting life and eternal victory” (1991:20). Boyce (1996) deploys similar usage, referencing “the personal and psychological reasons why, in the end, self-immolation was [Pearse’s] only choice. Death compensated for failure in life” (1996:168). Thus, the sacrificial deaths narrated in the ballads under review — while

not falling into the strict definition of self-immolation traditionally deployed — do have a profoundly self-immolative *context* within the Irish national struggle. That this ideological shift toward the lionising of martyrdom was also reflected in the attendant ballad tradition has been noted by Zimmerman (1967), who remarked that the “doctrine of ‘blood sacrifice’ and of messianic martyrdom does not belong to the nineteenth-century street ballads. . . . It became really popular after Easter Week [1916]” (1967: 71–2).⁹⁷

Despite the previously referenced longevity of the Republican song tradition, the position of such ballads within Irish folk music has undergone some considerable change in recent decades in terms of performance, style and popularity. Until the 1970s, such works enjoyed a broad cultural appeal and were popularly taught to children in primary schools. With the emergence of the modern Troubles in the late 1960s, however, the position of Republican ballads (along with many other aspects of Irish cultural life) underwent considerable re-evaluation within popular public discourse. Nightly television news reports of bombings and shootings suddenly gave the historical figures in such ballads a modern-day resonance that disconcerted many. McCann (2003) notes that while such ballads “might function in the South [of Ireland] as a nostalgic fireside song, . . . in the North [of Ireland] it would be a song of resistance” (2003:927). Framed within the context of an ongoing armed struggle by Republicans, these ballads served as a contemporary (and highly uncomfortable) reminder of the violent origins of the Irish state, with their underlying message of glorious self-sacrifice jarring

⁹⁷ It should be noted that the late nineteenth-century embracing of the sacrificial martyr as an inspirational trope was, in part, an unstated acknowledgment by Republicans of the increasing unlikelihood of an outright military victory over Britain. This development represents a clear attempt at shifting the centre of power in the British-Irish colonial dynamic, a feature that is evident throughout all of the ballads under review.

significantly with the more modern, cosmopolitan and socially progressive image that the Irish political and economic establishments were keen to project at the time. From the early 1970s onward, Irish government authorities pursued an unstated policy of political and cultural containment of the escalating northern conflict, with the period noted as one of historical revisionism and widespread political censorship (Corcoran and O'Brien 2005). Republican ballads did not escape such restrictions, with the Irish state public broadcaster RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann) effectively ceasing to play such works on television and radio, albeit via publicly undeclared broadcasting directives.⁹⁸ While rigorous academic research on this unofficial ban is scant⁹⁹, an insight into the prevailing censorious atmosphere can be gleaned from the comments of folksinger Christy Moore during a live performance for Republican prisoners at Portlaoise Prison in 1990:¹⁰⁰

This is a song myself and Dónal Lunny wrote a while ago.¹⁰¹ There's a music journalist — God be good to him, he's died since: he was killed in a plane crash

⁹⁸ See Shields (1993):

It is true that current songs expressing extreme republican or 'loyalist' views are censored on radio and television, North and South, a fact suggesting not only that these songs are an effective vehicle of subversion but that the views they express are rampant. Neither conclusion is justified. (1993:176)

⁹⁹ See Connolly (1998):

The extent to which contemporary political ballads inspired by the Northern Ireland conflict were proscribed by the British and Irish media awaits research. (1998:36)

¹⁰⁰ The quotation is taken from an unreleased and unofficial recording of Moore by Republican prisoners at the gaol on 7 February 1990, which is in the possession of the author. The recording has been widely copied and circulated within Republican circles ever since.

¹⁰¹ The song in question is the 1981 hunger strike ballad, 'The Time Has Come', a heavily nuanced narrative consisting of a monologue by a dying hunger striker who pleads with his mother not to allow

— but he hated me altogether. He was always slagging everything I did and everything I ever recorded, but then I recorded this song and Jaysus [Jesus], he gave it a great write-up altogether. He said: ‘It’s great to see Christy Moore giving up all that auld political shite and singing a decent love song.’ Well, he was right, but he didn’t really understand what the song was all about, and they played it for about six weeks on RTÉ until some eejit [idiot] in the Poblacht [sic] wrote what it was about.¹⁰² One of them intellectuals up in Belfast wrote what the song was all about, and it was all over for the song anyway — they banned it straight away.¹⁰³

During this period, censorship of Republican songs was not solely the preserve of state authorities, as there is also widespread evidence of self-censorship by musicians regarding contemporary political violence. Numerous high-profile performers publicly eschewed musical works that were overtly militant, most notably, the internationally acclaimed ballad group, The Dubliners. Ferriter (2012) notes how the group “stopped singing ‘rebel songs’ in the 1970s, the climate deeming their Irish ballads politically

medical intervention to save his life should he slip into unconsciousness. The hunger striker is not identified, but is thought to be Derry Irish National Liberation Army member, Patsy O’Hara, who died on 21 May 1981, after sixty-one days without food.

¹⁰² Moore is referring here to *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, the weekly political newspaper of Sinn Féin, which carried IRA statements and reports of military activity by the organisation (*An Phoblacht* translates as ‘The Republic’).

¹⁰³ It should be noted that while the reference to RTÉ banning the song is correct, Moore engages in some considerable artistic license about the identity of the reviewer and is clearly playing to his exclusively Republican audience. In his autobiographical work, *One Voice: My Life in Song* (2000), Moore identifies the journalist in question as Derry socialist activist Éamon McCann [b. 1943-] (2000:128).

incorrect” (2012:270).¹⁰⁴ Leading member Ronnie Drew articulated this position in a 2009 interview broadcast by RTÉ:

There were certain IRA songs that we did sing which were funny. Like, at the time, ‘The Old Alarm Clock’ was funny. . . . I remember in 1969, I said I wouldn’t sing another rebel song because of the trouble that was in the North of Ireland, because that would be my contribution. . . . I would be a Republican at heart, [but] when little children start getting killed and . . . stuff like that — I just didn’t want to know. (RTÉ 2009)

Interestingly, ‘The Old Alarm Clock’ narrates the capture and imprisonment of an IRA man in London during the organisation’s bombing campaign that lasted from January 1939 to March 1940 and which caused the deaths of seven civilians and the execution by hanging of two IRA volunteers. That such a ballad could be regarded as “funny” points to some of the more complex and nuanced aspects — if not, in fact, sheer cognitive dissonance — that pertain to the historical view of physical-force Republicanism in Ireland. Despite these sentiments, The Dubliners did continue to play a number of ballads with overtly physical-force narratives. Examples include, ‘Kelly, the Boy from Killane’ and ‘The Merry Ploughboy’, but perhaps as 1798 and 1916 narratives, respectively, the mists of time had clearly blunted the songs’ violent edges

¹⁰⁴ This self-censorship was further alluded to by Geraghty (1994), who writes that “by the mid-1970s, The Dubliners were performing less often in Ireland and more and more frequently abroad, especially in continental Europe, where they could convey a clear musical expression of Ireland at a time when the country was more and more torn internally.” (1994:135)

sufficiently so as to not discomfort the sensibilities of a 1970s audience, or indeed, a folk group, as the case may be.

* * * *

As Republican ballads form part of a living folksong tradition, musical arrangements have understandably varied through time, similar to the social, cultural and political contexts outlined above. The correct method of musical performance is, as ever, within the remit of the individual performer, with varying deliveries possible depending on time, place and audience. Of the ballads currently under review, all with the exception of 'Joe McDonnell' are in major keys and performed as standard I–IV–V arrangements resolving to a tonic.¹⁰⁵ This produces a notably mild musical ambience, along with a considerable degree of lyrical dissonance, given the dark subject matter narrated. Regarding time signatures, all except one are set to lilting 4/4 arrangements, with 'Brave Billy Reid' sung in traditional waltz time. Similar to the major key melodies and standard musical progressions used, the deployment of such gentle tempos is again somewhat incongruous, given the songs' emotionally bleak and thematically violent narratives. Clearly, one can never be fully sure whether this deployment is by accident or by design, so appropriate caution should be exercised before attributing specific motives. This musical innovation does, nonetheless, pose an intriguing musicological question: did ballad writers consciously embrace overtly 'softer' musical arrangements so as to subtly reflect the elevation of the self-sacrificing martyr within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish Republicanism? Were such keys and time signatures deemed necessary for what are clearly commemorative and quite often

¹⁰⁵ 'Joe McDonnell' alternates between keys, but is primarily a major key arrangement in each of the four verses (about the dying hunger striker), shifting to minor in the chorus (about the history of British colonial aggression), giving a discernibly 'darker' and more sinister sense at this point of the narrative.

hagiographic works?¹⁰⁶ The simplicity of the musical arrangements — while being somewhat typical of traditional Irish folksongs — does provide an indication as to where the importance of these works really lies. Such compositions are primarily narrative and secondly musical, a reflection of their commemorative (i.e. past) and inspirational (i.e. contemporary/future) propaganda functions. While it is obviously preferable for the music to complement such lyrics, this is not necessarily regarded as being one of the essential roles of the Republican ballad. Furthermore, an examination of Republican songbooks — particularly those from the mid-twentieth-century onward — reveals a significantly large number of ballads that contain no musical notation whatsoever to accompany the texts, again pointing toward the primacy of lyrical content. *Bliain na bhFrancach — Songs of '98 — The Year of the French* (1997), for example, provides music for only thirteen of the forty-five ballads included, and one major fiftieth-anniversary commemorative songbook, *The Tricoloured Ribbon* (1966), contains fifty-six ballads without any accompanying music. Similarly, *Songs of Resistance* (2001), a definitive collection of over 120 modern Republican ballads from 1969 onward, again contains no musical notation whatsoever. This is not to suggest, of course, the complete absence of music from all songbooks; however, it does point to the pre-eminence of the lyrical aspect of the tradition and to the broader propaganda function served by these songs, which, as suggested above, tends to supersede the importance of melody.

* * * *

¹⁰⁶ While there are, of course, modern ballads set to 'darker' musical arrangements, using minor keys or Mixolydian modes, these tend to be more generic political works that do not narrate a specific Republican martyr's death. Popular examples include, 'The Foggy Dew' and 'Come Out Ye Black and Tans'. It should be noted that both of these works are arranged in quick march time.

Within the broad parameters of folk music, the narrative ballad will always reflect the sociocultural mores of the community to which it finds itself related (Ferris 1970; Casey, *et al* 1972; Ó Cadhla 2012:69-70). Thus, we may reasonably expect the Republican ballad to provide us with a significant ideological insight into the Irish physical-force tradition itself and, by extension, the community that sustains it to the present day (Zimmerman 1967:9-10; McGimpsey 1982:7). The current research has examined a diverse cross section of death ballads from within the broad repertoire of Republican song so as to establish how protracted endurance and sacrificial martyrdom — both key ideological tenets of essentialist Irish Republicanism — are promoted within the tradition.

Three distinct sub-genres of Republican death narrative have been identified, namely: (i) death via hunger strike; (ii) death via state execution; and (iii) death via armed confrontation.¹⁰⁷ Being thematically reflective of the underlying political ideology, such works are regularly constructed on the correlated tropes of self-sacrifice and national liberation. This holds true with a notable consistency, despite the markedly different death scenarios narrated (i.e. the dignified hunger striker in his cell *versus* the unrepentant Fenian on the hangman's scaffold *versus* the classic depiction of the armed liberation fighter).

While the tropes of self-sacrifice and rebirth are more readily associated with the self-immolative context of the hunger strike, they are also evident — albeit in considerably more nuanced form — in Republican execution ballads. As will be demonstrated, this is due primarily to the protagonists' ability and willingness to absorb British (or, indeed, Irish) state violence and punishment. Such thematic representation is

¹⁰⁷ It is perhaps noteworthy that deaths via natural causes are very much absent from the Republican ballad tradition.

not so readily achieved, however, in ballads narrating Republican deaths in the context of violence that has been perpetrated by Republicans themselves. Here, in clear juxtaposition to the classic MacSwiney maxim, the Republican is not, in fact, enduring violence, but is actually inflicting same, a narrative feature that has resulted in the development of some interesting literary conventions by ballad writers. While analysing output from the latter category, I will show that the sacrificial endurance trope of the physical-force tradition is represented by the evasion and blatant obfuscation of any references to acts of Republican violence. In such instances, ballad writers are not simply claiming that Republicans have no responsibility for the violence they inflict; rather, they are stating quite baldly that Republican violence does not, in fact, exist in the first instance, such is the centrality of peaceful self-sacrifice within popular Republican tradition.¹⁰⁸ While the central characters in all three contexts are clearly sacrificing their lives in manifestly different ways, they all share a notable commonality in the eagerness with which they approach, and indeed embrace, their certain death. The narrative impact of such fatalism is that deaths resulting from both execution and armed conflict are elevated into a form of self-immolation within Republican ballad tradition, as will be observed in the following selections.

¹⁰⁸ Similar sentiments were expressed by senior Sinn Féin leader Martin McGuinness in a 1985 BBC interview:

The responsibility for every death in Ireland, whether it be the death of a British soldier, an IRA man, an RUC man, a UDR man, or innocent civilians; . . . at the end of the day, responsibility for all that lies at the feet of the British government. They are the people responsible. . . . They are the people who must pick up the tab for all that, not the people of Ireland.

Interview can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJeW3pWE7JI> (Accessed 5 May 2015).

See also Ó Broin (2009:13).

“I Bow My Head to Their Hate and Rage”: Self-Immolation in Republican Song

As observed, the mythological tropes of self-sacrifice and rebirth became embedded within the Republican psyche post-Easter 1916. One of the prominent participants in the Rising, Thomas Ashe, penned the autobiographical (and ultimately prophetic) ballad, ‘Let Me Carry Your Cross for Ireland, Lord!’ while imprisoned in England (O’Mahony 2001:13-5).¹⁰⁹ The ballad promotes the motifs of sacrificial endurance preceding a national regeneration, with the narrative conveying a hybridity of religious and political imagery in which Ashe entreats Jesus directly to facilitate Ashe’s own martyrdom. He likens his role within the Irish struggle to that of the Biblical crucifixion, the opening line of each verse repeating the titular invocation. In an echo of a popular Catholic recitation, Ireland is “weak with tears” and portrayed as a long-suffering, lamenting mother — “Róisín Dubh” — who, despite witnessing her own son’s martyrdom, gains solace from the knowledge that his death will alleviate the suffering of others.¹¹⁰

The “cause of Róisín Dubh” is a cross that Ashe must personally carry so as to enable national resurrection, the elevation of the Irish struggle to that of Jesus’ crucifixion being a popular dramatic ploy evident throughout Republican ballad

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Ashe (1885-1917) was sentenced to death for his role in the 1916 Rising, the sentence being later commuted to penal servitude for life. Following a general amnesty in June 1917, he was rearrested and charged with sedition and sentenced to two years’ hard labour. He embarked on a hunger strike for political status in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, where he died from the effects of force-feeding by prison staff on 25 September 1917 (O’Mahony 2001:19-22).

¹¹⁰ Compare the Marian prayer, ‘Hail, Holy Queen’:

To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears.

The name “Róisín Dubh” translates as ‘Dark Róisín’, an archaic poetic personification of Ireland. For further discussion on ballad imagery portraying Ireland as a grieving mother, see Zimmerman (1967:66).

tradition. In the opening verse, while acknowledging the unfinished task of 1916, Ashe predicts further unavoidable conflict, stating that for Ireland, “[t]he hour of her trial draws near”. The trope of national rebirth is developed by describing this “trial” in language evocative of a woman in childbirth (“And the *pangs* and the *pain* of the sacrifice / May be *borne* by comrades dear” [emphasis added]). The narrative quickly descends into abject fatalism. While many appear willing to assist Ireland in her hour of need (“Though anxious and all as they are to die / That Ireland may be spared”), Ashe pleads to be singled out for martyrdom (“But, Lord, take me from the offering throng, / There are many far less prepared”).¹¹¹

Verse 2 shows Ashe as having rationalised his decision (“My cares in this world are few”) and actively preparing for a death that will guarantee him glorious immortality (“And few are the tears will fall for me / When I go on my way to You”). His suffering — like that of Christ — will alleviate a similar fate for others, but perhaps more importantly, it will provide inspirational force to his own generation of Republicans and beyond:

Spare! Oh spare, to their loved ones dear,
The brother and son and sire,
That the cause we love may never die
In the land of our heart’s desire.

¹¹¹ It is perhaps an interesting insight into the militant mindset that these anonymous Republicans appear to be more focused on their own dying than on Ireland actually living.

The language employed in Verse 3 is explicitly sacrificial, with Ashe now actively inviting martyrdom:

Let me suffer the pain and shame,
I bow my head to their rage and hate
And I take on myself the blame.
Let them do with my body whate'er they will.

Again, he offers his life in order to spare others who may rededicate themselves to the completion of the national struggle:

My spirit I offer to You,
That the faithful few who heard her call
May be spared to Róisín Dubh.

A subsequent commemorative ballad, entitled 'In Memory of Thomas Ashe', reaffirms the ideological exposition evident in the original work (O'Mahony 2001:28). Again, the suffering of Ashe and Ireland are at one with that of Christ, who is addressed directly in the narrative in a notably confrontational tone, an implication, perhaps, that he does not fully appreciate the gravitas of what Ashe has actually endured on both Ireland's and Christ's behalf:

And he bore Your cross for Ireland, Lord,
And for glorious Mary's name.
He struggled with a daring soul
To enrich his country's fame.

Thus, the self-immolation of Ashe has facilitated a welcome martyrdom (and an ensuing immortality) that should not be mourned, as now, “the glory of that cross was his” (O’Mahony 2001:28).

Similar to the post-1916 period, the predominance of self-sacrifice and related ideological constructs came very much to prominence during the H-Block hunger strike of 1981.¹¹² Many ballads were written during the period of the strike itself and in its immediate aftermath, with all following a similar trajectory. One such work, ‘Ten Deathless Heroes Die and Ireland Lives’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:17), provides several illustrative examples of the pervasiveness of the tropes of sacrificial endurance and rebirth within the Irish physical-force tradition.

¹¹² Up to and including the present day, Republicans consistently demand recognition as political prisoners while incarcerated. The hunger strike of 1981 — which resulted in the deaths of ten Republican prisoners — took place at the Maze Prison (known to Republicans as “the H-Blocks of Long Kesh”) outside Belfast, and was preceded by five years of protest actions in which prisoners refused to wear convict uniforms, opting instead to cover themselves in blankets. What became known as The Blanket Protest escalated in 1978 when prisoners refused to leave their cells to wash or empty chamber pots. This followed the prison authorities’ decision to deny the prisoners permission to wear a blanket or towel to the washroom and toilet facilities. There were consistent allegations of prison staff brutality. Conditions in the prison deteriorated quite rapidly when prisoners began a campaign of smearing excrement on the walls and ceilings of their cells and emptying chamber pots under cell doors and out windows, events that would ultimately lead to the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981. For further reading, see Coogan (1980); Beresford (1987); O’Malley (1991); Hennessy (2014).

