Journey into Tradition: A Social History of the Irish Button Accordion

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This work is dedicated

to my parents – John and Bríd O’Keeffe

to Patrick and Dónal

and to the memory of

Joseph Browne
Abstract

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This thesis examines how the button accordion, first patented in 1829 and available for sale in Ireland by 1831, became a member of the family of instruments on which Irish traditional music is played. It traces the accordion’s journey into tradition and the varied pathways taken along the way. The introduction of a new instrument into any tradition, its adoption and its journey to acceptance as an instrument on which that music can be performed, involves major change, both in the music and the instrument. Source materials ranging from extensive personal field work to social history texts and contemporary newspapers are employed to establish the paths travelled by the accordion into tradition. The processes involved in the adoption of any instrument new to a tradition and the conditions necessary for its acceptance are considered.

The thesis begins with a discussion of the methodologies used and this continues with an exploration of the historical and social contexts in pre-accordion Ireland – an era of dramatic social change. The introduction of the free-reed principle to Europe and its use in the invention of new instruments during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is examined and the arrival in Ireland of many of these innovative instruments, among them the accordion and concertina, is discussed. Musical contexts in Ireland, both before and after the accordion’s arrival, are outlined and demonstrate that a number of subcultures existed, with music and dancing being of immense importance to all the people of Ireland. The works of the great Irish collectors are drawn upon to establish the repertoire and instrumentation in use among traditional musicians before the Great Famine while that event’s devastating consequences for Irish traditional music is also considered.

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century the accordion had become a new voice in Irish traditional music and began to take on the accent of that music. This allowed for the evolution of an identifiable Irish style of accordion playing. The popularity of dancing continued into the twentieth century, although contexts and locations changed considerably. This study proposes that the strength and resilience of the existing tradition – and the resultant openness to new instruments – allied to the accordion’s ability to adapt to changing performance locations and its suitability as an instrument to provide music for dancing, were major factors in the successful assimilation of the instrument into Irish traditional music. Other significant factors included the arrival of new technology such as sound recording processes and radio. The varied musical contexts provided within families and the wider community were also crucial to the development of the accordion in Irish music.

The power of the individual as an instigator of musical change is recognized in this study and is analysed through a detailed investigation of the pivotal accordion players in the twentieth century. It is argued that these players, by their musical activities, moulded and shaped this product of the industrial revolution into an instrument on which Irish traditional music could validly be played and are central to the accordion’s journey into tradition.
Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by me, that it is my own work and that it has not been submitted by me for any other degree or professional qualification.

__________________________________ __________________

Máire Ni Chaoimh Date
Acknowledgements

This thesis has been a journey in itself with many stops and starts along the way. At times, it felt like a never-ending marathon, and it certainly could not have been completed without the help of many people in many different ways. I have been extremely fortunate in the number and calibre of people who, from the outset, were so willing to help and whom I could call on, at a moment’s notice.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, who believed in this journey from the very beginning and was most understanding of the many pathways the journey took along the way, even when they deviated from the pre-planned route. His suggestions of pathways which might be explored along the journey were incisive and perceptive, and were crucial to the shaping of this work. He always instilled confidence, particularly when I was not feeling very confident, and his vision and sense of enthusiasm for this study was inspiring and uplifting. His encouragement and belief in me has been unstinting and for this I am truly grateful.

A constant throughout this journey, from the earliest days of research, through all the stages of writing – and panicking – has been my close friend and mentor, Rionach Úi Ógáin. She read drafts, located hard to find books and articles, sourced references, advised on changes, talked through chapters and much, much more. I am deeply appreciative of her immeasurable support and friendship.

I was fortunate and privileged to join the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at a very exciting time in its history – the beginning of its ‘journey into tradition’. I was even more fortunate to have as my ‘co-joiners’ some incredibly talented and supportive people. They were always ready to lend a helping hand, give advice, source an article or make suggestions, especially Sandra Joyce, Niall Keegan and Desi Wilkinson. Thanks also to Paula Dundon, Ellen Byrne and Melissa Carthy, who have also been there throughout the journey.
I am sincerely grateful to Kari Veblen for her encouragement of this study in its early stages, and for her invaluable help in putting so many readings in my direction. I have vivid memories of her emptying her filing cabinet in her apartment in Madison, Wisconsin and taking all the files to the nearest photocopying centre. I came home that summer with a mountain of articles in lovely yellow files. Those articles opened up the world of ethnomusicology for me, and set me on a voyage of discovery, which is ongoing.

The early stages of any journey can be uncertain and I wish to acknowledge the support of Kerry Co. Council, who provided certainty in the form of post-graduate grant assistance which ensured that I could continue on the journey. A special word of thanks to Déaglán Ó hÓgáin for his help in the preparation of the initial grant application.

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Having access to library resources is also important in a study of this nature, and sincere thanks to Flo Heather and Patti Punch at University of Limerick library and Mai McGurk of IT services, for their assistance and guidance throughout the process. My sister-in-law, Una Kelly, a librarian, deserves special mention for always being ready to look up yet another book. I also wish to thank Nicholas Carolan, director of the Irish Traditional Music Archive, and his staff who are, at all times, helpful, knowledgeable and so obliging.
Of course, libraries are not the only place to find information needed. I have been privileged, during the course of this study, to have come into contact with people, whose heads contain an amazing amount of facts and data, which they generously shared with me. These include Charlie Harris, whose knowledge of all things accordion, and especially the 78rpm era, is truly phenomenal; Keith Chandler, who gave me access to his research from *Talking Machine News*, as well as copies of many articles he has written on the subject, and Stuart Eydmann, who tracked down dates and other information for me at the drop of an e-mail. Thanks also to Máire Bean Úi Ghriofa and her husband Paddy, as well as Nicky and Anne McAuliffe, who have always been so generous with their great music and Nicky, of course, for his endless knowledge of that music.

