

Level II

2017-2018 LAOH Irish History Writing Contest

Expressing Irish History Through Music

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Across the entire world, an important way to study history is through song. Songs give historians a personal look into the struggles and reality that people are going through in a certain time period or place. Throughout key events in Irish history, such as Early Christian Ireland, the Potato Famine, and the War of Independence, music has expressed and represented the struggles, trials, and great joys the people were experiencing.

Early Christian Ireland spans from 400-1000 AD, and the music of that period reflected the changes that were being made in the people. Ireland was originally paganist with people believing in a multitude of gods. Christianity first began to spread in Ireland around 431 AD, with the arrival of many missionaries. The most famous of these missionaries was St. Patrick, who preached and taught the people of Ireland about the Bible and God. By 600 AD, Ireland was mainly converted to Christianity and many churches and monasteries were spread throughout the country. Although the monasteries of Ireland during this time were mainly focused on worship and scholarship, some of the earliest Irish music came from these places. Many historians agree that, "the early Irish church had its own form of Latin chant ... In parts of the West of Ireland today, where *sean nos* singing still survives, it is believed that this unique form of modal singing in Irish was handed down from (the chanting of the monks in olden times)." (hAllmhurain, A Short History of Irish Traditional Music) The monasteries of Ireland used chanting as a part of their worship, and this method of singing is still seen in parts of Ireland today. "Sean-nós, Irish traditional song, has been passed down through the generations orally. Traditionally, the phrase "sean-nós," literally "old-style," referred to songs sung in Irish Gaelic," (Library of Congress, "Irish American Song) The main instruments of music during this time can be found in the Brehon Laws, which were the early Irish law. These laws focus on social standing, and the harpist was at the top of the social period, showing what emphasis music had during this time.

(hAllmhurain, A Short History of Irish Traditional Music) The music of Early Christian Ireland was centered around the harpist and chants of the monasteries.

Another main event in the history of Ireland was the Potato Famine from 1845-1851. Potatoes were the staple food of the Irish diet. In 1845, 46, and 47, blight, a form of plant disease struck the potato crops making them inedible. Between 1845 and 1851 two million people died or were forced to emigrate from Ireland. (Crosscare Migrant Project, "Living in Ireland") Many songs came out of Ireland at that time filled with anguish and despair at the lack of food due to the ruined potato crops. Most of these folk songs have been passed on through oral tradition, such as "The White Potatoes." "Till the potatoes through the world died; That is the date and we'll long remember, For 'twill be talked of for many a day, For no disaster before was heard of Which took like that all our food away." ('Na Fataí Bána' , 'The White Potatoes') Some other well-known folk songs that came out of the famine were "The Potato Digger's Song" and "The Famine Song." Each of these songs adds a personal witness to the tragedy that took place and adds human perspective to the usual statistics that are given. Another important aspect of the famine was the forced emigration by so many of the Irish farmers, who were thrown out of their plots of land by the landlords because they could not pay them. One of the most famous eviction songs was 'Lough Sheelin,' which was about 700 or more people being thrown out of their homes into the cold. (Erick Falcher-Poyroux, "The Great Irish Famine in Songs") It says, "But our good dreams were too good to last The landlord came our home to blast And he no mercy on us did show As he turned us out in the blinding snow No one dare open for us their door Or else his vengeance would reach them sure." This song is yet another example of the hardships the people of Ireland faced during the Potato Famine. From songs about the lack of potatoes to eviction and emigration, the potato famine was described through Irish music.

Sources:

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