This ballad is an almost completely revised version of a previously released work, ‘Forever on My Mind’ (Moore 1984:94); however, there are marked contrasts between the two.¹¹³ The latter is a quasi-sentimental recollection of the hunger strike narrated by a participant in the widespread street protests of the time. Only in Verse 1 are we presented with imagery evocative of rebirth and national reawakening (“Darkened years of winter have passed, / Summer waits for spring before it lives”). The imagery of winter is used to describe the years of protest preceding the hunger strike (“Blanket clad and wasted the winter has been long”); however, the arrival of spring — a thinly veiled analogy for national regeneration and liberation — is uncertain, as “no gleam of hope a thoughtless nation gives.” Verse 2 follows an essentially commemorative trajectory, stating that the memory of the hunger strikers will remain undiminished in the mind of the narrator, who also describes a sense of collective helplessness at the futility of supportive street protests (“In silence we walked through the streets / As one by one our hunger strikers died”). Here, we are presented with imagery of a dejected people who are intellectually detached from both the hunger strike and the ongoing conflict, and thus in need of regeneration, which will ultimately be achieved via the sacrificial endurance of the hunger strikers.

This theme is developed within the reworked narrative, ‘Ten Deathless Heroes Die and Ireland Lives’, which brings us back onto more familiar territory. The

¹¹³ Both the original and the reworked versions were written by Dublin songwriter Pearse McLoughlin. ‘Forever on My Mind’ first appeared on Irish folk singer Christy Moore’s 1986 LP *The Spirit of Freedom*, which was released by Moore (unknown to his recording company, WEA) as a benefit album for the families of Republican prisoners. The album was subsequently withdrawn from circulation by WEA. Moore had a long-standing involvement in the H-Block protest campaign as far back as 1979 (Moore 2000:55;102).

paradoxical wording evident in title is indicative of the previously highlighted ideological juxtapositions that underpin militant Irish Republicanism, with the entire narrative centring on the self-immolation of the hunger strikers as a functional conduit for national rebirth. The ballad opens with the same verse as the original but inserts a qualifying second verse that extrapolates on the Winter/Spring analogy used previously. In an obvious echo of Pearse's 1915 polemic, the audience is presented with "anguished men, by sacrifice, again enkindle flames, / The dawn of Spring emerges from their graves". The Irish people are shown to be no longer oblivious to unfolding events. Instead, they are now a revived mass, united behind the hunger strikers, and by extension, refocused on the national question ("Sacrifice, in tempest, has raised us once again, / No more the cold indifference which depraves").

The ineffectiveness of street protests in the context of the cycle of deaths in the original ballad has been replaced with imagery of unified mobilisations across Ireland ("Towns and cities echo back the tramp of marching feet, / The names of 'Ten' our banners now enshrine"). There follows a further three verses that describe a post-hunger strike Ireland in which "the nation's soul" has been revived by the deaths in the H-Blocks, having been "cleansed again by vapours from their blood. . . . / Again we've found the manhood which forever kindles hope". The attendant phraseology is rich in sacrificial language (i.e. "martyred . . . revives . . . cleansed . . . risen . . . rising . . . lives again . . . purging . . . redeeming . . ."), and while the narrative does not contain the explicitly religious motifs found in comparable ballads, the writer cannot resist the familiar trope of fusing the suffering of Republican martyrs, the Irish people and the

crucified Christ into one (“Eight hundred years of darkness is our loss. . . . / Ten martyred men, our glory and our cross”).¹¹⁴

“High upon the Gallows Tree”: Execution in Republican Song

While the above works portray Republican self-sacrifice and resultant immortality within the very specific context of the hunger strike, the trope is not restricted to thematically self-immolative output. Similar representations of death are also evident in the extensive number of execution ballads within the genre. Both Zimmerman (1967:93) and O’Brien (2003:159) note that it is common for execution narratives to contain highly moralistic sentiments on behalf of the condemned, i.e. regret, repentance, fear of death, etc. In the context of Republican ballads, however, execution narratives perform quite the opposite function in that they serve primarily as platforms for the display of patriotic bravery and justification for the Irish struggle. One of the more famous of these works, ‘Kevin Barry’ (Cronin 1965:51-2), provides a markedly sentimental account of events prior to the eighteen-year-old’s death by hanging on 1 November 1920.¹¹⁵ Throughout the narrative, the execution itself is

¹¹⁴ The similarity between the imagery employed in the above quotation and that found in ‘In Memory of Thomas Ashe’ is notable, i.e. “the glory of that cross was his”.

¹¹⁵ Kevin Barry (1902–20) was born in Fleet Street, Dublin and joined the IRA at age sixteen. On 20 September 1920, he was captured following an attempt to relieve arms from a British Army patrol in Dublin during which three soldiers were killed. He was subsequently convicted of murder and sentenced to death by hanging. A campaign to secure his reprieve quickly ensued, resulting in Barry becoming something of an international *cause célèbre*. He was hanged in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, on 1 November 1920. The execution of such a relatively young man, coupled with his widely reported bravery while in custody, provided excellent copy to contemporary ballad writers. Several works were penned, the most famous being the anonymous composition detailed here, which was written in Glasgow at the time of the

deliberately downplayed so as to be of almost secondary dramatic importance to Barry's own willingness to sacrifice his life, a key trait of Republican execution ballads.¹¹⁶ Verse 1 describes the morning of the execution and portrays Barry as offering no resistance to his captors, thus facing death with characteristic stoicism ("High upon the gallows tree, / Kevin Barry *gave* his young life for the cause of liberty" [emphasis added]) and resolute in the face of his impending fate ("As he walked to death that morning he proudly held his head on high").¹¹⁷

Barry's Republican credentials are accentuated in Verse 2, where he requests to be shot "like a soldier" (i.e. a political prisoner) and not hanged "as a dog" (i.e. a criminal). Verse 3 returns to the familiar themes of endurance and suffering, highlighting Barry's opportunity to extricate himself from his predicament. He can easily escape the scaffold by simply imparting information, but (predictably) he refuses, thus hastening the inevitable fate that he gladly embraces:

British soldiers tortured Barry just because he would not tell

The names of his brave companions and other things they wished to know.

'Turn informer or we'll kill you!' — Kevin Barry answered, 'No!'

execution (*Irish Press*, 5 August 1951). This version gained worldwide popularity through recordings and performances by such diverse artists as Paul Robeson and Leonard Cohen, among others.

¹¹⁶ The descriptions of Barry's final moments before his execution in contemporary press reports varied between sympathy ("The boy met his death with cheerfulness and courage" (*The Guardian*, 2 November 1920)) and hagiography ("He goes to the scaffold praying for his friends and enemies. . . . Young Barry . . . went to the sacrifice calmly and serenely. . . . Another young life has been freely given for Ireland" (*The Freeman's Journal*, 1 November 1920)).

¹¹⁷ The line "High upon the gallows tree" also appears in an earlier execution ballad, entitled 'God Save Ireland'.

Similar to the hunger strikers who can simply wear a convict's uniform, Barry can extricate himself from his impending death by informing, but he chooses not to, thus 'carrying the cross' by explicit choice. There is a pervasive sense of fatalism throughout the ballad, coupled with a predetermined set of dramatic roles, which, when fulfilled, will facilitate Barry's entry into Republican mythology and immortality. Such inevitability becomes more apparent in later verses ("This sad parting *had* to be. . . . Kevin Barry, you *must* leave us. . . . On the scaffold you *must* die" [emphasis added]). The opening line of Verse 5 ("Another martyr for old Ireland, another murder for the crown") neatly distils the intrinsically symbiotic nature of the endurance/infliction binary that forms the cornerstone of modern Irish Republicanism. Within such a quasi-mythological construct, the volunteer may safely embrace death, comforted in the knowledge that he or she is soon to meet a predestined fate as a martyr within the Republican pantheon. Thus, in Verse 5 we are presented with the narrative's climactic moment when we are told that Barry, "to death walked, softly smiling". National redemption will be achieved through his self-sacrifice, and Barry will consequently become immortalised in Republican collective memory — and, of course, in song — with immediate effect.

A comparative narrative is to be found in 'Brave Tom Williams' (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:13), a work detailing the final moments of a nineteen year-old Belfast IRA man hanged in Crumlin Road Prison in 1942.¹¹⁸ Prison communications from

¹¹⁸ Along with five others, Williams (1923-42) was charged with murder for his role in a diversionary IRA operation to facilitate the passage of a banned Easter 1916 commemorative march in West Belfast, during which a member of the RUC was shot and fatally injured. While all six were initially convicted and sentenced to death, the sentences of the other five were commuted to terms of life imprisonment due to Williams taking personal responsibility for leading the operation (McVeigh 1999:36-8). Following his execution by hanging on 2 September 1942, Williams was interred in the yard of Crumlin Road Prison. A

Williams prior to his execution display the now familiar traits of stoicism and endurance, coupled with a fatalistic willingness to self-sacrifice. The Irish struggle is again compared to the suffering of Christ (“our dear, beloved, tortured, crucified Erin” (McVeigh 1999:49)) and MacSwiney’s maxim of victory via endurance is duly echoed.¹¹⁹ Following the reprieve of his five co-accused, Williams wholeheartedly embraces his imminent martyrdom, stating:

Don’t grieve for me, remember, from day one *this is how I wanted it. I wanted to die* and I’m happy that you five are going to live [emphasis added]. (McVeigh 1999:70)

Again, a Christ-like willingness to suffer so as to alleviate the fate of others is unmistakable, a theme returned to in the attendant ballad. The narrative is related several years after the execution and contains a certain gravitas due to the narrator — also a prisoner — witnessing the execution. The scene is set with depictions of grieving prisoners (“Of a night in Belfast Prison / Unashamedly, I saw men weep”), and similar to the portrayal of Barry as “just a lad of eighteen Summers”, Williams’ youth is also pointedly accentuated, being described as “a lad . . . in the flower of manhood, [going] to meet his God on high”. Similarly, he proceeds to the gallows with unthinking

lengthy campaign by his family and Republicans to secure the release of his remains was unsuccessful until 2000, when Williams was exhumed and reburied in the Republican Plot of Milltown Cemetery, Belfast.

¹¹⁹ The relevant quotation reads:

To carry on, no matter what the odds are against you, to carry on no matter what torments are inflicted on you. The road to freedom is paved with suffering, hardships and torture. (McVeigh 1999:49)

bravery: “marching . . . / [w]ith head erect he shows no fear”. As evidenced in other death ballads under review, Williams’ plight is representative of the broader colonial context in which a weakened captive (Ireland/Williams) seeks to invert the predominant power dynamic with a more dominant, oppressive adversary (Britain/the executioner). The obvious Christ-like symbolism of Williams assuming full responsibility for the shooting in order to facilitate the commutation of the death sentences of his co-accused is further developed within the narrative. Ireland’s plight is again portrayed as a crucifixion and is representative of a suffering that Williams can himself alleviate via his own sacrificial act (“And proudly standing on that scaffold / Ireland’s cross he holds so dear”), the audience being later instructed to “keep memory of the morn / When Ireland’s cross was proudly born”.

A lesser-known composition, ‘The Ballad of Tom Williams’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:96), follows a similar narrative, but stops short of describing the execution in such overtly sacrificial language. It does, nonetheless, make due reference to the standard Republican trope of portraying outright defeat as a victory that is to be achieved through the endurance, rather than by the infliction, of violence:

They have slaughtered our bravest, they have slandered their name,
But the end of the tyrant is hatred and shame.

Thus, the execution of Williams may provide a short-term victory for the British authorities, but it is ultimately self-defeating, as his death, having redeemed Irish nationhood, will simply inspire others to continue. In line with essentialist Republican dogma, the infliction of violence by the strong on the weak is effectively overturned and shown to be of itself, an intrinsic weakness.

Similar attempts at realigning the colonial power dynamic can be observed in other works previously discussed. As noted in ‘In Memory of Thomas Ashe’, for example, although now physically dead, the hunger striker has comprehensively defeated his tormentors by embracing their aggression, thus neutralising their superior strength. He has exposed them not as an all-powerful empire, but as a vindictive oppressor who targets the weak. In accordance with the more dogmatic tenets of the Republican tradition, victory has been achieved through suffering what Britain has inflicted, as Ashe is now, “triumphant, [as] dead he lay” (O’Mahony 2001:28). Similarly, in Ashe’s own work ‘Let Me Carry Your Cross for Ireland, Lord!’, his sacrifice has a unifying force that inspires and reinvigorates his fellow Republicans, and thus is an act that has rendered the enemy impotent: “With the men of Ireland around his bier / And the stranger’s strength at bay” (O’Mahony 2001:13-5). In ‘Ten Deathless Heroes Die and Ireland Lives’, the final verse again seeks to shift the balance of power in the colonial relationship by portraying defeat as victory, claiming that the hunger strikers — *à la* Ashe — “triumph in death” and that now (somewhat fancifully, perhaps) “Britain rules no more” (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:17). Similarly, in the narrative of ‘Kevin Barry’ (Cronin 1965:51), by embracing death, an obvious attempt is made at removing power from the English executioner so as to ultimately invert power as a weapon against him, a motif also in evidence in the death ballads of Williams, Ashe and the 1981 hunger strikers. Thus, by enduring the violence that has been inflicted, the previously highlighted “perverse psyche of Republicanism,” whereby abject defeat is essentially reconstructed as a victory, is very much evident throughout this selection of ballads and, indeed, predominates across the entire genre, despite significantly divergent narrative representations.

“I Shook Bold Freedom’s Hand”: The Obfuscation of Violence in Republican Song

Regardless of such attempts at power realignment, the jaundiced representations of political violence throughout the canon are worthy of further analysis. Among the most consistent conventions employed by ballad writers to convey the centrality of the self-sacrifice/endurance dialectic of Republican ideology is the marked absence of references to the actual violence perpetrated by the subjects of the ballads themselves. Acts of Republican violence (or even threats of same) are notable by virtue of their absence, although the need for such violence as an intrinsically justified reaction to British aggression is clearly implied. Consequently, Republican militants are never portrayed as aggressors who initiate violence, but are ubiquitously revered as hero-martyrs who — as per the MacSwiney maxim — endure, suffer and ultimately, die for Ireland and her people. Thus, to explicitly connect them with violent activities would be to sully the ideological purity associated with their sacrificial deaths. Republican violence — if mentioned at all — is described in markedly opaque language and shown to be of negligible narrative consequence when juxtaposed against graphic descriptions of British aggression, which, as observed, must be ‘endured’ (Zimmerman 1967:66).¹²⁰ It will be noted that none of the ballads under review (with the exception of ‘Kevin Barry’) give any indication as to the actual reason — violent or otherwise — for the subject’s imprisonment. Even in this instance, the specific offence for which Barry was charged and convicted (i.e. murder) is deliberately obfuscated and portrayed in an almost genteel manner (“All around that little bakery / Where we fought them hand to

¹²⁰ Conversely, Republican armed activity is regularly portrayed in a markedly light-hearted, semi-ironic manner. See, for example, ‘Auf Wiedersehen to Crossmaglen’, ‘My Old Man’s a Provo’, ‘My Little Armalite’, ‘Say Hello to the Provos’, etc.

hand”), again studiously avoiding any implication that it is the Republican who was the initial aggressor.

A further example of such obfuscation is evident in ‘Joe McDonnell’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:107), a work recounting the final days of the fifth of the 1981 hunger strikers to die.¹²¹ McDonnell himself narrates and mentions his imprisonment on four separate occasions; however, in each instance, he pointedly neglects to state the offence for which he was jailed.¹²² As shown in similar songs, the ballad writer deliberately disassociates McDonnell from any explicit acts of violence, the actual reasons for his imprisonment being described in deliberately opaque language, thus:

Then one fateful morning I shook bold freedom’s hand,
For right or wrong, I tried to free my land.

The narrative remains focused on the peaceful endurance of McDonnell and, by extension, that of the remaining hunger strikers, whose collective dignity is constantly juxtaposed against the aggression and intransigence of Britain. The latter is personified and addressed directly by McDonnell, who asks: “[a]nd you dare to call me a terrorist / While you look down your gun?” He proceeds to invoke Britain’s colonial history,

¹²¹ Joe McDonnell (1951-81), a member of the IRA from Andersonstown, Belfast, was interned without trial during 1972-73. He was rearrested in October 1976 following an arson attack, for which he was sentenced to fourteen years. McDonnell contested the Irish General Election in June 1981 *in absentia* on the Anti-H-Block/Armagh ticket for the constituency of Sligo/Leitrim and received 5,693 votes. He died on 8 July 1981, on the sixty-first day of his fast.

¹²² The relevant lines read: “All my young ambitions met with bitterness and hate, / I soon found myself inside a prison gate”; “Through those many months of interment on The Maidstone, in The Maze”; “I found myself in prison once again”; “I was sentenced to the H-Blocks for fourteen years or more”.

telling how “you have plundered, . . . divided, . . . terrorised, . . . ruled with an iron hand”. Again, he justifies his (implied) involvement in political violence by placing the blame for the root cause of the conflict firmly on Britain, which has “brought this reign of terror to my land”. As always, the latter is portrayed as the sole initiator of aggression, inflicting a violence that the Republican must endure for the collective good.

Such deliberate evasion is relatively easily achieved in the context of hunger strike ballads in which the narrative focus remains on peaceful, stoic endurance. This is not the case, however, in works that narrate the deaths of armed and active Republicans. Thus, for an ideology that in its most doctrinaire incarnations lays such emphasis on the justification for, and indeed necessity of, political violence, this obfuscatory treatment has provided ballad writers with some interesting literary challenges. Evidence of this thematic binary — coupled with a wholly subjective portrayal of British state violence — is narrated in ‘The Ballad of Billy Reid’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:69), a work that relates the killing of a Belfast IRA member by British soldiers in May 1971.¹²³ While not as explicitly self-sacrificial as other ballads under review, the narrative does nonetheless construct Reid as the familiar martyr figure who endures, rather than inflicts violence, and who suffers in order to alleviate a communal grievance.

The significantly uneven portrayal of violence is initiated in the opening verse when the narrator informs us of “a terrible wrong” and describes Reid’s death quite graphically: “A man he lay dead, he’d been riddled with lead / And he died on the streets of Belfast” (i.e. Britain is the sole aggressor, having “riddled” a man with bullets while defending his community). By commencing the narrative with the actual killing

¹²³ Billy Reid (1939-71) was part of an IRA unit that ambushed a British Army patrol in Belfast city centre, resulting in the wounding of two British soldiers and in Reid’s own death (*Tírghrá* 2002:14).

of Reid himself (i.e. with no preceding explanation given as to why the armed IRA man was where he was when he was shot), the narrative firmly establishes Britain in the familiar role of aggressor. Not until Verse 2 are we given the introductory account — *post-mortem* — of Reid engaging militarily with British troops “when the bold IRA went out to fight for their land, / With an old Thompson gun” (“old” and “bold” being somewhat affectionate descriptors for armed violence), to simply “put the troops on the run” (i.e. to neither injure nor kill), and then “to return to their home” (i.e. the family man and reluctant revolutionary). The subjective portrayal of British state violence is developed further in Verse 4, where the aggression is shown to be not solely restricted to the killing itself (“Although he lay dead, he was kicked in the head, / By the hair they dragged him around, / But they still fear him yet”), an indicator that Reid’s transition from active Republican to inspirational martyr has begun with immediate effect. The ballad finishes with the employment of Reid’s death as an exemplar that the Irish people should follow, a standard propagandistic trope evident throughout Republican death ballads:

So, if you think he was right, come and join in the fight
And help to free Belfast.
For the blood Billy shed, and although he lies dead,
In our hearts his memory will last.