I am told that the final stages of a marathon are the toughest and reaching the final stages of this journey, I found myself wearying (only a little bit!). Along came Martin Ryan and Josephine Boland to steer me through the final stages. Heartfelt thanks to both – Martin for all the proof reading and great comments, Josephine for the eagle eye, for keeping me on the path and for putting me in touch with Bonnie Long. My sincere gratitude to Bonnie for her formatting skills and for being so accommodating and calm in the middle of the storm.

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Chapter 1
Journey into Tradition – An Introduction

My initial interest in undertaking a study on the accordion in Irish traditional music was inspired by a chance comment made by melodeon and accordion player, Bobby Gardiner, during an interview which I did with him while I presented The Long Note programme on Radio Éireann during the early 1990s. Bobby mentioned the two main systems being used in Irish traditional accordion music i.e. B and C and C#/D and, as a fiddle player, I was immediately intrigued since I hadn’t realised that such was the case. Bobby explained that there was also the issue of the single-row accordions known as melodeons. The fact that a number of systems were involved in playing the accordion raised some interesting questions, the most obvious being how did one decide which system to play and which system was most traditional? Did the system you chose mean that the style of music you would play on that instrument might well be already decided? As a fiddle player, I would have felt that the fiddle was a blank canvas when starting out and that one’s style was not determined by the four strings and the bow. However, it seemed to me that a style of playing the accordion could be pre-determined by the instrument one began playing on. This was brought home to me again later in an interview for this study with Sharon Shannon when she described her early days learning to play the accordion and her confusion when her accordion didn’t sound like those being played by the other students in the class:

There were these classes happening in Corofin and a fellow called Gus Tierney… he got a big load of accordions, all Hohners and he was getting all these B Cs but my one happened to be a C#/D and he was trying to teach me and he used to make all the kids play together… and the rest of them were playing B and C style like D E F on the outside row and he was trying to make me play B and C style as well on the C#/D but when I was playing with the others it was completely out of tune and he kept saying “It’ll come down don’t worry the pitch will come down. (S. Shannon, personal communication, 13 Feb 1998)

Neither Sharon nor her teacher, fiddle player Gus Tierney, realised, until much later, that there were two different systems in use for playing the two-row accordion. According to Sharon “but sure he didn’t know himself, he didn’t know what was wrong”. Eventually she got another accordion, a B and C Paolo Soprani which solved the problem. From those initial discoveries about the systems in use by late
twentieth century accordion players I became interested in other questions surrounding the accordion in Irish music. When was it invented and where? When did it first arrive in Ireland and in what form? Who played the instrument in its earliest days and how did they know how to play it? What kind of music was played on it? How was it played? What were the factors that led to the adoption of the instrument into Irish traditional music? How is it now regarded by players and listeners?

Another subject which had interested me for some time was the notion of how an instrument enters a tradition – what happens to the instrument when it arrives and indeed what happens to the tradition as a result of the arrival of a new instrument? This brings up the issue of how some instruments are accepted into a tradition while others are abandoned very early on. For an instrument that is ‘accepted’, at what point does it become a traditional instrument, if ever, or does it simply remain an instrument on which traditional music can be played? Is the accordion accepted in Irish traditional music and what are the factors which dictate acceptance? Reading Ó Riada’s *Our Musical Heritage*, the book of the 1962 Radio Éireann series, one would think not. Nevertheless, my experience of sessions with great accordion players during the 1980s and 1990s appeared to contradict O’Riada’s anti-accordion sentiments and raised further questions as to why he and a number of others might have been so opposed to these instruments. As the accordion is one of Irish music’s youngest instruments, having been patented in Vienna in 1829, it seemed logical to use the story of the accordion’s journey into the Irish music tradition to investigate and address some of the issues raised by the above questions.

The purpose of this thesis then is to examine how the button accordion came to be a member of the family of instruments on which Irish traditional music is played. Eydmann (1995b: 2) has noted that “any attempt to map and understand the processes involved in the adoption and use of a musical instrument requires an approach which recognises the breadth of the musical field and accommodates its complexities, interpenetrations and contradictions”. According to Eydmann, any such approach “should position the development and use of the musical instrument within their social contexts” Merriam (1964: 47) suggests that “music reflects the culture of which it is a part” while Nettl (1964: 215) believes that “the study of
instruments can – and should – be integrated with descriptions of musical culture and musical style at large”. Thus, in following the many paths taken by the accordion on its journey, the important part played by historical and social contexts and in particular, musical contexts, in the development of the accordion in Irish music will form a large part of this thesis. Evidence presented will also show that, contrary to the widely held belief that the instrument arrived sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, the accordion was actually available for sale in Ireland as early as 1831.

Although the instrument has been widely played in the tradition for many years, little has been published on its history within Irish music. Accordion player, Graeme Smith’s Ph. D. thesis *The Social Meaning of Irish Button Accordion Playing Styles, 1900-1975* (1992) along with Brian O’Shea’s *The Melodeon in Irish Traditional Music* (1996) seemed to be the total of what was available supplemented by a further article from Smith (1997). Faced with this reality, a wide variety of methods was employed in compiling research material for this study. Historical sources such as newspapers and contemporary literature as well as internet sources were drawn upon in an effort to ascertain when the accordion might first have come to Irish shores and also to establish its contextual functions. Newspapers and in particular, advertisements for music shops were searched for information which would help to identify when the accordion was adopted by traditional musicians. Social history texts were also helpful in establishing the historical and social contexts prevailing throughout the early days of the accordion’s existence in Ireland.

In this thesis, *Journey into Tradition: A Social History of the Irish Button Accordion*, a number of interviews with accordion players were conducted with a particular and urgent focus on interviewing the older members of this group. These provided the earliest available memories and inherited memories and allowed me to trace back as far as the late nineteenth century. Interviewees included Dan Smith, who was ninety three when I met him in 1996 and a contemporary of P. J. Conlon and the Flanagan brothers; Joe Derrane who was such a pivotal figure in the accordion music recorded on 78rpm and Jack Doyle who played the accordion for dances six and seven nights a week in Chicago during the late 1940s. All of the above had experience of playing the accordion in America in the first half of the twentieth
century and provided important insights into the tradition of the instrument among the Irish American community. Both Dan Smith and Jack Doyle had emigrated from Ireland and after many years had returned home. This offered further information on the differences between “old and new world contexts” (Moloney 1992: 6-7). Other older accordion players interviewed included Joe McNamara who was the accordion player on the first recording made by the Tulla Ceili Band, Denis O’Keeffe from Rathmore in Sliabh Luachra who played a single row Globe Gold Medal accordion which was brought to him from America in the 1930s and Kevin Doyle, a friend and contemporary of Joe Cooley, who grew up in a house in the South Galway region famous for music and dancing. Informants were also interviewed from among accordion players of the latter part of the twentieth century, both professional and amateur and well-known and not so well-known. These interviews along with others conducted with a number of younger players who came to the fore in the 1990s meant that information from three generations was gathered. Material from radio, television and recordings was also consulted as were accordion players Charlie Harris, Paul Brock and Larry Gavin with whom numerous informal conversations proved very enlightening. Musicians who did not play the accordion were also interviewed, very often in opportunistic circumstances i.e. they were there so I interviewed them. These included piano player Felix Dolan and fiddle players Andy McGann, Seamus Connolly and Joe Ryan whose views and insights on contexts were particularly useful.

As the introduction of a new instrument into any music, the subsequent adoption of it and the journey travelled by it, constitute a major change in that music, theories of musical change in ethnomusicological literature were examined with a view to understanding the various processes involved. Terms such as revitalisation, syncretism, transculturation and enculturation are among the many words used by ethnomusicologists to describe musical change within a tradition. Herndon (1987: 458) notes that “musical systems are constantly changing if they are live systems”. The process of acculturation as described by Merriam (1955, 1964), Nettl (1958, 1963) and Blacking (1977, 1995) became increasingly relevant as the study progressed. Literature relating to the accordion in other cultures was also referred to and confirmed the fact that the instrument had been marching into many other traditions worldwide from Cajun (Snyder 1995; De Witt 2001) to Tex Mex (Pena 1985), to Quebecois (Snyder 1995), to African-American music where the button
accordion was known as a windjammer (Snyder 1994). Stuart Eydmann’s Ph. D. thesis, *The Life and Times of the Concertina* (1995b) was also a very useful source as detailed information about the origins of the accordion was included, due to the fortuitous circumstance that it was patented in the same year as the Symphonion, the forerunner of Wheatstone’s concertina.

During the writing process and particularly when discussing music in the pre-Famine era, a dilemma presented itself in relation to the use of the term ‘folk’ or ‘traditional’ to describe the orally transmitted dance music played by rural communities of the nineteenth century and in so doing differentiate it from the western art music enjoyed by the ascendancy class. Moloney (2000: 7) when describing the “nature of Gaelic harping in Ireland” expressed a preference for using the term ‘folk’ to describe orally transmitted music, alluding to “the simultaneous existence in the periods under discussion of two kinds of traditional music: that of the folk tradition and that of an aristocratic ‘classical’ harping tradition”. Carolan (1990: 1) however, when discussing the publishing of Irish music in the eighteenth century, makes it clear that the term Irish music, as he uses it, “is confined to what we would now call ‘traditional Irish music’, whether of the folk, popular or aristocratic oral traditions, and as distinct from music produced by literate composers”. Vic and Sheila Gammon (2000: 124) writing about what they termed “vernacular singers and instrumentalists” of mid-nineteenth century England, decided “for economy and ease of reference” to describe “this formation of institutions, repertoires and performance style as the ‘plebeian musical tradition’” even though late Victorian and Edwardian collectors were using the terms folk songs and folk music. Séamus Ennis, when collecting for the Irish Folklore Commission is known to have differentiated between learned music and songs and those acquired traditionally and only collected material which was, as he termed it, “ceol dúchasach” (úi Ógáin 2007):

> Dúirt sé go minic le daoine gur ceol dúchasach a bhí uaidh agus rinne nóta de sa dialann dá mba rud é gur shíl sé gur as leabhar a tógadh na hamhráin. Níor scriobh sé rud ar bith ó dhúine amháin, mar shampla, mar gur shíl sé nach raibh aon rud le fail uaidh, faoi mar a dúirt sé: ‘Tada nach raibh i geló’. (úi Ógáin 2007: 30)