Such deliberate reconstruction of Republican violence into a form of self-immolation can also be observed in ‘The Loughgall Ambush’¹²⁴, a similar narrative that

¹²⁴ ‘The Loughgall Ambush’ text can be found at <https://www.mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=24991>

(Accessed 8 May 2015).

relates the shooting dead of eight IRA members by an undercover British Army unit in 1987. The deliberate obfuscation of Republican violence is evident throughout, but particularly so in the title, where the use of the word “ambush” presents the audience with an interesting dichotomy. Despite the obvious fact that the members of the IRA unit were heavily armed and preparing to attack a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) base at the time of their deaths, they are pointedly not depicted as launching the “ambush”. Thus, from the vantage point of the Republican audience, the “ambush” is not the abortive IRA operation, but rather the counterattack by the Special Air Service (SAS) — or, at the very least, there is deliberate ambiguity created as to who was actually ambushing whom. The familiar contrast in language between British ‘inflictors’ and Republican ‘endurers’ is evident throughout.

Verse 2 depicts picturesque country scenes of a “village street” where “the scent of apple blossom filled the air . . . on a warm and misty Friday evening”. The idyllic narrative is not interrupted by the planned IRA gun and bomb attack, but rather by the mere presence of the SAS unit, whose “hidden eyes were watching everywhere”. There is no mention of the intended IRA violence, except for an oblique reference to the fact that “the digger bomb had only reached its target”. Thus, despite having a fully primed bomb and being heavily armed, the IRA men are deliberately shown to have until this point committed no actual aggression. As ever, it is the British alone who inflict violence:

The SAS did not want any prisoners.

‘Shoot to kill!’ — the orders were quite clear.

Of course, we may safely assume that the IRA unit “did not want any prisoners” either, and that it too, was also prepared and willing to shoot (and, indeed, bomb) to kill. However, such sentiment would obviously not sit easily as a musical representation of an ideology that endures rather than inflicts violence. At this point, the ballad effectively becomes a carbon copy of the Billy Reid narrative. Similar to Reid, who was “riddled” with bullets, the IRA unit has been “butchered” at Loughgall. Again, as with Reid, British aggression does not end with the killings themselves. Such violence is portrayed as being at best vengeful, and at worst psychotic, as the IRA men’s bodies are similarly abused and desecrated *post-mortem*:

They butchered eight brave volunteers that evening,
They were kicked and punched in case they were not dead.
They dragged them up and down that Armagh village
And filled their bodies full of British lead.

The collective national grief portrayed in Verse 1 (“When the Irish nation bowed its head in sorrow, / Such sadness as the country’s seldom known”) is magnified in Verse 3 to now include (somewhat implausibly) “the whole world”, which is suitably “appalled” at this latest act of British “savagery”. In the final verse, the narrator lists the names of the eight IRA men in succession, a popular literary device in Republican ballads described by Zimmerman (1967) as “strings of names . . . repeated in a litany like names of saints” (1967:66).¹²⁵ Republican martyrs from previous generations are

¹²⁵ The final verse reads:

Farewell to Paddy Kelly and Jim Lynagh,
No more you’ll lead your fighting unit forth.

cited in such narratives in order to confer past political legitimacy on the actions of the present. In an interesting convention, ‘The Loughgall Ambush’ develops this motif by not alone citing the dead, but also by addressing them directly (using “you” three times and “your” twice), thus implying their status as ‘living’ volunteers who have physically transcended the grave. Such references to immortality are ubiquitous throughout the genre and constitute a central trope of twentieth-century Irish Republican ballads, despite their almost complete disappearance from modern folksong (Ó Cadhla 2017).

Conclusions

This article has examined the various representational features of death and martyrdom evident within the modern song tradition of Irish physical-force Republicanism. An overview of some of the more dominant tenets of the ideology has been presented so as to provide an academic framework within which such musical representations may be satisfactorily analysed. An examination of Irish Republicanism

Side by side with Pádraig McKearney and Tony Gormley,

You died to drive the British from the North.

Declan Arthurs and the youthful Séamus Donnelly,

On that night you were the youngest of them all.

Gerry O’Callaghan and the gallant Eugene Kelly,

Your blood still stains the pavements of Loughgall.

This device is also evident in the chorus of the previously discussed ‘Forever on My Mind’, in which the names of the 1981 hunger strikers are similarly cited:

O’Hara, Hughes, McCreesh and Sands,

Doherty and Lynch,

McDonnell, Hurson, McElwee, Devine.

has shown that the trope of exemplary self-sacrifice as a prerequisite for national regeneration and liberation predominates, along with a hagiographic elevation of protracted suffering and physical endurance. Self-sacrifice has proven to be a totem of enduring longevity and one of singular importance to physical-force Republicanism, which became particularly pervasive within the tradition from the end of the nineteenth-century onward. Republican death ballads duly changed in tandem with this ideological shift by also embracing a cult of martyrdom, while simultaneously promoting the elevation of self-sacrifice as an iconic and exemplary act of patriotism within Republican popular culture. Various musicological aspects of the Republican song tradition have been examined including cultural context, style and arrangements, as well as the widespread censorship of such works by the Irish media from the early 1970s onward. An overview of a selection of works from the twentieth-century has shown that these narrative representations of sacrificial death have enjoyed both a popularity and a consistency within the musical canon, particularly so in the 1916 revolutionary period, re-emerging strongly at the time of the 1981 H-Block hunger strike.

Ballads detailing sacrificial death form a particular sub-genre within the Republican song tradition and continually act as conduits through which the martyrdom trope is promoted within militant Republicanism's broader ideological framework. The research has identified key dramatic devices used by ballad writers in order to convey the ideological centrality of self-sacrifice to Irish Republicanism. This is primarily achieved by the portrayal of self-sacrifice in significantly differing scenarios, i.e. not only in the more obviously self-immolative context of hunger strikes, but also via state executions and armed confrontations. Such narrative representations have resulted in deaths from the latter two categories becoming more thematically sacrificial, and being duly elevated into a form of self-immolation. Within such musical output, there is a

pervasive sense of fatalism on behalf of the individual Republican who embraces a fate he or she chooses to endure for the sake of collective redemption and national liberation.

The ballad writers consistently emphasise a calm, unflinching bravery as the Republican approaches death, and in doing so, attempt to realign the prevailing power dynamic within the British/Irish colonial relationship. In death, the Republican martyr triumphs by morally overpowering a markedly stronger opponent, thereby neutralising its vastly superior military strength, which is in turn shown to be an intrinsic weakness. All of the works under review seek to draw upon “[t]he perverse psyche of Republicanism”, whereby resounding defeat is essentially reconstructed as victory. Death is the ultimate vehicle for such triumph and provides the Republican militant with a manifest sense of liberation that is clearly not attainable via outright military victory.

The motif of interminable suffering is consistently promoted by ballad writers who deliberately obfuscate on the issue of Republican violence. As demonstrated, it is the Republican who endures rather than inflicts, an ideological construct that has resulted in ballad narratives that provide heavily jaundiced depictions of violent Republican activity. It has been demonstrated that even in instances in which Republicans are armed and engaging their opponents militarily, the narrative is deliberately manipulated in order to portray Republican militants as suffering, rather than inflicting, the violence that they have themselves committed. Such deliberate obfuscation points to the centrality of the self-sacrifice and martyrdom tropes within militant Republicanism, and coupled with the representational differences previously discussed, conveys the extent to which ballad writers have sought to thematically represent this core ideological construct of physical-force Irish Republicanism within the attendant song tradition.

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Abstract

Irish physical-force Republicanism has long been noted for its tendency to promote the tropes of martyrdom and immortality as core tenets of its ideological belief system. This essay sets out to examine the genre of Republican death ballads so as to identify how such essentialist concepts are represented and promoted within the attendant song tradition. Particular attention will be paid to works that deploy overtly supernatural tropes in order to articulate the key Republican concept of heroic immortality. The present research will demonstrate the consistency with which such narrative devices have been retained within the Republican song tradition into the late twentieth-century and beyond, a time when their utilisation had become largely redundant elsewhere within the broader folksong tradition.

“Young Men of Erin, Our Dead Are Calling”:

Death, Immortality and the Otherworld in Modern Irish Republican Ballads¹²⁶

While Irish Republicanism has received growing levels of academic focus in recent years, its attendant ballad tradition continues to avoid scholarly attention. Despite the enduring longevity of Republican ballads within Irish folksong, the genre is notable for a marked absence of published material, with the last major scholarly work being Zimmerman’s *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Irish Political Ballads and Street Songs, 1780-1900*, a 1967 publication which largely ignores twentieth-century output. Considerable volumes of Republican songbooks continue to be published up to the present but contain little, if any, by way of literary analysis or commentary. As ancillary literature, the popular ballad provides an invaluable insight into the shifting ideological sands of Irish Republicanism — as well as the communities from which it continues to draw popular support — and its absence from any scholarly evaluation creates a considerable academic lacuna.

In its more dogmatic, physical-force manifestations, Irish Republicanism displays an essentialism that promotes the tropes of martyrdom and immortality as core tenets of its ideological belief system. The following essay will demonstrate how such concepts have been popularly represented within Republican song culture through the utilisation of supernatural and/or revenant tropes in ballads narrating the deaths of militants. The present work focuses exclusively on works from the twentieth-century, a time when the composition of such narratives had become largely redundant within the broader folksong tradition, their more extreme manifestations from previous eras being

¹²⁶ Quotation taken from the ballad ‘Seán Mac Neela and Tony D’Arcy’ (*The Harp: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. 2, 1960:37).

largely rationalised by performers and composers alike (Ellis 1979:170;178). Despite their almost universal abandonment elsewhere, such culturally defunct narratives have been retained within modern Republican ballads with a remarkable consistency. In the works under review, a sense of thematic ‘other’ is pervasive and all show considerable diversity in terms of afterlife locations, spiritual transitions, resurrections, ghosts and revenants, among others. Thus, the current work does not focus exclusively on any one particular aspect of the supernatural; instead, it is intended as a broad overview of the varying ways in which Republican death and immortality are represented via the medium of the popular political ballad in Ireland. In doing so, a suitable literary paradigm is provided through which these key ideological concepts can be satisfactorily analysed and developed within the broader scholarly framework of modern Irish Republicanism.

* * * *

The origins of modern Irish Republicanism can be traced to political events of the late eighteenth-century, when the varying forces of Irish separatism embraced the principles of modern European Republicanism, having being significantly influenced by the successes of both the American and French Revolutions (Adams 1986:133; Bishop and Mallie 1987:18; English 2006:95-6; Sanders 2011:22). In tandem with the core objective of establishing an independent thirty-two county state, Irish Republicanism has consistently displayed a quasi-theological adherence to the tropes of protracted endurance and heroic self-sacrifice, at times elevating them to essential prerequisites of national liberation (Coogan 1980:14; Kearney 1980/1:62; Sweeney 2004:338-9). One of the most totemic and enduring articulations of same was by Patrick Pearse who famously declared that “[l]ife springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men

and women spring living nations” (Pearse 1916:133-7).¹²⁷ Bishop and Mallie (1987) have argued that this concept of “turn[ing] disaster into an emotional triumph” has created “[t]he perverse psyche of Republicanism” (1987:455) in which failure through ideological adherence will invariably supersede advances made through expedient political pragmatism (Ó Broin 2009:13; Frampton 2011:83-5;281; Sanders 2011:9). With the binary of sacrificial martyrdom and national liberation occupying such an elementary position within physical-force Republicanism, a resultant immortality has become embedded within its ideological belief structure, with death regularly obfuscated as a transient event in which the self-sacrificing Republican volunteer has willingly participated. Consequently, militants who have lost their lives quickly transcend their status as earthly patriots and come to be revered by the Republican community as quasi-mythological “hero-martyrs” (McCann 2003:928). As shown throughout the following selection of ballads, such immortality is accentuated by the utilisation of the tropes of suffering, death and resurrection, such metaphorical representations of the eternal Republican deliberately mirroring the unrealised vision of the arisen, liberated Ireland.

While all Republican ballads ultimately fulfil the basic propaganda requirements of political song by serving as platforms for the interwoven tropes of heroic bravery, patriotism, national liberation, etc., those containing death narratives perform a separate and very specific function. Such works are essentially commemorative in nature and are quite often hagiographic; however, they also display a clear narrative duality, by being

¹²⁷ Patrick Pearse (1879-1916) was a Dublin-born barrister, poet, playwright, educationalist, Irish-language revivalist and Republican militant. On 3 May 1916, he was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin for his role in the Easter Rising. The quotation cited is from his graveside oration for Fenian leader, Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa (1831-1915), delivered on 1 August 1915.

thematically inspirational in parallel with their primary commemorative focus. In such instances, they seek to serve as inspirational constructs by providing exemplars that future generations are expected to emulate. Thus, within Republican ballad narrative, the twin tropes of self-sacrifice and immortality primarily serve as dramatic devices used to reinforce this commemorative/inspirational dichotomy, and essentially act as the fulcrum for this propagandistic binary. By deliberately focussing the narrative on the Republican's martyrdom, the audience is explicitly warned to never allow the sacrifice made to have been in vain. Thus, the ballads serve an instructive role as a motivation-cum-warning to the living. In such instances, the (specifically Republican) audience is not simply inspired to complete the project of national liberation, but is also urged to emulate the sacrificial path taken by the now deceased volunteer, should this ultimately prove necessary.¹²⁸ Republican death ballads, therefore, function as unifying narratives between past and future events, but perhaps more importantly, they also act as facilitators in the intrinsically cyclical culture of militant Irish Republicanism. This is achieved by both commemorating past, and seeking to inspire, future armed activity in equal measure.¹²⁹ Combined with the promotion of glorious immortality, this dramatic utilisation of the dead as motivation for the living has led to a deliberate ambiguity between matters corporeal and otherworldly within Republican cultural narrative. As the following analysis will show, such ambiguity is reflected in the retention of

¹²⁸ The hunger strike ballad 'MacSwiney Thought Us How To Die' (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:99) provides an explicit example of such sentiment.

¹²⁹ These dialectic representations are manifest at Republican commemorations which form an indispensable component of the tradition. Such events are steeped in quasi-mythological rituals and traditionally involve marches (led by IRA colour parties) to Republican graves and are comparable to religious pilgrimages in protocol. In such activities, physical-force Republicans essentially seek to contemporise their history and thus, legitimise their actions (Patterson 2011:81-4).

paranormal tropes throughout the canon of modern Republican ballads, despite such dramatic devices having been either significantly rationalised or wholly discarded elsewhere within traditional folksong during this era.

* * * * *

Given that the metaphorical resurrection and rebirth of Ireland is well attested as far back as the *aisling*¹³⁰ poetic genre of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, it is perhaps unsurprising that ethereal depictions of Ireland have been retained throughout the modern canon of Republican song. Thematic representations of death as a transitional gateway to a heroic afterlife in Ireland are evident in, ‘Shall My Soul Pass Through Old Ireland?’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:80), ‘Take Me Home To Mayo’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:75) and ‘Brave Frank Stagg’¹³¹, works which document the final hours of three IRA hunger strikers who died in English prisons.¹³² All three are

¹³⁰ Trans.: ‘Vision’. In such output, Ireland will appear in (generally very beautiful) female form, lamenting the condition of the Irish people under British rule. She will then proceed to invoke a young man to arise from his degeneracy and strive on her behalf. Shields (1992/3) notes the clearly erotic subtexts in such representations (1992/3:171).

¹³¹ Lyrics published at: <https://www.mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=32684> (Accessed 12 February 2017).

¹³² The three in question are Terence MacSwiney (1879-1920), Michael Gaughan (1949-74) and Frank Stagg (1942-76). The former was Lord Mayor of Cork at the time of his arrest for “possession of seditious materials” (Flynn 2011:43) in August 1920. MacSwiney died on 25 October 1920, after 74 days on hunger strike, the longest recorded fast to death by a Republican political prisoner. Michael Gaughan was convicted and sentenced to seven years imprisonment in 1971 for his role in a bank raid. He embarked on a hunger strike in March 1974 for recognition as a political prisoner and for repatriation to an Irish prison, and died on 3 June 1974. Along with six others, Frank Stagg was convicted of arson in 1973 and sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment. During his time in several English gaols, Stagg undertook four separate hunger strikes, the last of which was to lead to his death on 12 February 1976. For further

narrated by the dying Republicans themselves, with each articulating predictive accounts of posthumous, spiritual journeys back to Ireland. Despite the obviously corporeal aspect of narratives related by still living subjects, all three works convey an unavoidable sense of the ethereal. As is the norm in Republican ballad culture, the offences for which the three were originally convicted are essentially irrelevant and are deliberately eschewed (Ó Cadhla 2017:275-9), resulting in narratives concentrating exclusively on the spiritual transition of the dying hunger strikers. In each of the three works, the concept of a posthumous journey is not restricted to the religious context of a celestial afterlife, as all three focus primarily on the men's dying wishes to be brought home to Ireland, a feature explicit in two of the titles. The trope of pilgrimage, coupled with the ritualistic descriptions of the journey home, is solidified by the utilisation of imagery conveying a pervasive sense of place and belonging in Ireland, juxtaposed against complete alienation within Britain. Such unavoidable references to home and location have a binary force from a Republican perspective; firstly, they reflect the role — however self-appointed — of the Republican guerrilla as a defender of his/her community, but they also successfully portray Britain as an invader, representative of an alien, unwelcome presence.¹³³ Thus, each narrative depicts Britain as being at best, a torturous purgatory or at worst, a hell which must be endured before the return to Ireland. The latter is in turn described in deliberately affectionate language as the heavenly destination that awaits the Republican hero-martyr. Descriptions of the remains returning to Ireland are infused with ritualistic imagery and contain spiritual

reading on the centrality of hunger-striking within Irish Republicanism, see Coogan (1980); Beresford (1987); O'Malley (1991); Hennessy (2014).

¹³³ For an analysis of the local defensive dynamic of physical-force Republicanism, see Alonso (2007:38-66); Moloney (2007:80-7; 229).

subtexts that evoke a form of sacred journey that the dying Republican must undertake to complete his sacrifice. The hunger strikers are each portrayed as being indifferent to their impending death, displaying a stoicism commonly found in Republican execution ballads (Zimmerman 1967:70; O'Brien 2003:159-61). In parallel with such fatalism, their only concern appears to be the aforementioned wish to be brought 'home', which is portrayed as a heavenly deliverance from their Hellish suffering in English prisons. This journey is, of course, not simply their wish to be returned to Ireland for burial, but is representative of both their physical and spiritual liberation and by extension, an analogy for the newly resurrected and, thus, liberated Ireland.