In his diaries written during collecting periods in the 1940s there are several instances where Ennis uses the term “ceol dúchasach”. During a visit to the Oireachtas singing
competitions held in Donegal he expressed surprise at what he considered the poor quality of the sean nós singing he heard during the competition and observed that the only singer he came across that night was a person who had a few songs that Ennis himself already had and those had not been acquired in a traditional manner:

\[
\text{Ní raibh m é in ann teacht ar aon duine de na hamhránaíthe san oíche ach duine nach raibh aige ach cúpla ceann a bhi agam agus ní raibh said go dúchasach aige.} \\
(\text{Ennis in ì Ógáin 2007: 101})
\]

On another occasion in *Na Forbacha* in Conamara when Ennis enquired about music in the area he remarked that he was told that the only music in the area was formally learned music and not native:

\[
\text{Chuir mé tuairisc cheoil ar. Dúirt sé liom nach raibh san áit sin ach ceol foghlamtha (nach dúchasach).} \text{ (Ennis in ì Ógáin 2007: 38)}
\]

Although the collectors of the nineteenth century, such as Petrie and Joyce, used the term ‘folk music’ in their publications of Irish music I wondered what musicians playing dance music in that period would have called it and came to the conclusion that as a good majority of them before the Famine were still Irish speakers and more than likely would not have encountered any other kind of music, they possibly would have just called it ‘ceol’ or perhaps ‘ceol dúchasach’ as Ennis did. Moreover, I don’t believe that people consciously thought about it too much as music seems to have had a very functional role in their lives. It was all around them and was particularly valued as dance music since dancing was such an important pastime. Therefore, having experimented with using terms like ‘folk music’ and ‘music of the lower classes’ or ‘rural communities’ and other such possibilities, the term ‘traditional music’ will be used when referring to the orally transmitted dance music and airs played mostly by rural dwellers in the nineteenth century although it should be noted that O’Neill (1913) was using ‘folk music’ and ‘traditional music’ as interchangeable terms when describing Irish music in his 1913 publication *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*.

Merriam (1960: 109) proposes that ethnomusicology should be defined as “the study of music in culture” and suggests that “our basic understanding of the music
of any people depends upon our understanding of that people’s culture, the place music plays in it, and the way in which its role is played”. Blacking (1995: 167), when discussing musical change concurs stating that “even if musical styles are selected for study, the social context in which musical change is being analysed must first be specified”. Accordingly, this introductory chapter is followed by a chapter which aims to set the scene and provide some brief background information on the historical and social contexts existing in Ireland during the early nineteenth century – the time of the birth of the accordion. The prosperity of the late eighteenth century will be contrasted with the growing poverty of the lower classes in early nineteenth century Irish society and the ever widening division between landlord and tenant will be explored. The political climate which included the 1798 rebellion and the granting of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 – the same year as the first patent of the accordion, will also be considered.

Chapter 3 will then examine the origins of the accordion and will outline the important developments taking place in the world of instrument making during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and in particular, instruments using the free reed principle. It will demonstrate that, far from being an overnight discovery, the accordion was the culmination of a series of inventions which had taken place for many years prior to 1829 when the accordion was first patented in Vienna. The chapter will also document the introduction of free reed instruments to Ireland and will suggest that of all the free reed instruments to arrive in Ireland during the early nineteenth century it was the accordion and its English cousin, the concertina, which were to have the most significant impact on the history of Irish traditional music. Based on the price of these instruments, I believe that the contexts in which the accordion and concertina were adopted during their initial years in Ireland were quite similar. Nonetheless, while contemporary newspapers offer much information with regard to the availability of these instruments – mainly through advertisements in music shops – the concertina received much more coverage than the accordion with regard to contexts where the instruments were played. Consequently, a brief overview of the concertina’s initial years in Ireland will be undertaken as this will help to provide an insight into the early years of the accordion in Ireland. It will be proposed that, even though there is no concrete evidence available that the accordion was used in concert performances
in the same manner as the concertina, there is the strong possibility that, in its initial years in Ireland, the instrument was the preserve of the wealthier classes and was therefore used in the drawing rooms of the nobility and gentry.

The next two chapters will focus on music in Ireland at the time of the accordion’s introduction and will argue that the pre-existence of a vibrant traditional music community was all important in ensuring that the accordion prospered as it did when it eventually joined that community. Chapters 4 and 5 therefore, will examine at length the various musical traditions in existence in pre-accordion Ireland. A general discussion of music in Ireland in Chapter 4 will show the importance of music to all the people of Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It will outline how two traditions, “the colony” and “the colonised” as described by Carolan (1990: 4), existed on the island during the period under discussion. One group, the Anglo Irish ascendancy class, was influenced by music from England and Europe and the second group, who were mostly rural dwellers, consisted of those involved in traditional music, although a number of musicians from the ‘colonised’, many of whom were professional pipers and harpers, managed to mix with both groups. Music during this period was also seen as a positive element in life and there was a concerted effort to introduce certain types of music, namely choir singing and temperance bands, to the lower classes in the belief that it would improve their minds and morals and also their health. Chapter 4 concludes with an examination of the musical practices of the countryside where traditional music was a significant part of the fabric of rural everyday life. Evidence from many contemporary travel writers presents a picture of a people for whom dancing was a favourite pastime, with the visit of a dancing master to an area eagerly anticipated. The extent of collecting during this period provides further evidence that traditional music was plentiful and the publications produced by such collectors as Bunting and Petrie are important sources for gaining an insight into the traditional music of the time, although a number of reservations with regard to the correctness of these publications are also discussed. Chapter 5 addresses the issue of the nineteenth century ‘folk’ musician and the work of the “Great Collectors” (Breathnach 1971) is drawn on to establish musical contexts as well as instrumentation and repertoire with the writings of Petrie, Joyce, and later, Goodman and O’Neill being particularly useful. The catastrophic events of the Great Famine and their effects on the traditional music community of the time will also be discussed in Chapter 5.
and it will become evident that traditional music was undergoing many great changes in the period before the accordion entered the tradition.