The motif of the sacred journey is evident in 'Take Me Home to Mayo', in which both "home" and "Mayo" are cited in each of the four lines of the chorus. The ballad has just two verses — placed between the three refrains of the 'homeward-bound' chorus — which contrast the idyllic life enjoyed by Gaughan in Ireland with his grim existence as a political prisoner on hunger strike in England. In Verse 1, the audience is presented with Gaughan as a young man in Mayo who has been compelled to leave home and take action against external aggression. The notion of a 'reluctant revolutionary' predominates, a popular feature of the Republican ballad tradition. He is dying in Verse 2, thoroughly alienated in Britain and wishing simply to be brought home. The clear sense of pilgrimage alluded to in the ballad was also evident throughout Gaughan's funeral proceedings in which his remains were escorted by IRA colour parties through Irish emigrant areas of North London and similarly, from Dublin to Ballina via every town along the route.¹³⁴ Similarly, MacSwiney's questioning of the

¹³⁴ In keeping with the ritualism associated with the Irish physical-force tradition, the tricolour draped on Gaughan's coffin was also that used to cover Terence MacSwiney's remains in 1920. Five months after Gaughan's death, the same tricolour was to be used again, this time on the coffin of IRA volunteer James

priest in the second narrative as to whether his soul shall “pass through old Ireland” is followed by a chorus which explicitly references his city of birth, along with places of close personal and familial connections. The deliberate use of descriptors such as, “old”, “little”, “loving”, “dear”, “pure” and “sanctified” in relation to Ireland, convey a pervasive sense of homeliness and belonging, all of which are absent in Britain (“foreign”; “dreary”) and which MacSwiney will only reconnect with following his journey home. While ballads from the late twentieth-century generally convey a less overtly religious dynamic than earlier works (McCann 2003:928), ‘Brave Frank Stagg’ retains strong spiritual and quasi-religious subtexts. Unlike MacSwiney, who sought consolation from a priest, Stagg’s family appeal directly to God on his behalf. The presence of two women — Stagg’s wife and mother — at his side, deliberately evokes the Biblical crucifixion scene, as do his final words of consolation to his family as he nears death:

‘Ah, my loves’, the young man murmurs,
 ‘Do not cry your tears for me.
 For my time is nearly over
 And today I will be free.’¹³⁵

McDade, who was killed in a premature bomb explosion in Coventry, England. For a detailed account of Gaughan’s death and funeral, see O’Donnell (2012:201-7).

¹³⁵ The quoted lines echo lyrics from the traditional Irish-language crucifixion lament, ‘Caoineadh na dTrí Muire’ (Trans.: ‘The Lament of Three Marys’.) The relevant lines read:

*‘Éist, a mháithrín, is ná bí cráite. Óchón is óchón-ó!
 Tá mná mo chaointe le breith fós, a mhaithrín. Óchón is óchón-ó!’*
 (Trans.: ‘Listen, dear mother, and do not be tormented. Alas! Woe is me!
 The women who will mourn for me have yet to be born. Alas! Woe is me!’)

Again, the sense of place and home is pervasive throughout (“Ireland/Erin” being mentioned three times, and “Mayo” twice, in just three verses), with Ireland again posited as the heavenly terminus that awaits the Republican at the end of his sacrificial journey. Before he dies, Stagg has a heavenly apparition and comforts his mother and wife with the words, “I can see a bright sun shining / On my own green Mayo fields, / And I see dear Michael Gaughan / Waiting there beneath the trees”, again articulating an awaiting paradise which ensures — and indeed, celebrates — Republican immortality. In Stagg’s case, there was to be a further exposition of the Republican resurrection trope in the aftermath of his death, following a dispute regarding the hunger striker’s legal instruction that he be afforded an IRA funeral and burial beside Gaughan. Unwilling to witness a similar display as had happened with the latter’s funeral in 1974, the Irish government took the unprecedented decision to divert the aeroplane carrying Stagg’s remains in order to frustrate a Republican funeral. He was interred three days later with 3ft of concrete placed over his grave by police in order to prevent his reburial by the IRA. An armed police guard was removed from his grave in November 1976, at which point Republicans — accompanied by a priest — tunnelled through the adjoining vacant plot and reinterred Stagg beside Gaughan with full IRA honours.¹³⁶ The discovery of the empty grave following his re-interment clearly evoke the opening of the tomb on Easter Monday and further accentuates the overtly Christian aspect of his self-immolation. In the popular Republican mindset, Stagg has finally completed his mortal suffering and is now not just spiritually, but also physically, ‘arisen’ from the

The Three Marys in question are said to be Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James and Joseph.

¹³⁶ For a detailed account of the considerable controversy surrounding Stagg’s funeral, see O’Donnell (2012:350-73).

dead. Thus, he has become immortalised within Republican consciousness, as evidenced in the attendant ballad narrative:

But he lives in Erin's heart yet
And wherever flies her flag,
Ireland's sons and Ireland's daughters
Will remember brave Frank Stagg.

Similar thematic portrayals of Ireland as an idyllic afterlife are liberally employed; however, numerous works also articulate a specific Republican Elysium beyond Ireland that all volunteers will ultimately reside in, similar to that alluded to in 'Brave Frank Stagg'.¹³⁷ Ellis (1979) notes the widespread propensity for vagueness regarding descriptions of such afterlife locations, with a heaven of "definite theological connotations [and] Biblical descriptions" (1979:176) by no means being the norm within traditional folksong.¹³⁸ Such output is ubiquitous throughout the genre of Republican ballads, with narratives displaying constructs similar to that found in 'Kevin Coen',¹³⁹ ["He has gone to join the company of Sligo's gallant dead, / The six men on Benbulbin's slopes who fought and nobly bled, / Sheeran, Breheny, Gorman, Savage¹⁴⁰,

¹³⁷ A comparable heroic otherworld — An Mag Mell ('The Plain of Happiness') — is well-attested in pre-Christian Irish warrior mythology. See MacKillop (2006:24;149;213).

¹³⁸ See also, Van Effelterre (2007:69).

¹³⁹ Kevin Coen (1947-75) was killed during a gun battle with the British Army on the Cavan-Fermanagh border on 20 January 1975.

¹⁴⁰ The six Republicans in question here are Sligo anti-Treaty IRA members, Séamus Devins, Brian MacNeill, Harry Benson, Paddy Carroll, Tommy Langan and Joseph Banks, all of whom were executed on Benbulbin Mountain, Sligo by Irish Free State soldiers on 20 September 1922. Thomas Sheerin, Harry

who bravely faced the foe, /Are there to greet the dauntless soul of Rusheen's Kevin Coen" (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:52)], 'Seán Sabhat¹⁴¹ from Garryowen' ["They have gone to join that gallant band of Plunkett¹⁴², Pearse and Tone"¹⁴³ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:39)], 'The Ballad of John Greene'¹⁴⁴ ["Tonight amongst the martyrs of Erin, / God rest you, brave Johnnie Greene" (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:51)] and 'Seán MacNeela and Tony D'Arcy'¹⁴⁵, whom we are told reside in "Halls Eternal" with "Ashe"¹⁴⁶ . . . and

Breheeny and Patrick Gorman — again, all from Sligo — were also killed by pro-Treaty forces during the Civil War period. Martin Savage was a native of Sligo, but was a member of the IRA's Dublin Brigade when he was killed in action on 19 December 1919.

¹⁴¹ Seán Sabhat (1928-57) was killed with Feargal O'Hanlon (1936-57) during an IRA attack on Brookborough RUC station, Co. Fermanagh on New Year's Eve, 1956.

¹⁴² Joseph Plunkett (1887-1916) was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin on 4 May 1916, for his role in the Easter Rising.

¹⁴³ Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-98) was a Dublin-born Protestant radical who was arrested and charged with treason for his role in the 1798 Rising. He died on 19 November 1798 from an alleged self-inflicted injury while in custody following a refusal of a military execution by firing-squad.

¹⁴⁴ John Greene (1946-75) was shot dead in disputed circumstances outside Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan in 1975. See *Tírghrá: Ireland's Patriot Dead* (2002:158).

¹⁴⁵ Tony D'Arcy (1906-1940) and Seán (Jack) MacNeela (1914-1940) both died on hunger strike in Dublin in 1940 following their conviction for relatively minor political offences. The former was sentenced to three months for refusing to account for his movements and for not giving his name and address when arrested, with the latter receiving two years for "conspiracy to usurp a function of Government" (Flynn 2011:95) by operating a pirate radio station.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Ashe (1885-1917) was sentenced to death for his role in the 1916 Rising, the sentence being later commuted to penal servitude for life. Following a general amnesty in June 1917, he was rearrested and charged with sedition and sentenced to two years hard labour. He embarked on a hunger strike for political status in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, where he died from the effects of force-feeding by prison staff on 25 September 1917.

brave MacSwiney” (*The Harp: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. 2 1960:37). This dramatic ploy of reciting lists of martyred Republicans from previous generations is a consistent feature of Republican song, described by Zimmerman (1967) as “strings of names . . . repeated in a litany like names of saints” (1967:66). As well as accentuating Republican immortality, the practice also enables the ballad writer to convey a strong sense of historical continuity to the audience, which in turn, is used to instil the contemporary struggle with a greater political legitimacy, an essential feature of the physical-force tradition in Ireland.¹⁴⁷

The trope of a heroic Republican otherworld is developed significantly in several other works in which not only is the volunteer shown to be immortal within this realm — and consequently in the collective folkloric recall of the Republican community — but he/she is also portrayed as having physically transcended the grave. In such instances, the dead volunteer is no longer solely functioning as an ideologically inspirational figure from the relative distance of an abstract Republican paradise. Instead, he/she is also depicted as returning to Ireland — *post mortem* — to reinvigorate and lead the next generation of militants. This represents an interesting thematic shift from the three ‘pilgrimage’ ballads previously discussed. Here, Ireland is now no longer representative of an ethereal paradise that the volunteer will journey to after death; instead, it is a clearly physical setting to which the resurrected Republican will return in

¹⁴⁷ See Frampton (2011):

For [dissident Republicans], history offers the ultimate validation — and the guarantee of future success. The culture of the dissidents is steeped in commemoration and reverence for republican ancestry. . . . [D]evotees see themselves as following in the footsteps of those who have gone before. (2011:281)

See also Sinn Féin policy document, *Where Sinn Féin Stands*:

[W]e take our inspiration and experience from the past. (1970)

order to maintain the struggle and to encourage and ensure that others do likewise. Thus, the act of self-sacrifice is but one dimension of the Republican martyrdom trope, pointing further to the ballad narratives containing parallel commemorative and inspirational force, as previously argued.

An examination of such output reveals narratives that focus primarily on events before, and subsequent to, the actual death which the ballads were originally conceived to narrate. This deliberate obfuscation of death provides a seamless continuity between matters corporeal and ethereal, and infuses the subjects with a pervasive sense of the eternal. Such immortality is manifest in ‘Hughes¹⁴⁸ Lives on Forever’, a work which focuses on the military prowess of its subject in the years preceding his imprisonment, to the almost complete exclusion of his eventual self-immolation on hunger strike.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, Hughes’ death is notably absent from the narrative, a feature re-enforced by the repetition of the ballad’s title at the end of each verse and chorus, respectively. Thus, in spite of Hughes’ death, his deeds are shown to be very much of the present as, “[t]he flame he carried now burns on”, he is “[u]nconquered still”, his “spirit is free” to complete the task pursued while alive.¹⁵⁰ The narrator indicates that Hughes is among the living by addressing the hunger striker directly, claiming his death will be avenged and finally, cites Hughes as an omnipresent force within the Republican struggle:

¹⁴⁸ On 12 May 1981, Francis Hughes (1957-81) became the second of the H-Block hunger strikers to die.

¹⁴⁹ This work appeared on the album *The Roll of Honour* (1983), an independently-released recording by Irish ballad group, The Irish Brigade. Lyrics are unavailable in printed source and are reproduced here with the kind permission of their author, Gerry O’Glacain.

¹⁵⁰ A similar representation is evident in ‘The Ballad of Francis Hughes’ which, after presenting his various military feats, again depicts Hughes as an active IRA volunteer who has transcended death:

And high ‘round the hills of Bellaghy,

Francie Hughes watches over his men. (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:6)

They feared you then, they fear you yet —
For Hughes lives on forever.¹⁵¹

Hughes' immortality resurfaces in the 'The Volunteer'¹⁵², an explicitly paranormal ballad narrated by a fictional IRA man who has been wounded in a gun battle with the SAS. Before being summarily executed, the narrator is rescued by an unidentified militant who singlehandedly overcomes an entire company of British soldiers, before carrying him to a safe house. The wounded man then "turned to thank my comrade brave, but I found I was alone". He tells the household of his "comrade strange, but it seemed they already knew". The popular folkloric motif whereby the living only fully realise that they have encountered a revenant after its disappearance (Van Effelterre 2007:69) is shown at the ballad's conclusion when the narrator ultimately recognises his rescuer in a framed picture which reads: "In memory of Francis Hughes". In 'The Volunteer', the deceased Hughes speaks twice: firstly to the SAS men ("Just drop those guns down gently"); and secondly, to the narrator ("You'll be safe here; . . . / They're friends of mine, though we haven't met for many a lonely year".) This represents a significant development of the dramatic device previously cited, in which the deceased is addressed by the narrator. The attribution of direct speech to Hughes further emphasises both his physical — and of course, politico-

¹⁵¹ Comparable expressions are also evident in 'The Ballad of Billy Reid':

But they still fear him yet and they'll never forget

How brave Billy Reid stood his ground. (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:69).

Reid (1939-71) was part of an IRA unit which ambushed a British Army patrol in Belfast city centre on 15 May 1971, resulting in the wounding of two British soldiers and in Reid's own death (*Tírghrá* 2002:14).

¹⁵² See footnote 149.

ideological — immortality and thus, his active participation within the broader Republican struggle. Again, what the audience is presented with is not a militant who is simply immortal within the abstract confines of a heroic Republican afterlife. Rather, Hughes' faculty of speech, coupled with his physical ability to carry a wounded comrade to safety while carrying a rifle, all combine to show his narrative presence as being very much of this world.

'The Ballad of Mairéad Farrell'¹⁵³ contains a resurrection narrative related not by an anonymous figure, but by the deceased Republican herself. The ballad opens with the line, "Do not stand at my grave and weep. / I am not there I do not sleep", thereby imposing her immortality on the narrative from the outset. The established motif of symbolically equating the resurrected Republican with the newly-reborn Ireland is also evident throughout ("When Ireland lives, I do not die"), as is the familiar trope of suffering necessarily preceding liberation:

In Armagh Gaol I served my time,
Strip searches were a British crime.
Degraded me but they could not see —
I suffered this to see Ireland free.

Similarly, 'Martin Hurson'¹⁵⁴, also employs the device of posthumous speech with three of the four verses narrated directly by the hunger striker himself. The first

¹⁵³ Lyrics published at: <https://www.bobbysandstrust.com/multimedia/songs-lyrics/> (Accessed 3 March 2017). Along with two other Belfast IRA members, Mairéad Farrell (1957-88) was assassinated by the SAS in Gibraltar on 6 March 1988.

¹⁵⁴ See footnote 149. On 13 July 1981, Martin Hurson (1956-81) became the sixth of the H-Block hunger strikers to die.

verse states (three times) that Hurson is dead, but in the remaining three, he is clearly alive and recounts his childhood, his years on IRA active service, his imprisonment and finally, his time on hunger strike. Hurson engages in the familiar inspiration-cum-warning widely deployed throughout the canon: “And though I’m gone, you must fight on ‘til Ireland is free again”. Any potential for doubt that he has not, in fact, transcended the grave is dealt with in the final verse when — similar to Hughes — he is omnipresent and leads his fellow Republicans: “My . . . companions brave, I’m watching over you yet”. Hurson’s immortality is again emphasised in the final (repeated) line, in which he says, “*a chairde, slán go fóill*”, his *au revoir* again indicating that death does not conclude the activity of the deceased Republican hero-martyr.¹⁵⁵

Despite the tangible sense of ‘other’ in the above depictions of Hughes, Farrell and Hurson — and while they have all clearly risen from the dead — it is still somewhat unclear whether their *post mortem* status is, in fact, corporeal, ethereal, or revenant, a common ambiguity of ballads that are thematically supernatural (Munnely 1992/3:177). Indeed, Atkinson’s (1991) deployment of the non-specific “unmortal character” (1991:233) in such instances, is perhaps appropriate in this regard. In the case of ‘The Volunteer’, the arisen Hughes still possesses wholly physical attributes and faculties, despite the unmistakably paranormal narrative related. Similarly ambiguous representations are also clearly evident in ‘Hughes Lives On Forever’, as well as the previously discussed portrayals of Farrell and Hurson. While the corporeality (or otherwise) of these particular visitations may be equivocal, elsewhere in the canon, ballad writers show no reluctance in fully embracing the supernatural through the promotion of exclusively revenant apparitions. In one such work — ‘Feargal Óg

¹⁵⁵ Trans.: ‘Goodbye for now, friends.’

O’Hanlon’ (*The Easter Lily: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. 3 1964:23)¹⁵⁶ — the subject returns from the dead and appears in apparition near the border town of Clones. He speaks lucidly throughout the ballad, narrating the circumstances of his death at Brookborough with Seán Sabhat. The established trope of Republican paradise is duly referenced, as they both now reside among “the hosts of Count O’Hanlon”.¹⁵⁷ The encounter is related anonymously and the narrator describes the arisen O’Hanlon as:

[A] freedom fighter of great renown,
Who fought and laid his young life down.
. . . His eyes were bright with freedom’s glow
As when on earth he walked below.

The paranormal theme is reinforced in the final verse in which O’Hanlon “vanished in an Ulster dell, . . . [b]ut forever in our hearts shall dwell”, thus remaining — as ever — immortal. Before his disappearance, the narrator — clearly unperturbed by the apparition — asks the dead Republican if he has “a message to convey”. O’Hanlon replies (albeit somewhat predictably), “‘I have,’ said he — ‘Fight on!’”, the posthumous rallying call clearly being the sole reason for his visitation.

Ballads in a similar thematic vein are pervasive. In such works, the dead reappear to instruct former comrades to complete the task of national liberation for which their own lives have been sacrificed. More importantly perhaps, they also seek to ensure that the living do not stray from the path of self-sacrificial militancy. Such tropes are reinforced by the appropriation of the ballads’ closing lines as inspirational constructs

¹⁵⁶ See footnote 141.