O’Neill (1913: 153) wrote about “the demoralising influence of the famine years” on Irish music and included many examples of musicians who were forced to emigrate. Nevertheless, while the decades after the Famine were undoubtedly testing times for traditional music, it will be argued in Chapter 6 that the latter half of the nineteenth century was one of the most important periods in the history of the music as it was during that time that the instrumentation of the music was changed significantly with the addition of the free reed instruments. Newspapers from the nineteenth century are central to research in this area and evidence based on advertisements for concerts and music shops of the time will be presented to show that, rather than making a grand entrance, the accordion slipped almost unnoticed into the body of instruments on which traditional music is performed. It will be demonstrated that a combination of factors such as a decline in the number of pipers, the growing popularity of set dancing, bettering social conditions in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the availability of lower priced instruments, all played their part in facilitating the adoption of the accordion which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had travelled from the status of a middle class instrument to that of a new voice in Irish traditional music.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the accordion, or melodeon as it was more widely known among the traditional music community, was spreading to all corners of the world and setting down firm roots wherever it journeyed. In all the geographical areas where it penetrated, it very quickly became part of the local tradition and in a short while had taken on the accent of the local music. In Chapter 7, the process of how an instrument, new to a tradition, takes on the accent of that tradition will be examined in the context of a number of other cultures where the accordion very quickly became part of the local music. Factors, which helped that process in Ireland, will also be assessed. The historical and social contexts existing in Ireland in the early part of the twentieth century will be examined and will show that it was a time of great change. A feature of the early decades of the century was the introduction of new technology from the spread of the phonograph and gramophone to the emergence of the radio and the beginning of the recording of Irish music. These
landmarks of modernisation will be discussed at length as they all had a significant impact on Irish traditional music, changing forever the way repertoire was acquired and how music was played. They were also important contexts for the advancement of the accordion in Irish music as the instrument was very much involved during the early years of both recording and broadcasting in Ireland. Consequently, the effects of these new technologies on the acceleration of the accordion’s journey into tradition will be considered.

Chapter 8 explores how the accordion, having taken on the accent of Irish music, then perfects that accent to such an extent that, according to fiddle player, Andy McGann, it was one of the most popular Irish instruments in New York where he recalled it being known as “the Irish accordion” (A. McGann, personal communication 9 Nov 1996). In seeking to understand how an identifiable Irish style of accordion playing was developed, the elements that constitute style are explored. McCullough (1977) along with Ó Súilleabháin (1990), Doherty (1996), Dromey (1999), Cranitch (1999) and ui Ógáin (2002) are drawn upon in the quest for a definition of style, and their views regarding style in traditional music are discussed. It will be suggested that, while there is the possibility that the earliest players of traditional music on the accordion could have used tutors for the instrument in learning how to play, it is more likely that many of these early players came to the accordion having already acquired the elements of an Irish style, either because they played another instrument or because they had absorbed it from their musical environments where singing and dancing were an important part of everyday life. Once they had worked out the logistics of playing the instrument they simply transferred the music they were so familiar with onto the accordion. With this in mind, the social environment of the accordion player will be explored and the contexts and musical pathways which shaped the direction of the accordion in its journey into tradition will be considered. Three main contexts which provide the conditions for the establishment of an Irish style of playing the accordion will be identified and the role of family, neighbours and visitors as well as the wider community will be examined.

One of the most important functions of traditional music in the early days of the accordion’s entrance into the Irish tradition was to provide music for dance, and it
will be argued that this area, above any other, was of paramount importance in developing a style of playing the accordion in an Irish way. Therefore, an outline of the varied and numerous contexts for dancing will be given and through this it will be demonstrated that many developments in the accordion such as changes in shape, size and timbre, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, were linked to changes in performance locations which involved dancing and which brought about changes in the functions of the instrument. In the aftermath of the 1935 Public Dance Halls Act, for example, the accordion really came into its own in the transition from crossroads and country house dances to the newly constructed parochial halls, mainly because of the body of sound it could produce and the need for greater volume in these new contexts. It will also be shown that other changes in the accordion – such as the development of larger and more powerful instruments – came about due to the demands placed on the instrument by the crowded dance halls frequented by the immigrant population in England and America. The establishment of céilí bands provided further performance contexts for the accordion involving almost all areas of traditional music activity such as early disc recordings and radio broadcasts as well as céilí band competitions at Fleadhanna Cheoil. The origins of céilí bands and the accordion’s place in them are discussed as are some of the oppositions to the concept of the céilí band.