¹⁵⁷ Count Redmond O’Hanlon (c. 1640-81), seventeenth-century Irish outlaw.

for the following generation. It should be noted that these posthumous statements are wholly unambiguous and bear no similarity to the popular revenant ballad motif of “a confrontation . . . and an ensuing wit combat, the outcome of which determines whether the immortal can lay claim to the mortal” (Atkinson 1991:232). Such riddling episodes are not a feature of Republican ballads, as revenants have a very specific message to relate and are never of malign intent. (In any event, such activity is wholly unnecessary, as Republican revenants are very much preaching to the already converted). This device is ubiquitous and is not restricted to explicitly resurrection-focussed narratives. Similar expressions are to be found in execution ballads such as ‘Kevin Barry’¹⁵⁸ and ‘Brave Tom Williams’¹⁵⁹, but are also evident in works that narrate physical confrontations, such as ‘The Ballad of Billy Reid’.¹⁶⁰ While such political exhortations are clearly

¹⁵⁸ Lads like Barry are no cowards, from the foe they will not fly.

Lads like Barry will free Ireland, for her sake they’ll live and die. (Cronin 1965:51)

Kevin Barry (1902-20) was captured following an attempt to relieve arms from a British Army patrol in Dublin in which three soldiers were killed. He was subsequently convicted of murder and was hanged in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, on 1 November 1920.

¹⁵⁹ So, I say to Irish soldiers: ‘If from Tom’s path you chance to stray:

Keep in memory of that morn,

When Ireland’s cross was proudly born,

By a lad who lies within the prison clay.’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:13)

Tom Williams (1923-1942) was convicted of murder for his role in a diversionary IRA operation to facilitate the passage of a banned Easter 1916 commemorative march in West Belfast, during which a member of the RUC was shot and fatally injured. He was hanged in Crumlin Road Gaol on 2 September 1942.

¹⁶⁰ So, if you think he was right, come and join in the fight

And help to free Belfast.

For the blood Billy shed, and although he lies dead,

In our hearts his memory will last. (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:69) See footnote 151.

unambiguous, their impact is considerably lessened — certainly from the perspective of a Republican audience — by virtue of their anonymous narration. In ‘Feargal Óg O’Hanlon’, however, a tangible gravitas is added to the invocations due to their utterance by a volunteer who has transcended the grave and not simply by an anonymous narrator. In ‘The Ballad of John Greene’ (*Songs of Resistance* 2001:51), the dead volunteer now resides in Republican paradise “amongst the martyrs of Erin”; however, this is but a temporary destination before his inevitable return to the conflict in Ireland. The theme of Republican immortality is revisited throughout the narrative, with references such as “the deathless Irish Republic” accompanying descriptions of Greene’s return from the dead. His resurrection is symbolic of the reborn Ireland, which will be delivered with his own personal participation in the struggle:

And we march to the dawn light of freedom,
You will lead us, brave Johnnie Greene.

An almost identical narrative is evident in ‘Seán Mac Neela and Tony D’Arcy’ (*The Harp: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. 2 1960:37). Again, their immortality is heavily emphasised. The pair are “deathless heroes”, whose deeds “we’ll hold . . . in our hearts forever . . . / We’ll tell their tales through generations”. Similar to previous narratives, the two deceased Republicans return to physically participate in what will be the final, victorious battle:

Brave Tony D'Arcy and brave Seán MacNeela,
And all our heroes from sea to sea.
We'll march beside you 'til in joy and triumph,
We'll sing your praises in Ireland free.

The opening line of Verse 3 contains an interesting literary device:

Young men of Erin, our dead are calling
To their comrades in field and town,
To join the standard of *Poblacht na hÉireann*¹⁶¹
And fight the forces of the British Crown.

In such narratives, the inspirational trope found in the final lines of 'Kevin Barry', *et al*, is accentuated to the point where living Republicans are infused with a pre-emptive guilt should they even consider abandoning the path of sacrificial militancy and thus, are effectively haunted by the dead to complete the task of national liberation. Similarly, in 'The Roll of Honour'¹⁶², despite the ballad being an ostensibly corporeal-focussed work which commemorates the 1981 hunger strike, the writer insists on utilising the paranormal so as the dead may instruct the living. The first three verses provide a generic account of the collective grief of the Republican community in the wake of the hunger strikes, but the narrator appropriates the final lines to address the final (now dead) hunger striker directly:

¹⁶¹ Trans.: 'The Irish Republic'.

¹⁶² See footnote 149.

‘Michael Devine from Derry, you were the last to die.

With your nine brave companions with the martyred dead you lie’.

All ten dead hunger strikers then reply in unison:

‘Remember! Our deaths were not in vain!

Fight on and make our homeland a nation once again!’

Comparable hauntings appear throughout the canon with considerable frequency.

‘A Call From The Prison Graves’¹⁶³ relates a striking narrative in which living Republicans are not simply extolled to rededicate themselves to the cause of Irish freedom due to the sacrifices already made, but are explicitly haunted into doing so. Direct speech is utilised throughout and all four verses are spoken by the dead. Unlike previous works, the Republicans here are anonymous, an iconic figure clearly unnecessary to develop the narrative, such is the force of sentiment contained therein. Again, immortality is centre stage, as shown in the opening line in which the dead are deemed to merely “sleep in death”. The familiar invocation appears early in the ballad

¹⁶³ Lyrics published at: <https://www.digitalcollections.tcd.ie/content/689/pdf/689.pdf> (Accessed 24 April 2017). The lyrics for this ballad are reproduced with the kind permission of the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.

As noted previously in the instance of Pearse’s 1915 funeral oration, the grave is an ever-popular trope within Irish Republican culture. Similar sentiments were expressed the year previously, by fellow 1916 Rising leader James Connolly:

If you strike at, imprison, or kill us, out of our prisons graves we will evoke a spirit that will thwart you and, mayhap, raise a force that will destroy you. We defy you! Do your worst!
(quoted in Adams 1986:70)

(Verse 1), when the living are instructed, thus: “Before the flame we kindled wanes, we charge you do your part”. Verse 2 conveys a greater sense of urgency (“The creed our blood re-baptised — then will you not serve it too? / We cannot man the breach again, ‘tis you must dare and do”) with the living scorned, and effectively ordered to embrace death in the cause of Irish freedom (“Oh, what is life, that you should pause or fear to cast behind?”), a cause without which their lives are deemed meaningless (“Life consecrate to some high cause alone doth purpose find”). Verse 3 returns to the familiar theme of Republican continuity and the living are instructed to complete the task of national liberation for which the dead have sacrificed their lives (“From our cold hands then take the sword, complete what we began”). Should the living renege on this task, Verse 4 contains stark and explicit warnings as to the consequences of failure: the dead will return to their “blood-dyed grave [and] your shame will curse and know”. This fate will not be borne solely by the living, as a considerably worse humiliation will be brought to bear on the Republican dead who “will feel a fiercer pain than sting of England’s lead, / If you betray, for ease or gain, the trust of martyred dead”. As already noted, living Republicans are to draw inspiration from the fact that they will be accompanied in militant action by the risen dead, a coalition which will assure victory:

Beside you in your columns proud,
We martyred ones will walk.
You strong with life, we in our shroud —
The tyrant still will baulk.

In this instance, the thematic utilisation of the martyred dead as an inspirational trope is taken to dramatic extremity with the representation of shroud-clad, revenant

IRA volunteers marching in military columns alongside the living.¹⁶⁴ By depicting Republicans in their death shrouds — yet still able to fight — the narrative succeeds in articulating a form of purgatory that the deceased cannot escape until the struggle for Irish independence has been completed, which perhaps may explain their eagerness to return to the corporeal world. The revenants in this work, being of a more obviously ghostly nature than previous examples, would be the exception rather than the rule in Republican song. In terms of general appearance and activity, the revenant Republican largely tallies with Buchan’s (1986) definition of a “corporeal creature, a substantial person acting like a human being because he or she is to all appearances a human being, though one returned from the Otherworld”, and certainly bears no resemblance to “ghosts of the diaphanous variety with jangling chains and heads tucked under arms” (1986:145). As noted, the revenant Republican not only verbally encourages former comrades to continue the struggle, but will also popularly participate in same, and is therefore, very much a “walking, talking dead person in a significant part of the action” (Buchan 1986:151).

Given the established consistency of supernatural tropes within the Republican death ballad genre, it is appropriate at this point to examine comparable representations of same throughout the broader folk song tradition. Folklorist and musicologist Hugh Shields (1972; 1992/3) has researched extensively in the field and has set out a series of criteria that are pervasive in ballads containing revenant narratives, namely:

- (i) The popular use of decayed, decomposed bodies rising from the grave (1972:101);

¹⁶⁴ A similar narrative can be found in the ballad, ‘The Dead March Past’. (*The Flag: Songs and Recitations of Ireland*, vol. 1, n.d.:22)

- (ii) The occurrence of supernatural events within dream sequences (1972:103; 1992/3:164);
- (iii) Subject matters are generally of a “latter day banality”, with “sketchy apparitions” (1972:108);
- (iv) The use of revenant characters solely as a “narrative device to bring about a suitable conclusion to the story”, such occurrences being “quite perfunctory and no more remarkable than any natural event” (1972:109);
- (v) The propensity for apparitions to be “feebly motivated . . . express[ing] in their relations with the living . . . nothing more than a vague benignity” (1972: 109);
- (vi) Shields (1972) also notes the gradual disappearance of revenant tropes from popular ballad tradition over time, explaining the loss as being “possibly as a result of simple degeneration, but often rather through the tendency to rationalise by effacing supernatural features wherever they occur” (1972:99), citing the “general decline in the strong, collective conviction that things against nature can happen” (1972:99). Munnely (1992/3) further observes that “[b]allads dealing specifically with supernatural occurrences, individuals and other beings do not make up a very large corpus of traditional song in English in Ireland” (1992/3:173). Essentially, with the arrival of more sophisticated, literate audiences, such folkloric motifs have been rendered somewhat *passé* in the modern era (Ó Cadhla 2012:69-70).

If we are to employ the above criteria as a comparative paradigm between thematically paranormal ballads from both the Republican and the broader folksong traditions, immediate anomalies become apparent. The current research has shown that within Republican ballad narrative, revenant hero-martyr figures:

- (i) are physically strong and battle-ready, and regularly display corporeal faculties, most notably speech. They also participate in armed action;
- (ii) appear to the living in specifically non-dream settings;
- (iii) are clearly identifiable and have heroic, epic roles;
- (iv) represent the climactic moment of the narrative and thus, are in no way perfunctory;
- (v) have very clear and definitive roles and are motivated to return so as to inspire and physically assist future generations, conveying explicit instructions and warnings;
- (vi) enjoy a ubiquitous position within the ballad genre and show no signs of the deconstruction evident within folksong tradition in general.

It is clear from the above comparison that all six of Shields' criteria are at some considerable variance with the established format of the revenant Republican ballad, something which puts the genre in a rather unique position when compared with the broader folksong tradition. Similarly, Republican ballads show no evidence of "a central relationship [that] has been severed" (Buchan 1986:146), nor of the emotional upheaval and excessive grieving commonly found throughout folksong (Buchan 1986:147-8; Moreira 2008:109), nor indeed, of the traditional role of ballad revenants as providers of solace and consolation to the living (Ellis 1979:178; Buchan 1986:147-50; Moreira 2008:109). Therefore, revenants in Republican song display no comparable cathartic function for the wider Republican community. In essence, such a role is effectively redundant given the clear obfuscation of death within the song tradition, a direct consequence of the fundamental importance of self-sacrifice, resurrection and

immortality as inspirational tropes within physical-force Republican ideology. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the attendant song tradition has not undergone the transition evident elsewhere. With the concept of heroic immortality being so deeply embedded within the ideology, revenant representations are consequently not viewed as nostalgic, quaint narrative motifs, but rather have a genuinely contemporary resonance within popular Republican consciousness. All of the above is not to suggest, of course, that militant Republicans retain an archaic belief in superstition and ghosts. Put simply, the trope of heroic immortality, as represented by the revenant Republican hero-martyr, has proven far too powerful and totemic a propaganda device to allow its disappearance. Thus, the often explicitly essentialist nature of Irish Republicanism has acted as an effective barrier to the rationalisation and discarding of such revenant tropes, which as demonstrated, have been retained within the ballad tradition with remarkable consistency.

One final ballad worthy of discussion is ‘Dark Rosaleen’s Last Chaplet’.¹⁶⁵ This early twentieth-century work contains an explicitly paranormal narrative in which the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising are portrayed as spirits flying over Dublin city.¹⁶⁶ Verse 1 revisits the theme of Republican immortality by describing the interment of Pádraig Pearse, thus: “Forty feet deep they dug his grave, . . . / But none could bury his soul”. The absurd grave depth is repeated in the following line (“Forty feet of Irish earth / The true heart of Pearse they covered”) as a dramatic device — albeit a clumsy one — to again pointedly articulate the concept that death is not the final role for the

¹⁶⁵ Variation on ‘Róisín Dubh’ (trans.: ‘Dark Róisín’.) Archaic poetic personification of Ireland. Lyrics published at: <https://www.digitalcollections.tcd.ie/content/731/pdf/731.pdf> (Accessed 24 April 2017). The lyrics for this ballad are reproduced with the kind permission of the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.

¹⁶⁶ The ballad only lists the 15 leaders executed from 3–12 May, so it may be assumed that the work was penned before the execution by hanging of Sir Roger Casement in London on 3 August 1916.

Republican hero-martyr. As per the political resurrection motif famously extolled by Pearse himself, the grave is no obstacle for the deceased Republican, as “over the city that gave him birth the wind of his spirit hovered”. The following two verses continue in a similar vein, citing several of the executed 1916 leaders who, like Pearse, are all portrayed as ethereal figures in the Dublin skies.¹⁶⁷ The sense of paranormal eeriness is further accentuated with archaic descriptions of inclement nocturnal weather: “Toll the bells of Ireland, toll”; “The wind of his spirit hovered”; “His soul sailing under the morning star”; “The red wind of death rushed by”; “The winds of Ireland . . . / At dawn . . . and at dark”; “In the mist”; “On His wind”; “The twelve winds of Erin”; “the grey-green winds”; “The purple winds”.

Verse 4 is spoken by no less a narrator than God himself, who personally grieves for Joseph Plunkett and while addressing him directly, returns to the theme of equating the suffering of Ireland with that of the Biblical crucifixion:

‘I have a care for thee,
Since many a crown was for Ireland weaved,
Like one that was wove for me’.

The Christian imagery is repeated in the following verse in which God proceeds to extol a martyrdom willingly embraced so as to alleviate the suffering of others:

¹⁶⁷ The executed Republicans cited are: Michael O’Hanrahan, Thomas Clarke, Thomas McDonagh, Edward Daly, Seán McBride, Michael Mallin, Thomas Kent and Eamon Ceannt, along with Patrick Pearse’s younger brother Willie.

‘I saw [Con] Colbert chose a felon’s path
That a comrade might go free’.

Verses 6 and 7 personify Ireland, portraying her in the familiar role of a lamenting mother in a perpetual state of suffering, the only escape for her ‘children’ being martyrdom and Republican immortality:

And the voice of Ireland chanted slow:
‘Only my dead are free’.

A conversation heavily-infused with religious imagery follows in which ‘Mother Ireland’ addresses God, claiming that the wreath of mourning she carries for her ‘sons’ is “of a thorn-bush . . . made”, clearly implying that the 1916 leaders have not so much been executed, as crucified. Along with the wreath, she also offers God her chaplet containing fifteen rosary beads, each symbolising one of her executed ‘sons’. The ballad writer’s representation of the executed 1916 leaders as a set of rosary beads in the hands of a mourning mother implies unity of political purpose and communal endurance. Coupled with the veneration of a maternal deity figure associated with rosary recitation within Catholicism, the image completes a picture of *pietà*-like suffering regularly promoted within the Irish physical-force tradition (Zimmerman 1967:67; Sisson 2004:162-3). Heavenly angels — *dramatis personae* notably absent from Republican death narratives — escort the 1916 martyrs to “the highest place”, where they are addressed by a God infuriated by “the black story of England’s way”, proclaiming that for “[t]oo long hath Ireland the thorn-path trod”. Ellis (1979) remarks that angels’ primary role in folksong was “to mediate between this world and the next so as to

minimise the importance of death” (1979:173), but here they appear to assist solely in the elevation of the 1916 leaders into angels themselves, further evidence of revenant Republican song eschewing a cathartic function for the wider Republican community. The ballad concludes with apocalyptic utterances from God as he descends to earth and vows to “show the dawning of Ireland’s day”, by inflicting similar suffering on Britain:

‘Vengeance is Mine!’ said the mighty God,
‘Is mine! I will repay!’

The adaption of God as a *de facto* IRA man is an interesting narrative development. While obviously infusing the Republican struggle with a further degree of hallowed sacredness, it is also an obvious acknowledgement of the vastly superior strength of Britain and consequently, the unlikelihood of an outright Republican victory in the classic military sense. The appropriation of a heavenly deity to the Republican struggle points to a rather extreme development of the dramatic device whereby such ballads are used in an attempt at inverting the prevailing colonial power dynamic and points clearly to “[t]he perverse psyche of Republicanism”, already discussed. Thus, if national liberation and control of political destiny are not possible via military victory over Britain in this life, then perhaps they may only be achieved symbolically, by the embracing of suffering and endurance leading to an inevitable death — and importantly, resurrection and immortality — a consistent feature of the Republican song tradition that would benefit from further scholarly attention.