Despite the popularity of the accordion among musicians and dancers, the instrument, from its earliest days, was subject to disapproval and criticism from many different quarters all over the world. Chapter 9 begins with a look at some of these criticisms and the reasons behind them. Examples are given of extreme reactions to the instrument in such traditions as Cajun (De Witt 2001), Breton (Perroches 2001), and Scottish music (Eydmann 1999) as well as the Cibao music of the Dominican Republic (Snyder 2001). In Ireland opposition to the instrument took a number of forms and the anti-accordion viewpoints expressed by such commentators as O’Neill (1913), Ó Riada (1982) and De Noradh (1965) are taken into account, while the reaction of one accordion player to the negative comments is also discussed. The main focus of Chapter 9 however, is the importance of the role of the individual musician in shaping and directing an instrument’s journey into tradition. As research for this study progressed, it became evident that the individual’s importance as an instigator of musical change and a director of
musical development was central to the story of the evolution of button accordion playing styles in Irish music. The sound history of the accordion in Irish traditional music, from the earliest recordings at the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day, will show that all along the journey there were exceptional individuals who, by their musical actions and choices, advanced the accordion to another stage on that journey. These main movers, through their innovation and creativity, established the accordion on the Irish traditional music map. Eydmann (1995b: 4) in his research into the life and times of the concertina in Scotland was concerned that his study “should recognise the role of the individual musician in musical culture, particularly in relation to change and innovation”. Similar concerns, as expressed by Bohlman (1988), Myers (1993), Quigley (1995) and Nettl (1983), will be alluded to in a general discussion on the role of the individual musician in musical change. The theories of Slobin (1993), Merriam (1964) and Blacking (1995) on the issue will also be referred to. This will be followed by a section in which the main movers in the world of the button accordion in Irish music during the first half of the twentieth century will be identified and introduced to the reader. The earliest recorded sound of the accordion will be established and the early accordion players who recorded in America as well as those who were part of the early days of recording in Ireland will be discussed.

Chapter 10 will explore the major developments which took place in the second half of the twentieth century when the full potential of the accordion was realised and exploited and the instrument reached new heights of popularity despite some spirited controversy. The arrival of two-row accordions during the early decades of the century had provided players with extra notes not found on the ten-key melodeon and allowed them to play in keys other than the home row. This “extended melodeon style” (Smith 1997: 437) while giving the musician the opportunity to play an expanded repertoire, still had pitch difficulties relating to the standard pitches of D and G resulting in the need for accompanying instruments such as fiddle to be tuned up or down depending on the tunings available on different accordions. The emergence of the B and C system in the 1930s and its subsequent dominance of accordion playing styles during the 1950s and 1960s revolutionised the position of the accordion in Irish music and is central
to the development of the instrument in the second half of the twentieth century. Pitch problems which had beset earlier two-row models were resolved by the use of cross fingering, which also changed the articulation required in the bellows, resulting in more legato style playing known as ‘playing on the draw’. A challenge to the dominance of the B and C instrument emerged in the 1970s and the effects of this on the sound, shape and styles of playing the accordion for the ensuing decades of Irish accordion music will be explored. As in Chapter 9, it will be demonstrated that key individuals along the way influenced the very significant changes happening at the time and these individuals’ contributions to the story of the accordion in Irish traditional music will be outlined and discussed. The founding of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 1951 and the establishment of their festivals of music and song known as *Fleadhanna Cheoil* coincided with many of the major changes taking place in the world of the accordion at this time and provided a number of new performance contexts. The competitions at these events and their role in validating particular styles of playing will be examined. It will be argued that the B and C system was the style expected and accepted in accordion competitions from the earliest days of the *Fleadh Cheoil*. Chapter 11 will discuss the findings of the thesis and will examine whether the accordion is accepted or not in Irish traditional music. It will also suggest possibilities for further study.
Chapter 2
On the Eve of Emancipation – Ireland Pre-Accordion

In the year ’29, I remember well the time,
The immortal O’Connell like a dawn,
The emancipation gained, and the clergy freed from chains,
But old Ireland’s liberator he is gone, boys gone
May his soul rest in heaven – he is gone.

(uí Ógain 1995: 78)

In 1829 Daniel O’Connell achieved Catholic Emancipation for the people of Ireland and in that same year Austrian instrument maker, Cyrill Demian, patented the accordion in Paris – two disparate events which were to shape the future of distinct elements of Irish life in the years to come. By the mid-nineteenth century references to the accordion being sold in music shops in Dublin were common in contemporary newspapers. By this time, Daniel O’Connell and Cyrill Demian were dead, both having died in 1847. Ireland had also changed dramatically as a result of the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century.

The subject of this thesis is the entry of the accordion into Irish music and its journey and developments therein. Based largely on historical developments as they pertain to the accordion, the thesis also explores the idea of the acceptance of an external instrument into an existing tradition and the effects of changes in the instrument as a result of the process of acceptance. It will also examine the changes which occur within the tradition to allow for acceptance. While the focus of the thesis is the emergence and evolution of this new voice within the Irish tradition, it is necessary to provide some brief background information to establish Irish historical and social contexts prevalent during the early nineteenth century – the time of the birth of the accordion – and to paint a picture of the Ireland in which the accordion found itself by the early decades of that century.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Act of Union was passed heralding an end to the “halcyon days of the late eighteenth century” (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 1). This chapter will sketch the characteristics of that period as well as give an outline of the social and political considerations of the time.
2.1 ‘All There is Gaiety and Pleasure’
– Prosperity in Pre-Nineteenth Century Ireland