Conclusions

Since the late nineteenth-century, Irish physical-force Republicanism has displayed a propensity to elevate the tropes of endurance and heroic self-sacrifice as prerequisites of Irish national liberation. This essentialist ideal of “turn[ing] disaster into an emotional triumph” has created what Bishop and Mallie (1987) have termed “[t]he perverse psyche of Republicanism” (1987:455). This is evidenced in the widespread promotion of heroic immortality throughout the ideological belief structure of Irish Republicanism. Within such discourse, death is popularly represented as having no finality, with deceased militants lionised as “hero-martyrs” (McCann 2003:928) who have transcended death. In Republican popular culture, such figures are regularly portrayed as earthly patriots and mythological figures in equal measure. This paper has examined a diverse cross-section of Republican death ballads so as to identify how the tropes of sacrifice and immortality are represented and promoted within the genre. It has been established that such works display a narrative duality, by being thematically inspirational in parallel with their primary commemorative focus, with the twin tropes of self-sacrifice and immortality serving to reinforce this dichotomy. This is achieved by deliberately focussing the narrative on the Republican’s martyrdom and in doing so, explicitly warning the audience not to allow this sacrifice to have been in vain. It has been demonstrated that by utilising the immortal dead as motivation for the living, a deliberate ambiguity has been contrived between matters corporeal and ethereal. Such ambiguity can be observed in the widespread utilisation of paranormal tropes within the popular musical tradition of Irish Republicanism. Several distinct categories of Republican death ballads have been identified, all of which are thematically supernatural to varying degrees. Several works represent Ireland as an idyllic, ethereal otherworld that awaits the deceased Republican, while others articulate a specific

Republican Elysium that all volunteers will ultimately reside in. Works popularly portray the Republican hero-martyr as physically transcending the grave and subsequently returning to Ireland. Here, Ireland is no longer representative of a heavenly otherworld, but is a clearly physical setting to which the revenant Republican returns, thus further accentuating the paranormal theme. Regular inconsistencies have been identified as to the *post mortem* status of characters within the ballads reviewed. It has been argued that the representation of death in Republican ballads is deliberately obfuscated so as to provide seamless continuity between the corporeal and ethereal realms, with such works progressed by focussing primarily on events before, and subsequent to, the Republican's death. Direct speech is regularly attributed to the arisen Republican so as to further accentuate the sense of immortality. Exclusively revenant apparitions are also widely employed throughout the canon. It has been demonstrated how the dead perform a very distinctive function within such works by pointedly instructing former comrades to continue the struggle for which they themselves have sacrificed their lives. Closing lines are regularly appropriated as inspirational constructs for the following generation in this regard, with the living effectively haunted by the dead into pursuing the task of national liberation to its completion. Such thematic utilisation of the dead is taken to extremity in several works reviewed, through the graphic depiction of dead IRA volunteers marching beside the living to fight the British. Such ballads articulate a form of political purgatory that the hero-martyr cannot escape until the struggle for Irish liberation has been successfully concluded. A comparison with thematically revenant ballads from the broader canon of folksong has also been provided. A total of six distinctive features common to such works have been identified, while the almost complete disappearance of revenant narratives from traditional song in the modern era has also been noted. All six of these criteria have been demonstrated to

be at significant odds with the established format of the revenant Republican ballad. This puts the genre under review in quite a unique position within the broader folksong tradition, demonstrating as it does, the complete absence of the modernising transition evident elsewhere. Further comparisons have revealed that revenant Republican ballads display no evidence of a severed close relationship, excessive grieving, or of revenants providing consolation to the living, all of which are universally found throughout folksong tradition. Thus, the revenants in Republican song provide no discernible catharsis for the wider Republican community, instead functioning primarily as motivating exemplars for future generations of militants. With the tropes of self-sacrifice, resurrection and heroic immortality being so deeply embedded within Irish Republicanism, revenant representations have been retained as inspirational tropes within the attendant ballad tradition with notable consistency. I argue that this is due to the ideal of heroic immortality — as represented by the revenant Republican hero-martyr — being too powerful and totemic a propaganda tool to permit its removal. Thus, the often explicitly essentialist nature of Irish Republicanism has acted as an effective barrier to the discarding of such revenant tropes from the Republican song canon, as has been demonstrated to be the case in the wider folksong tradition throughout the modern era.

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Abstract

This article critically considers the representation of armed femininity within the attendant song tradition of Irish physical-force Republicanism, with specific focus on the personal and cultural consequences for two prominent female Republican activists, both of whom successfully traverse the gender demarcation lines of war. While noting the didactic, often misogynistic, trajectory of works narrating ‘transgressive’ females within the broader ballad tradition, this article seeks to determine whether or not the interwoven essentialist tropes of death, martyrdom and resurrection — all deeply-embedded ideological constructs within the framework of Irish Republicanism — successfully supersede calcified patriarchal mores and in so doing, facilitate an alternative narrative landscape for the cultural documentation of militant Irish Republican women via the popular ballad.

Ann Flood, Mairéad Farrell and the Representation of Armed Femininity
in Irish Republican Ballads

Introduction

As a culturally reflective component of physical-force Irish Republicanism¹⁶⁸, the attendant ballad tradition has often been noted for its effective silencing of the militant female voice (Dowler 1998:170; Kinsella 1998:188; McDowell 2008:340), with one historian pointedly remarking in a recent review of a scholarly collection of Republican song, that “the women of the revolution were sanitised to the utmost” throughout the genre.¹⁶⁹ This is not, of course, to suggest the complete absence of militant female Republicans from the canon. When present, however, such women are

¹⁶⁸ The delineating prefix “physical-force” is deployed as a descriptor for Irish Republicans who support and/or engage in armed struggle in pursuit of a 32-county Irish Republic. Given its common association with political violence (Connolly 1998:508; English 2006:509; Moloney 2007:707), the appropriation of the term ‘Republican’ has often proven to be highly contentious in Ireland and has been the source of much friction, depending on respective political, or indeed, historical vantage points. For the purposes of this and previous articles, I have deployed the term ‘Republican ballads’ universally, as the composers of said works would no doubt have regarded the personalities narrated therein as such. See Ó Cadhla (2017a:280).

¹⁶⁹ Ferriter, Diarmuid, ‘Review: *The Indignant Muse: Poetry and Songs of the Irish Revolution, 1887-1926*’ (*The Irish Times*: 23 April 2016). While acknowledging that female militants have been largely neglected in Republican song and in wider historical narrative, the fact remains that women and men were not similarly represented within militant republican organisations at any stage of the Irish national struggle. For example, while discussing the 1916 Rising, Ferriter (2004) notes how “about 1,000 men and 200 women . . . answer[ed] the call of the Irish Republic” (2004:141) during Easter Week. Even accepting a putative five-to-one gender split, the absence of militant females from the Republican song tradition is still particularly stark. Indeed, the monograph reviewed by Ferriter and that prompted his “sanitised to the utmost” remarks, yielded only seven female-themed narratives from over 550 texts.

routinely restricted to marginal and wholly ancillary roles, inhabiting as they do, the heavily-demarcated gender space of war, with such works often notable for the extent to which they studiously avoid overt portrayals of female revolutionary violence. Within the wider ideological framework of violent Irish Republicanism, such intergender friction is further complicated by the nineteenth-century elevation of the trope of the Republican mother as a grieving *mater dolorosa* to both her martyred militant son and, by extension, to the nation itself (Zimmerman 1967:54;77; Steel 2004:97), the early twentieth-century ideological reconfiguration of armed Republican activity as a violence ‘endured’ and not ‘inflicted’ (Coogan 1980:15; Clarke 1987:111; Smith 1995:13; Sweeney 2004:338; Shanahan 2009:40; Beiner 2014:199), along with the ubiquitous nationalist connotations of ‘female / nation’ and ‘male / warrior’ found in Ireland and beyond, a wholly restrictive trope that successfully “defines women’s role in nationalism as passive and secondary” (Ryan and Ward 2004:1).

The popular ballad has long been utilised as a didactic cultural vehicle for the reinforcement of patriarchal hegemony, with such works threatening dire (and often fatal) consequences for women who seek to transcend established gender boundaries, whether in war or in peace time (Stewart 1993:66; Gammon 2008:49; Tatar 2015:4). While clearly not promoting a political worldview informed by such raw misogyny, the Irish Republican ballad can, nonetheless, regularly exhibit latent male anxieties when confronted with the thematic of the female warrior, regardless of the ideology’s much-vaunted claims to universal equality. This paper will now consider two biographical ballads narrating prominent examples of violent women from separate periods of the Irish national struggle, with a view to investigating the cultural and societal consequences for female Republicans who successfully transgress the demarcated gender lines of war: Wexford woman Ann Flood, who killed a British soldier in an

incident at her home during the 1798 Rising, and Mairéad Farrell, an IRA volunteer from Belfast, who was assassinated while on active service for the organisation in 1988.¹⁷⁰

“An Aberration at Best and Demonic at Worst”¹⁷¹: Women in the Male Arena of War

At all societal levels, the maintenance of patriarchal order has necessitated an obfuscation of the historical contribution of revolutionary women, and the history of physical-force Irish Republicanism is by no means unique in this regard.¹⁷² This tendency is particularly evident in traditional male spheres of hegemony, with the strict re-enforcement of calcified gender roles being a direct consequence. Such skewed representations are ubiquitous in both factual and fictional narratives of armed conflict, an arena in which the supremacy of the male warrior has remained largely unchallenged throughout history (Malesevic 2010:275).

Elshtain (1995) points to the predisposition of Western society to assume “an affinity between women and peace, [and] between men and war” whereby at their most fundamental level, “[m]an [is] construed as violent, whether eagerly and inevitably, or reluctantly or tragically; women as non-violent, offering succour and compassion” (1995:4). Such jaundiced concepts offer a fundamentally flawed gender paradigm that ignores the chaotic day-to-day realities of conflict and war. The inevitable cultural

¹⁷⁰ For complete lyrics of both ballads, see Appendix.

¹⁷¹ Whaley Eager (2008:3).

¹⁷² This pointed failure to adequately document the active role of militant female Republicans has been highlighted by several scholars. See, for example: McGivern and Ward (1980:71); MacCurtain and O’Dowd (1992:1-5); Tallion (1999:iv); McCoolle (2004:16); Ryan and Ward (2004:i); McCarthy (2007:1); McDowell (2008:35); Matthews (2010:9); Gillis (2014:7); Reinisch (2016:151).

implications of gender lines being drawn on the basis of such a rigid 'active male'/'passive female' dichotomy are expanded upon by Dowler (1998) who highlights the widespread perception of "men as violent and action-orientated, and women as compassionate and supportive to the male warrior" (1998:159). Thus, it is not simply that women are restricted from entering the male arena of war; instead, they are firmly placed in ancillary, subordinate roles, which they are expected to fulfil in passive (and thus strictly non-violent) terms, "offering succour and compassion" (Elshtain 1995:4) to violent, swashbuckling males. Youngs (2004) argues that at their most elemental level, both conflict and war have an explicit dependence on such strict gender demarcations in which "dominant forms of the masculine (warrior) subject as protector/conqueror/exploiter of the feminine/feminised object/other" (2004:79) will inevitably prevail.

As a fundamental trope of militarism in Western society, such contrived limitations on the role of the female warrior have been stubbornly re-enforced, thus remaining largely unchallenged in cultural memory and narrative (Hamilton 2007:132; Banerjee 2012:3). Such historical obfuscation is not achieved without some considerable and deliberate effort. The propensity toward 'remembering to forget' the participation of women in conflict is particularly remarkable given the obvious turmoil and chaos of war and the inevitable social upheaval of post-conflict society. Despite this, a resultant realignment of traditional gender roles in such settings is very much the exception, rather than the rule. Indeed, it is more often than not the case that war will merely facilitate the copper-fastening of such pre-existing positions (McDonald 1987:9; Dowler 1998:163).¹⁷³ Thus, the societal symbiosis whereby males and females are

¹⁷³ McDowell (2008:337) cites the widespread use of military commemorations as a cultural vehicle for the restoration of patriarchal order disrupted by conflict and war.

respectively expected to adhere to the narrow parameters of “Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls” (Elshtain 1995:4) is continually reinforced within social and cultural memory.

Given the strictures of such narrowly defined and carefully demarcated male-female paradigms, it is therefore wholly unsurprising that the acceptance of women within the muscular, male-dominated arena of political violence should be the source of considerable intergender friction and anxiety, generating what Banerjee (2012) has termed an acute sense of “social dis-ease” (2012:2). From the male perspective, the inclusion of women within the historic and cultural narrative of political violence is highly problematic and will be subject to some considerable resistance, often times from diametrically opposed ideological viewpoints. Hostility will primarily emerge among male participants in (and supporters of) said activity, who see their established hegemony as susceptible to external challenge and significantly weakened as a consequence. Here, are women deemed to be not only invading an exclusively male space (Ryan 1999:256-7; Banerjee 2012:9) — a not insignificant undertaking in itself — but in perpetrating acts of violence, they are also vulnerable to the accusation of abandoning their natural, predestined role as caring mothers (McGivern and Ward 1980:69-70; Dowler 1998:168; Hamilton 2007:132;142).¹⁷⁴ Women who engage in such ‘transgressive’ behaviour are seen as aberrative and are consequently vilified as being “less than a woman” (Whaley Eager 2008:3), “desexed” (McGivern and Ward 1980:69), “unwomaned” (Jones 1991:xi) or “desexualised” (Banerjee 2012:9), with their activity condemned as “an aberration at best and demonic at worst” (Whaley Eager

¹⁷⁴ Dowler (1998:168) argues that such hostility to the notion of women’s ability to span the motherhood/warriorhood binary is particularly prevalent in Western society, where the concept continues to be largely rejected.

2008:3). By engaging in violent activity, the established dividing lines of gender become irrevocably weakened, with such women being effectively 'masculinised' in the process. More problematically, perhaps, men who have not adequately resisted such transgression are vulnerable to accusations of having been 'feminised' as a consequence, thus further intensifying male anxieties (Ryan 1999:267; Banerjee 2012:10). Furthermore, the political opponents of such activity will regularly impugn the sexual morality of such women in order to further undermine and discredit the political cause that they represent and, by default, will reinforce the subordinate role of the militant female (Ryan 1999:258;267; Hamilton 2007:141-2; Banerjee 2012:88).

It should be noted that such male anxieties not only are an outward manifestation of raw patriarchal muscle but also derive to a significant extent from gendered perceptions of 'nation' and 'warrior' within the broader politico-cultural context in which militant women find themselves. Similar to the previously discussed concept of 'warrior' as an exclusively masculine trope, the representation of 'nation' as a feminine entity has gained almost universal acceptance within modern nationalist discourse (Banerjee 2012:6). By its very essence, political violence will coincide with significant national upheaval, resulting in the 'necessity' of (male) liberation, defence, maintenance, establishment, etc., of the (female) nation. With female militancy proving to be such a contested historical and cultural space, this dichotomy creates yet further layers of intergender complexity. Within such a paradigm, women are effectively consigned to a maternal role as begetters of the nation's male warrior class who, in turn, must defend the female motherland, thereby further silencing the militant female voice. Thus, the participation of women in political violence creates significant societal and cultural anxieties, with their transmission from life-givers to life-takers sitting uneasily

within the established mores of both militant nationalism and Western patriarchy, simultaneously.

“Doomed . . . Dead or Damned”¹⁷⁵: Women in Traditional Ballad Culture

Given the noted reluctance of Western society to culturally embrace the virtues of a socially-empowered (let alone an armed) femininity capable of disrupting patriarchal norms (and has more often than not shown outright hostility to the very concept), commensurate restrictions on the representation of ‘transgressive’ women in traditional ballad narrative are similarly to be expected. Stewart (1993) has argued that since “women have always been relegated to an ancillary position in Western culture” (1993:55), it is thus wholly necessary to examine traditional ballad culture within this prevailing context. As a broad collective, traditional narrative ballads contain diverse and multifaceted representations of female *dramatis personae*, all of which are to a considerable degree reflective of the prevailing conventions of the society in which the ballad was composed and/or the audience at which it was directed. With appropriate academic caution, therefore, such output can be mined as a source of contemporary social and gender mores and will display cultural shifts (or, indeed, calcification) in the status of women, where evident (Ferris 1970:439-49; Casey, *et al* 1972:397-403; Ó Cadhla 2012:69-70; Skinner 2017:205).

As cultural interpretations of women, traditional folk ballads regularly deploy highly moralistic tropes, with their narratives often functioning as blunt devices of patriarchal reinforcement (Gammon 2008:49). Stewart (1993) argues that traditional ballad culture rigidly demarcates gender boundaries as “battle lines . . . on a field of cultural expectations, the most prominent of which is that the species must survive”

¹⁷⁵ Stewart (1993:57).

(1993:66). When such expectations are met, it is “at the considerable price of extreme sexual and social oppression of women” (1993:66). While conceding that some ballads will duly narrate subtle shifts in terms of overall improvements in the social standing of women, Tatar (2015) goes considerably further than the allegation of patriarchy, arguing that such works have a tendency to be highly misogynistic in trajectory due to “the severity of punishment [being] out of proportion to [the] crime” (2015:4). Ballads of this hue will regularly contain sinister undercurrents by disseminating thinly-disguised warnings to women as to the consequences of breaching established gender demarcations, thus serving as “didactic tools to instil obedience in young women” (2015:4).

Given that such works were manifestly conceived and subsequently disseminated within the context of contested gender space, they have habitually struggled (whether by accident or by design) to accommodate progressive representations of militant femininity, preferring instead to accentuate the ‘transgressive female’ thematic. This is so whether such ‘transgressions’ are regarded as sexual, moral, class-inspired or, indeed, violent. Within the parameters of the traditional narrative ballad, it is indeed immaterial whether the latter is in the domestic sphere (be it as a consequence of female-initiated aggression or in self-defence) or, as is the case in the genre under review, politically motivated, and thus underpinned by an over-arching moral justification. Therefore, as active participants in political violence, female Republican activists may well be ‘transgressive’ within the restrictive patriarchal parameters highlighted by Stewart, *et al*; but their actions must also be necessarily framed within the context of a violent British colonial occupation, a socio-political dispensation that Republicans themselves would no doubt consider a far more insidious transgression than any individual contravention committed by such women. This adds a

significant caveat when considering the position of militant females within Republican song: while perhaps not ubiquitously celebrated within the tradition, the violent activity of Republican women can, at the very least, be equivocated upon as a consequential response to British state violence in Ireland.

Within Republican ballads, the accurate representation of the armed female fighter is further complicated by the opaque and obfuscatory treatment of political violence within the ideological framework of physical-force Irish Republicanism. From the mid-nineteenth-century onward, the trope of the heroic, self-sacrificial martyr gained ideological primacy within the Republican belief system, becoming duly elevated into a quasi-theological construct within the tradition (Smith 1995:13; Sweeney 2004:338; Shanahan 2009:40; Beiner 2014:199). At this juncture, the philosophy of violent Republicanism, while still firmly committed to a wholly physical-force approach to achieving Irish independence, adapted a parallel juxtaposition of heroic passivity. In doing so, the ideology embraced a markedly essentialist position of lionising the sacrificial endurance of violence by Republicans, as opposed to its blunt infliction on others, regardless if such violence was either proactive or in self-defence (Kearney 1980/1:62), a thematic stemming from what Clarke (1987) has termed “the perverse relationship between suffering and strength in the history of physical-force nationalism” (1987:111) in Ireland.¹⁷⁶ Such opaqueness and ideological selectivity regarding the

¹⁷⁶ The ‘endurance of violence’ thematic was uniquely distilled by IRA hunger striker Terence MacSwiney (1879-1920), who famously declared:

This contest of ours is not on our side a rivalry of vengeance, but one of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most, but those who can suffer the most, who will conquer . . . [I]t is conceivable that the army of occupation could stop our functioning for a time. Then it becomes simply a question of endurance. Those whose faith is strong will endure to the end and triumph. (quoted in Coogan 1980:15)

deployment of political violence further constricts the potential narrative landscapes available for the articulation of the militant female voice throughout the corpus of Republican song.

This paper will now consider two notable exceptions to this obfuscatory tendency: ‘The Ballad of Ann Flood’, a narrative from the 1798 Rising that relates the killing of a British soldier by Flood in her home, and ‘The Ballad of Mairéad Farrell’, a commemorative work composed in the aftermath of Farrell’s assassination by the SAS while on active service for the IRA in March 1988.¹⁷⁷ Given the very specific exceptionalities regarding the deployment of Republican violence, along with the deeply essentialised theoretical belief system embedded within the physical-force tradition in Ireland, the current research seeks to examine the personal and societal consequences for militant female Republican activists, and whether the ideological complexities of Irish Republicanism demarcate such women from comparable representations of ‘transgressive’ females found within the wider ballad tradition.

“Oh, I Took Up the Mallet and Hit Hard”: ‘The Ballad of Ann Flood’

As a work narrating an undiluted incident of female-on-male violence, ‘The Ballad of Ann Flood’ is a wholly unique extolment of militant femininity from any timeframe within the corpus of Republican song. While not strictly a Republican ballad *per se* (Flood was not a member of any armed organisation), the work was nonetheless deemed worthy of inclusion in a local commemorative songster that marked the two hundredth anniversary of the 1798 Rising.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ The Special Air Service is an elite undercover unit of the British Army.

¹⁷⁸ Berry, Paddy, ed. (1997) *Selected Songs and Ballads of '98* (Carrigbyrne Comóradh '98 Committee: Wexford).

Set in the town of Garrenstackle, Co. Wexford, in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of New Ross, the ballad is narrated by Flood herself who, in the opening verse, speaks frankly of her killing of a British soldier.¹⁷⁹ Significantly, she also implies that by such open documentation of female violence, the ballad seeks to correct both historical and cultural omissions in this regard:

Come listen, my children and I will relate
A rousing story of '98.
You've heard of the battles o'er and o'er
When our nearest and dearest died by the score.
But this is about myself, Ann Flood,
And how I spilled a Hessian's blood.

The reference to subsequent local narration of the incident is used deliberately not only to record the heroism of Flood but also to pointedly accentuate it in the context of male failure during the 1798 Insurrection. Upon mention of Flood, local men lament not having her among their ranks:

When this tale was told in days gone by,
You had to be sure no foe was nigh.
And the women who heard it said a prayer,
And the men: 'Ann Flood had courage to spare.
She should have been with us on Vinegar Hill

¹⁷⁹ The Battle of New Ross, Co. Wexford, took place on 5 June 1798, during which Irish separatist forces were roundly defeated.

With a fine pike, the foe to kill.’

While said men were engaged at New Ross, the female population of the locality had been left vulnerable to assault. The context of male abandonment again deliberately emphasises the bravery of Flood in the ensuing incident:

Ah, when the men went off to fight,
Lonesome it was day and night.
Would they ever come back to us again,
Our fair young sons and stalwart men?

Kavanagh (1898) notes — albeit with considerable hyperbole — that to avoid the “savage debauchees” of the British Army, “the women fled from their homes and took refuge in the fields”, save for Flood, who “refused to follow the example of her sex, and remained at home” (1898:334). Thus, to defend both her home and herself, she is compelled to confront the armed, brute masculinity of the soldiers alone, save for the company of Máire O’Shea, a twelve-year-old girl from the locality who assists her in domestic duties. As a group of mounted soldiers pass the house, the last member of the troop dismounts for no immediately discernible reason:

He banged on the door and I faced him straight,
My eyes — can you blame me? — ablaze with hate.
For where do the men of the house be now?
Killed by his like? And when? And how?

Ostensibly, the British soldier was merely seeking to light his pipe, but a darker motive quickly emerges: an attempted sexual assault of the child:

‘I just came in for a light’, he said,
And he pushed past me to the settle bed,
Where our Máire sat, all frozen with fright,
He caught her arm — ‘twas a sorry sight
To see a soldier so brutal and cold,
And little Máire with her hair of gold.

Fuelled by a combination of her now being *in loco parentis* to Máire, as well as her clear desire to avenge the local men killed by the British, Flood proceeds to beat the soldier to death with a mallet. Both Flood and the child immediately dispose of the soldier’s body before facing down British soldiers during subsequent questioning about the incident:

Oh, I took up the mallet and hit hard,
And we shook as we dragged him into the yard.
We covered him over with faggots dry
And they came and they looked for him, by and by.
But they never found him alive or dead:
‘We never saw any such man’, we said.

It should be noted, that besides the seminal account contained in Kavanagh (1898:324-6), detailed historical sources on Flood are scant, with local folklore

recollections providing much of the information on the incident.¹⁸⁰ She is recorded alternatively as having killed the soldier either with “a mallet . . . [and] hid his body in the haggard”¹⁸¹, with “a square-headed mallet . . . and buried him in the heap of manure”¹⁸², or with “a long-handled mallet, which was used for washing potatoes”.¹⁸³ Another account tells that “[s]he took a mallet from a box and hit him on the back of the head and killed him [and] brought him out and buried him in the dung-heap”.¹⁸⁴ A further version again cites a mallet as the weapon involved, stating that Flood “hit him between the two eyes and knocked him dead [and] covered him up in the dung hill”.¹⁸⁵ She is named as “Biddy Flood” by another local informant, who again cites “a wooden mallet she had for washing potatoes”¹⁸⁶ as the weapon used to kill the soldier. Only one account differs from the rest by recording that “she went in and shot him and dug his grave in a field at the back of the house”.¹⁸⁷ The latter was related by “Mrs. Byrne of Cornmarket, Co. Wexford”, who accentuates the gender dynamic of the incident by

¹⁸⁰ Beiner (2011:70) cites the possibility of Kavanagh (1898) influencing the narrative of oral versions of the incident collected in the twentieth-century.

¹⁸¹ ‘Local Hero’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009340/5008570/5123726> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

¹⁸² ‘A Local Hero’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009340/5008571> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

¹⁸³ ‘How a Wexford Woman Slew a Hessian Captain’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009337/5008402> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

¹⁸⁴ ‘A Local Hero’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009279/5004170/5132808> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

This particular version was documented in 1937 and noted that Flood’s descendants were still residing in the locality at that time.

¹⁸⁵ ‘Stories, Songs and Ballads of ‘98’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009309/5006260/5134387> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

¹⁸⁶ ‘A Story of ‘98’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009341/5008730/5130079> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

¹⁸⁷ ‘Story of ‘98’: <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/5009258/5002327/5131580> (Accessed 14 June 2019).

pointedly adding that “[s]he did the work very thoroughly indeed, and she succeeded where the Irish lads might have failed”.

Along with yet another version citing Flood’s use of a mallet, Murphy (1998:182) documents several comparable narratives from the 1798 Rising in which a lone woman kills a soldier, all of which involve the use of a kitchen utensil as a weapon. Eleven comparable episodes were collected in Longford relating to a similar incident following the Battle of Ballinamuck¹⁸⁸ (Murphy 1998:182), with Beiner (2007:192) noting additional versions collected in Mayo and Leitrim. Murphy (1998) has suggested that given the geographical spread of the versions collected, “the lone woman who kills a soldier may be an Irish version of an Apocryphal legend that can be traced back to the story of Jael and Sisera . . . in the Old Testament Book of Judges” (1998:184). Indeed, the biblical connotations associated with the incident had been recognised one hundred years previously by Kavanagh (1898), who described the soldier as being “dead, to all appearances, as Holofernes when that tyrant fell under the edge of his own sword wielded by the heroic Judith of Scriptural renown”, further describing Flood as “our Wexford Judith” (1898:325). Whether Flood’s actions were, in fact, an attested historical event or simply an exaggerated local incident grafted onto a pre-existing legend will perhaps never be known for certain. What is clear from the multiple versions documented from oral sources, however, is that the trope of an armed, violent heroine was certainly not considered aberrative among the local community in Wexford and was deeply embedded within the collective consciousness of the area well into the early twentieth-century. Regardless of such contention, the narration of such an unvarnished act of blunt violence carried out by a specifically-named Republican is

¹⁸⁸ The Battle of Ballinamuck, Co. Longford, took place on 8 September 1798.

exceptional within the song tradition (even among works detailing male protagonists) and clearly points to a didactic motivation on behalf of the ballad writer.¹⁸⁹

This instructive thematic is facilitated by the deliberate positioning of Flood as her own narrator, a noteworthy literary device on several fronts. Firstly, it purposely portrays a woman wholly at ease with the deployment of extreme violence by herself, and by implication, other females. Secondly, it also serves as a very public admonishment of men for confining women to the homestead during times of conflict, a conflict in this instance in which said men were comprehensively routed at the Battle of New Ross. Thirdly, Flood very effectively disempowers the men by putting her own words into their mouths (“She should have been with us on Vinegar Hill / With a fine pike, the foe to kill”), resulting in their own self-admonishment for their failure at New Ross. Furthermore, her appropriation of the mallet — a tool with obvious phallic connotations and one routinely deployed throughout folksong as a trope of male supremacy (Sweers 2005:178) — is clearly no accident either. Most importantly, perhaps, Flood’s self-narration confers a specific inspirational agency on the work and allows the ballad function as a totemic exemplar for potentially similar-minded Republican women.

The message conveyed in ‘The Ballad of Ann Flood’ is unambiguous: female violence is not only a wholly justifiable response to male transgression but one that is to be unashamedly celebrated. In the case of Flood, her violence has yet further agency. By spanning both domestic and political spheres, she succeeds in fusing the tropes of warrior and mother into a totemic embodiment of empowered, militant femininity, an exemplar that Western society has shown such reluctance to accommodate (Dowler

¹⁸⁹ For further reading on the obfuscation of Republican violence in popular song narrative, see Ó Cadhla (2017a:275-9). See also footnote 207.

1998:168). Without question, this identifies ‘The Ballad of Ann Flood’ as a representational high water-mark in terms of armed femininity within the tradition of Republican song, with the narrative not only extending well beyond the parameters of simply extolling (and thus endorsing) acts of female violence but also serving as a proto-feminist text within the genre.

“I Took Up My Gun, Until Freedom’s Day”’: ‘The Ballad of Mairéad Farrell’

The outbreak of wide-scale civil unrest within Nationalist communities in Belfast and Derry in the late 1960s led to a split within both the IRA (1969) and Sinn Féin (1970), with what was to become the more dominant of the two factions — known colloquially as ‘The Provisionals’ — immediately rededicating itself to an almost exclusively physical-force approach to the national struggle.¹⁹⁰ While Cumann na mBan¹⁹¹ was still an active organisation during this period, an IRA General Army Convention held in late 1968 had voted to permit women to join the IRA as full members and to serve alongside male volunteers in the organisation (Reinisch 2013:116; White 2017:78).¹⁹² This resulted in a significant shift in terms of active

¹⁹⁰ The 1969/70 split was a public manifestation of major internal divisions that had arisen in the Republican Movement during the earlier part of the decade. For detailed discussions of the events, personalities and ideologies leading to the split, see Patterson (1997:110-35;140-56); Hanley and Millar (2010:108-48); English (2012:81-108).

¹⁹¹ Trans.: ‘The Council of the Women’. Cumann na mBan was an all-female Republican paramilitary organisation founded in 1914 that served as an adjunct to the Irish Volunteers, the forerunner of the IRA. For further reading, see Ward (1995); Tallion (1999); McCarthy (2007).

¹⁹² This decision was strongly opposed by a number of female activists who viewed it less as a case of gaining equal status with men within the IRA and more as a loss of their autonomy as Cumann na mBan volunteers. White (2017) describes the move as “[a]n attempt to control women activists” (2017:151) within the Republican Movement.

female participation within the IRA, with women now openly visible as armed volunteers.¹⁹³ From the early 1970s, Armagh Gaol saw a large influx of female Republican activists, firstly as internees and subsequently as sentenced prisoners. This would, in due course, provide the women with a further arena of conflict, when they engaged in the protracted campaign for the reintroduction of political prisoner status after its withdrawal in March 1976.¹⁹⁴ As female prisoners were permitted to wear their own clothes, the women in Armagh Gaol were specifically engaged in a no-work

¹⁹³The increasingly frontline military role for women continued to expand in the 1980s. Moloney (2007) notes the rewriting of the IRA's constitution at the 1986 General Army Convention "to excise sexist language" and that women "had become [IRA] brigade commanders and had even made it to the staff of Northern Command" (2007:376) by this period.

¹⁹⁴ Following a hunger strike in 1972, the British government introduced what it termed 'Special Category Status' for those charged with, and convicted of, political offences. (Despite being 'political prisoner status' in all but name, the term was pointedly never used by the British state or indeed by Irish authorities for prisoners in their gaols). Special Category Status was abolished on 1 March 1976, following the British government's decision to pursue an explicit policy of criminalising its political prisoner population. In line with well-established tradition, the (male) Republican prisoners in Long Kesh (now officially renamed as 'HM Prison, The Maze') eschewed convict uniforms, instead opting to cover themselves solely in blankets. As prison rules required the wearing of a prison uniform, the 'Blanketmen' were confined to their cells for twenty-four hours a day. The protest escalated in 1978 when prisoners began smearing excrement on the walls and ceilings of their cells and emptying chamber pots under cell doors and out windows. This followed the prisoners' refusal to leave their cells to wash or empty pots due to consistent allegations of assault by prison staff, along with a decision to deny prisoners permission to wear a blanket or towel to cover themselves with when accessing the washroom and toilet facilities. 'The Blanket Protest' culminated in the hunger strike of 1981, during which ten Republican prisoners died. For further reading, see Coogan (1980); Beresford (1987); O'Malley (1991); Hennessy (2014).

protest.¹⁹⁵ In February 1980, following the severe beating of the prisoners by a prison staff riot squad and the subsequent refusal of authorities to allow the women out of their cells for a twenty-four hour period to bathe or empty chamber pots, the protest escalated to emulate the male ‘no-wash’ protest at Long Kesh. At this point, the women engaged in a considerably more extreme form of protest than that of their male counterparts by smearing both excrement and menstrual fluids on their cell walls.¹⁹⁶ Three female prisoners had also gone on hunger strike in late 1980, alongside the seven male hunger strikers in the H-Blocks.¹⁹⁷

The most prominent of the three hunger strikers was Mairéad Farrell (1957-88), an IRA volunteer from Belfast who had previously come to public prominence after a smuggled photograph of her in a cell smeared with her own bodily fluids was first published in 1980. Farrell was arrested in 1976 and was sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment for her alleged role in an IRA bombing operation in Belfast. While in Armagh Gaol, she served as Officer Commanding the Republican prisoners and played a leading role in the campaign for the reintroduction of political status, as well as in the

¹⁹⁵ For detailed accounts of the conditions of the protesting female prisoners in Armagh Gaol at the time, see Murray (1998); Wahidin (2016:107-96).

¹⁹⁶ The various protest actions by women prisoners in Armagh — particularly the deployment of menstrual blood as a form of protest — were the cause of some considerable division among feminist activists at the time. For further discussion, see Loughran (1986:64); Weinstein (2006:24). For further reading on the deployment of menstrual fluids as a form of protest in Armagh Gaol, see O’Keefe (2006:535-6); Banerjee (2012:126-30).

¹⁹⁷ The three female hunger-strikers were IRA prisoners Mairéad Farrell, Mairéad Nugent and Mary Doyle. The fast at Armagh Gaol began on 1 December 1980 and ended on 19 December, the day after the Long Kesh hunger strike (27 October-18 December) had ended in heavily disputed circumstances. No hunger strikers died in either prison during the period of the 1980 hunger strike.

subsequent anti-strip search campaign of the early 1980s.¹⁹⁸ At the height of the 1981 hunger strike in Long Kesh, Farrell contested the Irish General Election *in absentia* on the Anti-H-Block/Armagh ticket.¹⁹⁹ Upon release in 1986, she immediately rejoined the IRA, ultimately becoming a member of the organisation's GHQ Staff. During this period, Farrell gained a significant public profile and was widely recognised as a Republican spokesperson, giving several media interviews on the subjects of feminism and the armed struggle.²⁰⁰ Along with fellow Belfast IRA volunteers Seán Savage and Danny McCann, she was assassinated by the SAS in Gibraltar on 6 March 1988.²⁰¹

Thus, by the time of her death, Farrell had comprehensively occupied all roles available to the contemporary Republican militant, regardless of gender. Both as an IRA volunteer on active service and as a political prisoner, she had demonstrated a consistent willingness to transgress calcified gender norms (particularly via the weaponisation of menstrual blood) and was without question a singularly totemic representation of armed femininity within modern physical-force Republicanism. All of the above — and particularly the circumstances of her death — assured Mairéad Farrell's iconic status

¹⁹⁸ For detailed accounts on the strip-searching and assault of female Republican prisoners during this period, see Aretxaga (2001:1-27); Wahidin (2016:169-96).

¹⁹⁹ Farrell stood in the June 1981 General Election for the constituency of Cork North Central and received 2,751 votes.

²⁰⁰ Interview footage of Mairéad Farrell recorded shortly before her death can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXXSQvBwpxA> and at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2TyzlQVL4o> (Accessed 5 May 2019).

²⁰¹ While Farrell, Savage and McCann were on active service for the IRA in Gibraltar, all three were unarmed when shot dead by members of the SAS.

within Republican collective consciousness and prompted the composition of a well-known commemorative ballad in the early 1990s.²⁰²

Similar to Ann Flood, Farrell is consciously positioned in the work as her own narrator, again giving deliberate articulation to the militant female voice. While the repeated opening and closing verses appear to have been appropriated from the opening and closing couplets of a poem from the early 1930s, they are illustrative of a ubiquitously deployed trope of Republican song: the explicit guarantee of eternal life for the fallen warrior:²⁰³

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there I do not sleep.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

When Ireland lives, I do not die.

²⁰² The work was composed by Patricia McBride of Maghera, Co. Derry.

²⁰³ The original lines read:

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there I do not sleep. . . .

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

I am not there: I did not die. (Shapiro 2006:295)

The authorship of the original poem was disputed for several years but has since been attributed to American poet, Mary Elizabeth Frye (1905-2004). While such recycling of text from other sources is by no means a unique phenomenon within Republican song, the genre is more notable for its appropriation of pre-existing musical scores. For example, 'Kevin Barry' and 'Shall My Soul Pass Through Old Ireland?' both share the same melody, as do 'Roddy McCorley' and 'Seán Sabhat from Garryowen'. Indeed, 'The Ballad of Máiréad Farrell' is itself set to the familiar air of 'Black Is the Colour of My True Love's Hair'.

Here, Farrell is pointedly shown to have transcended the grave and is presented to the audience not as a martyred hero to be mourned but rather as a living Republican volunteer. Revenant figures and apparitions are a common feature of Republican song (Ó Cadhla 2017b) and represent a politico-cultural continuum of Patrick Pearse's famous 1915 panegyric which proclaimed that "[l]ife springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations" (Farrell Moran 1994:146).²⁰⁴ The ideological thematic deployed in this instance is a familiar one. By proclaiming her own eternity (and deliberately conflating it with that of the Irish nation), Farrell declares that the struggle for freedom must be maintained until completion or she will, in fact, 'die'. This alludes not merely to her own physical demise but to a more lasting ideological death coinciding with that of the aforementioned Irish nation, which she now embodies.²⁰⁵ Only when national freedom has been won can she ultimately rest. Similarly deliberate blurring of the liminal space between life and death are widely deployed throughout the canon and successfully construct a form of Republican limbo

²⁰⁴ On 3 May 1916, Patrick Pearse (1879-1916) was executed by firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin for his leading role in the Easter Rising of that year. Pearse's famous polemic — which has become a staple of militant Republican narrative ever since — was made in a graveside speech at the funeral of veteran Republican activist, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (1831-1915). The latter was convicted in 1865 on conspiracy and treason charges and sentenced to penal servitude for life.