The latter half of the eighteenth century in Ireland is widely considered to have been a prosperous time with great progress made in all aspects of Irish life. Between the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and the rebellion of 1798, Ireland benefited from a hundred years of peace, stability and prosperity (Lalor 2003) which allowed for development in the economy. During the reign of King George III (1760 – 1820), Ireland witnessed unparalleled expansion in all areas:

Certainly the relative prosperity of the late eighteenth century may fairly be described as an expanding era for Ireland. Throughout the period there was a continuing increase (allowing for short term slumps) in output from both industry and agriculture. Population expansion in Britain, as well as at home, made for an expanding market for both food stuffs and manufactured goods, and trade (overseas and internal) enjoyed a lengthy period of buoyancy. (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 2)

This marked rise in the British population from the mid-eighteenth century was linked to the Industrial Revolution and resulted in an increased demand for food. Lyons (1973) suggests that this had a revolutionary effect on Irish agriculture resulting in many changes in practice. A growing emphasis on tillage was encouraged by steadily rising prices. Increased production of grain, butter, beef and pork found ready and convenient markets in the export trade to Britain. In fact, this growth of foreign trade was considered one of the success stories of life in Ireland during the latter half of the eighteenth century (Foster 1992). This period also witnessed a growth in industrial activity, much of it being concentrated in the North East. The Irish linen industry, which emerged as a significant trade when the woollen industry collapsed in the early eighteenth century, benefited from a duty-free access to British markets and, by 1788, linen accounted for over 70 percent of all exports. Other industries of the time included decorative plasterwork, furniture production, glass manufacturing, sugar refining, silk and brewing. Many of these industries operated with the help of protective tariffs established during the last decades of the eighteenth century (Ó Tuathaigh 1990; Foster 1992).

The city of Dublin was a central hub for trade expansion and was considered one of the most impressive capitals in Europe. Writing in the 1770s, Arthur Young (1780: 231) noted that “all there is gaiety pleasure, luxury and extravagance.”
During this period many cities acquired their grid plans as well as major public buildings and nowhere was this more evident than in the nation’s capital city (Lalor 2003; Foster 1989). Dublin was also the seat of the Irish Parliament from 1782 to 1800. Henry Grattan had successfully campaigned for legislative independence in the early 1780s and this, combined with a growing confidence in the commercial successes of the time, inspired buildings in Dublin such as the Custom House, the Rotunda and the Four Courts as well as numerous Georgian residences built by the gentry. Lord Cloncurry, a wealthy landowner of the time, noted that:

Dublin in 1797 was, perhaps, one of the most agreeable places of residence in Europe. There were no conveniences belonging to a capital, in those days, which it did not possess. Society in the upper classes was as brilliant and polished as that of Paris in its best days, while social intercourse was conducted with a conviviality that could not be equalled in France, and which, though not always strictly in accordance with modern notions of temperance, seldom degenerated into coarseness. All persons of a certain condition were acquainted with each other, and were in the habit of meeting together in social circles both private and public. (Cloncurry 1849: 216)

The latter half of the eighteenth century was also characterised by the enhanced appearance of many towns and their surrounding countryside (Foster 1992). Improved transport facilities such as the turnpike roads leading out of Dublin, as well as impressive inland waterways, led to increased prosperity in market towns while buildings such as flour mills and distilleries were further evidence of expansion (Foster 1989). The port towns of Limerick and Waterford enjoyed substantial success and Arthur Young described Cork in the 1770s as “the most animated, busy scene of shipping in all Ireland” (Young in Morley 2008: 58). However, it should be understood that while communications improved throughout the country, the length of time taken to complete a journey was still quite substantial as illustrated in The Ennis Chronicle and The Clare Journal which “announced in 1789 that there was a coach service from Dublin to Ballinasloe three times every week and that the journey only took thirty two hours!” (Sheedy 1990: 39). The arrival of Charles Bianconi (1786 – 1875) to Ireland in 1802 had a major effect on the public transportation system throughout the island in pre-Famine times, particularly in the south of the country. Bianconi identified the need for a fast, efficient and cheap coach service based on regular timetables and in 1815 opened his first route between Clonmel and Cahir. This service grew rapidly and by the mid 1840s his coach services covered most of the southern half
of the country (Ó Tuathaigh 1990). By the mid 1830s, railways were beginning to be established. Bianconi, showing great business acumen, aligned himself to the railways and provided coaches which linked with the rail services. Visitors to Ireland regularly remarked on the transportation system in Ireland. On the eve of the Great Famine, Samuel Carter and Anne Marie Hall, who travelled extensively throughout Ireland in 1840, were to comment:

Machines for travelling in Ireland are, some of them at least, peculiar to the country. The stage coaches are precisely similar to those in England, and travel at as rapid a rate. They, of course, run upon all the great roads, and are constructed with due regard to safety and convenience. The public cars of M. Bianconi have, however, to a large extent, displaced the regular coaches, and are to be encountered in every district in the south of Ireland. In form they resemble the common outside jaunting-car, but are calculated to hold twelve, fourteen, or sixteen persons; they are well horsed, and have cautious and experienced drivers, are generally driven with three horses, and usually travel at the rate of three Irish miles an hour; the fares averaging about twopence per mile. They are open cars; but a huge apron of leather affords considerable protection against rain; and they may be described as, in all respects, very comfortable and convenient vehicles. (Hall in Carty 1966b: 4)