²⁰⁵ The poetic depiction of Ireland as a woman — often in goddess-like apparition — is a well-established trope of traditional Irish song that appears regularly across multiple cultural disciplines. Popular descriptors for the 'nation mother' include Róisín Dubh, Dark Rosaleen, Caitlín Ní hUallacháin, Síle Ní Ghadhra and Mother Ireland, among others. For further historical context on the allegory, see Zimmerman (1967:56).

from which living IRA volunteers routinely endure *post mortem* hauntings from revenant Republican martyrs (Ó Cadhla 2017b:126).²⁰⁶

While such a thematically traditional opening positions the work very firmly within the established parameters of Republican song, the folkloric theme is immediately interrupted by the opening lines of Verse 2. The blunt (and markedly unencoded) gender message of “[a] woman’s place is not at home” is proclaimed, not as an aspiration towards an ill-defined gender equality, but pointedly because “[t]he fight for freedom, it still goes on”. As evidenced previously with Flood, Farrell exhorts other women to disregard gender restrictions and assume their own role in the Republican struggle, similar to that occupied by her while alive. The theme of unvarnished militant femininity is reinforced in the lines:

I took up my gun, until freedom’s day
I pledged to fight for the IRA.

At this point, Farrell temporarily parts company with Flood. Unlike the latter, she does not wait at home for the fight to come to her but is proactive in this regard. With biographical Republican song traditionally eschewing any overt reference to the

²⁰⁶ The twin themes of eternal life and renaissance have survived well into the twenty first-century within the popular Republican song tradition. A recent illustrative example is ‘The Warrior from West Belfast’, a ballad written in memory of IRA volunteer and 1980 Long Kesh hunger striker, Brendan Hughes (1948-2008):

And Brendan Hughes still guards The Falls with rifle in his hands.
He stands on top of The Cooley Hills and he guards his native land.

Lyrics published at: <https://www.irish-folk-songs.com/the-warrior-from-west-belfast-lyrics-and-chords.html> (Accessed 11 May 2019).

infliction of violence by its subjects, the unambiguous militancy of the reference carries some considerable force, particularly so, as it is related by a woman who took up ‘her’ (and not ‘a’) gun.²⁰⁷

With Farrell unambiguously traversing into the male arena of armed conflict, the appearance of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Verse 3 adds a significant complication to the gender landscape.²⁰⁸ At this juncture, the audience is now presented with a woman ‘ordering’ violence against Farrell, herself a self-proclaimed violent woman, as per Verse 2:

Gibraltar was the place I died.

McCann and Savage were by my side.

I heard the order so loud and shrill

Of Thatcher’s voice, said ‘Shoot to kill!’²⁰⁹

In this instance, it is clearly the colonial — and pointedly not the gender — context that is decisive, with Thatcher alone (and consequently, not Farrell) consciously

²⁰⁷ As noted, ballads commemorating an identified Republican volunteer are notable for their tendency to avoid linking the subject to any explicit acts of violence, preferring generic references to their activity instead. Note here how the final line of Verse 2 (“I pledged to fight for the IRA”) moves seamlessly into the opening of Verse 3 (“In Armagh Gaol, I served my time”), without any explanation as to how Farrell came to be convicted and imprisoned.

²⁰⁸ Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) was British Prime Minister from 1979-90 and was a particular *bête noire* of Republicans due to her role in the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981.

²⁰⁹ “Shoot to kill” is a reference to what Republicans termed the ‘Shoot-To-Kill Policy’ of the 1980s, whereby suspected IRA and INLA members were summarily shot dead by the RUC and British Army, without first attempting to apprehend and arrest them.

depicted as the aberrant, transgressive female, despite the latter's self-proclaimed participation in political violence, along with her public exhortation of other women to engage in same. Thus, as part of the IRA's armed campaign, Farrell's 'transgression' can be redefined as a necessary and defensible form of 'contra-transgression' to British occupation and is wholly justified as a consequence — to Republicans at least, if to no one else. Therefore, the juxtaposition of two politically-violent women in 'The Ballad of Mairéad Farrell' highlights a certain exceptionality regarding the representation of militant femininity within Republican ballads. While the violence of female Republican volunteers is certainly 'transgressive' from the perspective of societal patriarchy, it is clearly not deemed as such by the Republican audience. Rather, it is British state violence that represents the *actual* transgression in the ballad and is it aberrative regardless of the gender of the person who orders or inflicts it.

Ann Flood and Mairéad Farrell: Narrative Outcomes

Given that Flood and Farrell are both women who have successfully deployed violent methods in pursuit of their goals and display no discernible reticence in doing so (despite a certain narrative vagueness in the case of Farrell), it is worth considering both in greater detail as exemplars of the consequential outcomes for Republican women who traverse the traditional gender boundary of political violence. With some minor exceptions, the parallels between the two narratives are immediately obvious:

- Both women are the titular focus of the ballads.
- Unlike other female-inspired works in the genre, both appear in every verse and are clearly the central focus of the narratives.

- By Farrell stating that “[a] woman’s place is not at home” and the contention that Flood “should have been... on Vinegar Hill”, both ballads accentuate feminine militancy while simultaneously repudiating domestic confinement.
- Both embrace Republican and feminist liberation, in tandem with their rejection of British and patriarchal domination.
- Both are unambiguously prepared to deploy violence against the British state in Ireland.
- Perhaps most importantly, both ballads are self-narrated, giving clear articulation to the militant female voice. In the case of Flood, this is achieved by her appropriation of the male voice following their defeat in battle; with Farrell it is a *post mortem* narration from beyond the grave.

There are two significant distinctions between the respective works, however. Firstly, where the violence of Flood is described in some graphic detail, that of Farrell has been elided by the composer. Secondly, there is a marked divergence in terms of the consequences for both protagonists due to their involvement in political violence: while Flood has lived to tell the tale of her militant actions, Farrell has clearly paid a significantly higher cost for hers, with her life.

In her analysis of gender power relations in the Child ballads, Stewart (1993) posits a framework of potential outcomes for women who transgress societal (and specifically male) expectations of gender-appropriate behaviours. While aspects of Stewart’s thesis have been questioned by some scholars (Wollstadt 2002:297), and the findings cannot, of course, be applied with complete universality across multiple genre, her analysis does nonetheless provide a useful paradigm for analysing the resultant personal and societal consequences for militant women such as Flood and Farrell.

Furthermore, as the thesis has as its central analysis “[women] depicted agonistically with a man or with a male-headed authority structure” (Stewart 1993:56), it has an additional relevance to works narrating protagonists in armed conflict, given the propensity for strained gender relations in such situations.

Stewart (1993) argues that in the Child ballads, women “are caught in the bind that has been made evident through the feminist critique of the patriarchy: females in a male dominated world are subject to oppression whether they act or do not act” (1993:55). Consequently, she juxtaposes ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in the context of women who seek to confront such patriarchal restrictions, further arguing that both outcomes can be either ‘personal’ or ‘cultural’. Within this framework, ‘personal success’ can be defined as a woman reaching a stated goal and averting harm in the process. Such achievement can be accompanied by either ‘cultural failure’ or ‘cultural success’. In the former, the woman realises her personal ambition but is considerably diminished from a societal perspective as a result (1993:56). In the latter (a rarity in traditional folksong), the personal goal is successfully reached alongside the fulfilling of societal expectations. This is largely achieved by women “appropriating the masculine decision-making prerogative . . . or by appropriating masculine dress” (1993:65). In terms of ‘personal failure’, Stewart gives several examples of women who are attacked or who need male rescuing as a result of their unsuccessful pursuit of personal goals but are subsequently promoted to an elevated societal status by the ballad’s conclusion, thus attaining ‘cultural success’ in the process (1993:60). ‘Cultural failure’ follows ‘personal failure’ due to “a women’s use of violence, or unsanctioned sex, or both” (1993:59) in confronting patriarchal mores. Such instances involve “doomed women, who end up dead or damned, whether through someone else’s actions, or through their own” (1993:57).

As women who have the stated personal objective of inhabiting the male-dominated arena of political violence, it is clear that both Flood and Farrell have unquestionably succeeded from a personal perspective; therefore the issue of 'personal failure' does not arise.

Flood experiences 'personal success' by

- appropriating the militant male voice as a device to extol violent revolutionary femininity and consequently, in order to publicly admonish Republican men for the failure of the 1798 Rising;
- protecting both herself and the young girl in her care from assault;
- reinforcing the safety of her homestead;
- killing a British soldier;
- escaping the consequences of the killing and living to tell her story; and
- being elevated into an inspirational prototype of militant Republican femininity.

Similarly, Farrell enjoys significant 'personal success' by virtue of

- joining the IRA, a male-dominated, armed revolutionary movement;
- engaging in armed activity on an equal footing with men;
- serving a lengthy sentence as a political prisoner;
- engaging in extreme forms of prison protest action (smearing bodily fluids on cell walls and engaging in a hunger strike) that were traditionally the preserve of male Republican prisoners;
- immediately rejoining the IRA upon release, rising to the rank of GHQ Staff member;

- enjoying an elevated social status within the wider Republican community as a political ex-prisoner;
- articulating the militant female voice in unambiguous terms; and
- being elevated into an inspirational prototype of militant Republican femininity.

But what of the resultant ‘cultural successes’ and ‘cultural failures’ of the two? This will, of course, depend largely upon both the societal and the political parameters that we may apply to their respective narrative outcomes. Given the noted propensity of physical-force Irish Republicanism to reconstitute outright military defeat as an effective ideological victory (Kearney 1980/1:62-70; Bishop and Mallie 1987:455; Clarke 1987:11; Bell 2017:585), the concept of what constitutes ‘success’ can often be very much in the eye of the Republican beholder. Thus, the consequences for Farrell and Flood ought not to be solely gauged against the “meeting of male expectations” (Wollstadt 2002:297) in a patriarchal society, as such mores are obviously secondary to the individuals under review. As both have publicly spurned the restrictions of patriarchy, they have clearly not met such narrow male expectations in the first instance and are quite happy to have not done so. Instead, the measure of whether or not they have achieved ‘cultural success’ must be necessarily framed within the very specific ideological tenets that underpin the theoretical framework of violent Irish Republicanism.

Regardless of such ideological intricacies and nuance, as discussed previously, Flood has achieved ‘cultural success’ by gaining the tacit approval of physical-force Republican men for her actions, albeit by her own appropriation of their voice. While such an acknowledgement from martial males is, of itself, obviously significant, their gender (similar to that of Margaret Thatcher) is essentially unimportant, as she has met

the more important cultural expectations of physical-force Republicanism. Regarding Farrell, the consequences are not quite so clear-cut. Her ‘personal success’ has led to a prolonged period of imprisonment and to her assassination at thirty-one years of age. It could be reasonably argued, therefore, that she effectively meets the criteria for ‘cultural failure’, and is one of Stewart’s “doomed women, who end up dead or damned” (1993:57) as a consequence of her “use of violence” (1993:59). Despite Farrell having been killed, however, the ballad deliberately presents her as having physically overcome death by transcending the grave and returning to narrate her own political narrative as a ‘living’ IRA volunteer. As argued, this is not an instance of the standard folkloric motif of cathartic revenance found commonly in traditional folksong. Rather, it is representative of the ideological adherence to martyrdom and heroic self-sacrifice necessarily preceding national liberation and rebirth, an essential thematic within the Irish physical-force tradition.

Therefore, within the very constricted and specific ideological context of violent Irish Republicanism, it is possible to further expand upon Stewart’s thesis. In terms of the cultural consequences for Farrell, the Republican tropes of everlasting life and national rebirth supersede any moral disapproval from patriarchal or wider societal sources. Thus, the potential ‘cultural failure’ created by her ‘death’ is immediately erased, as she has gained instantaneous ‘ideological success’ — albeit at the ultimate cost — by entering the pantheon of Republican martyrs. Similar to that of Flood, the inspirational agency created by Farrell’s death is further accentuated by the subject transmitting her own narrative (in this case *post mortem*), thereby facilitating her elevation into a totemic exemplar for future generations of Republicans — and for female militants in particular — to emulate.

Thus, whether Republican women live to tell their tale like Ann Flood or lose their lives prematurely in conflict like Mairéad Farrell, their actions by transgressing into the male-dominated arena of political violence cannot incur the dire, often fatal penalties of ‘cultural failure’ as posited by Stewart. While Farrell’s death is clearly not her desired outcome, the innate ideological essentialism of physical-force Republicanism allows death — the ultimate ‘cultural failure’ in any social context — to be effectively reconfigured as ‘ideological success’, thus providing a significant addendum to Stewart’s system of classification. This tendency is not, of course, reflective of any particularly progressive gender thematic deliberately promoted by the composers of Republican song. Nor is it to suggest that the politico-cultural ideology of violent Irish Republicanism is underpinned by some morose subculture of death. Rather, such narrative outcome is a consequential representation of the interwoven essentialist death tropes of heroic martyrdom preceding resurrection and national rebirth, along with the paradoxical Republican tendency to reconstruct outright military failure as ideological victory. All of the above effectively combine to provide militant Republican women with a unique set of criteria that facilitates their circumvention of the misogynistic, didactic consequences for ‘transgressive’ women evident elsewhere throughout the corpus of traditional narrative song.

Conclusions

This paper has noted the dearth of academic output within the historiography of physical-force Irish Republicanism that documents armed female activists’ contribution to the Irish national struggle, along with how this narrative neglect has also been mirrored throughout the attendant song tradition. When present in such output, militant women are routinely consigned to marginal, secondary roles indicating thinly-disguised

male angst in the face of an empowered, armed femininity. In the context of Irish Republicanism, such intergender friction is considerably accentuated due to the widespread promotion of the trope of the grieving Republican mother, the conflation of ‘woman’ as a totemic representation of ‘nation’, obfuscatory ideological constructs attached to the infliction and endurance of Republican violence, along with the deeply-essentialised concepts of martyrdom, resurrection, and eternal life, all of which further constrict the narrative space available to the female militant in Republican musical output. The societal expectations of women (specifically as non-combatants) have been highlighted, along with how such patriarchal mores have been routinely presented in traditional ballad culture via didactic, misogynistic texts that at times promote fatal consequences for women who successfully breach gender restrictions. With a view to examining the personal, societal and cultural consequences for female Republican militants who challenge male hegemony in the arena of political violence, the work has focussed on two exceptional musical narratives of violent Republican women: ‘The Ballad of Ann Flood’ and ‘The Ballad of Mairéad Farrell’. The system of classification posited by Stewart (1993) for analysing the relative successes or failures of ‘transgressive’ females was utilised as a comparative framework for investigating the personal and cultural consequences for both women’s involvement in political violence. The analysis noted that while both Flood and Farrell achieved ‘personal success’ by virtue of their respective involvement in the Republican armed struggle, their cultural consequences were at odds due to Flood’s survival and Farrell’s assassination at a relatively young age. It was further demonstrated, however, that the heavily-essentialised ideological constructs that underpin physical-force Irish Republicanism allow Farrell to effectively escape the fatal consequences of her actions. Republican Valhalla — with all of its attendant politico-cultural immortality — and Farrell’s *post*

mortem appearance in the ballad narrative as a living, active IRA volunteer combine to effectively reconstruct the ‘cultural failure’ associated with her ‘death’ as a form of ‘ideological success’. Therefore, while the consequences for ‘transgressive’ women as posited in the theses of Stewart (1993), Gammon (2008), Tatar (2015), *et al* can provide us with useful comparative frameworks up to a certain point, they cannot be applied seamlessly to militant women in the Republican song tradition. Due to the highly-nuanced and selective attitudes to political violence, along with the essentialised tropes of martyrdom, resurrection and immortality promoted within the broader ideological parameters of physical-force Irish Republicanism, the severe consequences for women found elsewhere in traditional ballad culture do not predominate Republican song. As demonstrated in the instance of Mairéad Farrell, such militant women may well pay with their lives for their ‘transgression’ into the martial male arena, but this cannot be construed as ‘cultural failure’. Rather, death — the ultimate ‘cultural failure’ — is effectively inverted as a form of ‘ideological success’ that complements the ‘personal success’ of their militant involvement. As ever, “the perverse relationship between suffering and strength” (Clarke 1987:111) within Irish Republicanism provides a uniquely paradoxical framework with which to record the narratives of its heroic martyrs. While acknowledging the obvious paucity of militant women recorded within the genre, this paper has demonstrated that Republican ballads provide an effective dichotomy of ‘cultural successes’ for militant women whereby even when their ‘transgression’ results in death, they are ultimately victorious, with any nascent ‘cultural failure’ immediately negated as a result.

Appendix

The Ballad of Ann Flood

Come listen, my children and I will relate

A rousing story of '98.

You've heard of the battles o'er and o'er,

When our nearest and dearest died by the score.

But this is about myself, Ann Flood,

And how I spilled a Hessian's blood.

When this tale was told in days gone by,

You had to be sure no foe was nigh.

And the women who heard it said a prayer,

And the men: 'Ann Flood had courage to spare.

She should have been with us on Vinegar Hill

With a fine pike, the foe to kill.'

Ah, when the men went off to fight,

Lonesome it was day and night.

Would they ever come back to us again,

Our fair young sons and stalwart men?

The townlands all were quiet as ghost

And Garrenstackle 'twas quieter than most.

I was here in this house with Máire O'Shea,
A little girl who came each day.
From the first house at the top of the road,
She talked and she helped to lighten the load.
She was barely twelve that time, I been
A handsome girl, she looked sixteen.

We were working easy about the place,
When we heard the tread of quicken pace
Of soldiers on horseback coming the way,
We closed the door and started to pray
They they'd pass along and let us be,
And off they galloped away — but see!

The last man looks, he stops, dismounts,
And we're in for it now, by all accounts.
He banged on the door and I faced him straight,
My eyes — can you blame me? — ablaze with hate.
For where do the men of the house be now?
Killed by his like? And when? And how?

'I just came in for a light', he said,
And he pushed past me to the settle bed,
Where our Máire sat, all frozen with fright,
He caught her arm — 'twas a sorry sight

To see a soldier so brutal and cold,
And little Máire with her hair of gold.

Oh, I took up the mallet and hit hard,
And we shook as we dragged him into the yard.
We covered him over with faggots dry
And they came and they looked for him, by and by.
But they never found him alive or dead:
'We never saw any such man', we said.

With the Kellys to aid at the fall of the night,
We buried his body out of sight.
Over the way in the grey marl hole
And may God have mercy on his soul.
And when to your children this tale relate,
Tell them times were bad in '98.

The Ballad of Máiréad Farrell

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there, I do not sleep.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

When Ireland lives, I do not die.

A woman's place is not at home.

The fight for freedom, it still goes on.

I took up my gun, until freedom's day

I pledged to fight for the IRA.

In Armagh Gaol I served my time.

Strip searches were a British crime.

Degraded me, but they could not see —

I suffered this to see Ireland free.

Gibraltar was the place I died.

McCann and Savage were by my side.

I heard the order so loud and shrill

Of Thatcher's voice, said: 'Shoot to kill!'

So, do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there, I do not sleep.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

When Ireland lives, I do not die.

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