2.2 ‘The Big House’– The Irish Landlord and his Tenants

The Georgian period (1714–1830) could be described as a golden age for Irish landlords and the wealth of the period was reflected in the ‘Big House’. Across Ireland large country houses were constructed by landlords, the majority of whom were of English descent “having come into possession of their estates through confiscation” (Murphy in Lalor 2003: 92). Traditionally, the owners of these estates retained a few hundred acres for ornamental and practical purposes but leased the rest of their land to tenants. Rents provided the landlord with an income with which to support his family and run the Big House (Pakenham 2001). Most landlords were absenteees who lived in England and hired agents to manage their estates. Other landowners leased part of their land for a fixed rent to middlemen, many of whom were descendants of dispossessed Catholic landowners:

For a modest sum lazy or absent landlords could save themselves the fatigue of rent collection from a host of semi-insolvent small tenants by letting to a middleman, who let out land for a higher rent to undertenants, who might, in turn, lease out potato plots to the poorest class of all. (Pakenham 2001: 136)
The rents charged were high and middlemen were prepared to enforce eviction if rents were not paid (Jones in Lalor 2003: 722). In cases where landlords were resident in Ireland, they were central to the lives of the surrounding rural community. They often owned the village nearby and were the main providers of employment in the district:

The Big House itself employed servants and estate workers, its needs gave work to the local artisans (blacksmith, stonemason, etc.), and it was not unusual for the landlord to own the local grain-mill. Obviously enormous power rested with such men. (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 146)

The plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ensured that landownership in Ireland was restricted to a privileged minority. Practical realities, however, meant the land was managed by a combination of middlemen, farmers, labourers and cottiers. Each class, while living on the same estate, experienced very different levels of existence as noted by American evangelical, Asenath Nicholson. Her writings from before the Great Famine describe travelling on a coach and “passing the domains of the rich, whose high walls and wide-spreading lawns made a striking contrast with the thatched hovels and muddy door-yards of the wretched poor around them” (Nicholson 1847: 202).

Life in the ‘Big House’ was characterised by endless rounds of parties and social engagements as well as shooting, hunting and fishing (Pakenham 2001; Ó Tuathaigh 1990). Many of the ladies of the house were involved in local committees and various charity works while also paying heed to the fashions of the day, taking part in picnics and appearing at the annual whirl of soirees in Dublin. The large group of servants employed by the landowner met all of the households needs and typically included a housekeeper, pantry boy, dairymaid, light housemaid, a cook, coachman, and a gardener (Herbert in Pakenham 2001: 110-11). In contrast to the sumptuous lifestyle of the ‘Big House’, the labourer and cottier experienced a very different existence in which extreme poverty was the norm. Many of them lived in one roomed mud cabins with no windows or chimney. Their diet consisted of potatoes and, in good times, some buttermilk while the clothes they wore were often little more than rags. Between landlord and cottier were various levels of tenant farmers and small farmers. Many of the richer tenant farmers enjoyed a comfortable standard of living – unlike a large number of
the poorer small farmers most of whom, especially in the west of Ireland, were not much better off than the cottiers and labourers (Ó Tuathaigh 1990).

There are, however, examples of estates being managed very capably with fair treatment and responsibility being shown to all tenants. The Edgeworth estate in Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford was one example of this. Richard Lowell Edgeworth lived in England until 1782 when he returned to Ireland with his family to find his estate nearly in ruins due to mismanagement. He quickly set about remedying the situation and his efforts on behalf of his tenants were described in his memoirs in an account written by his daughter, the novelist Maria Edgeworth:

The exertions he made from the time he settled at Edgeworth-Town in 1782, in building comfortable dwellings for some, and in assisting others to build the same for themselves… the reasonable rent and tenure at which he let his land – the unusual time which he allowed his tenants to make their rent – his freeing them from duty work – his avoiding as much as possible, in his leases, oppressive or restrictive clauses – his respecting the tenant’s right, wherever tenants had improved – his encouraging them by the certainty of justice and kindness… succeeded altogether beyond his most sanguine hopes, in meliorating the condition of the people… The whole face of his estate, strikingly improved not only in appearance, but in reality. The poorest class of his tenants, who in former times lived in smoke and dirt, in too pitiable condition for description, have now to most of their cabins chimneys and windows, comfortable thatch, and good earthen floors. (Edgeworth in Pakenham 2001: 140-141)

Other landlords who sought to improve the lot of their tenants by building villages and improving existing properties included Lord Kingston in Co. Limerick, the Tighe family in Rosanna, Co. Wicklow and Lord Kenmare in Co. Kerry who, writing in 1750, blamed the middlemen for the less than tolerable condition of the tenants:

This is in a great measure owing to the pride, drunkenness and sloth of the middling sort among the Irish. Every one of them thinks himself too great for any industry except taking farms. When they happen to get them they screw enormous rents from some beggarly dairymen and spend their whole time in the alehouses of the next village. (Lord Kenmare in Pakenham 2001: 139)

While the above depicts progressive landlordism, the majority of landowners in Ireland in pre-Famine times were often ignorant of the appalling situations in which many of their tenants found themselves and even when they were aware, turned a blind eye and charged their agents or middlemen with the collection of rent whether it be payable or not. The archetypal Irish landlord therefore, was one
who was constantly “bleeding his tenants of rent while recognising no responsibility to them” (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 146). These actions were to have serious repercussions in the first half of the following century.

2.3 ‘Storm Clouds of Distress’ – Population, Potato and Poverty

Although there was general prosperity in the second half of the eighteenth century, by the close of the century, certain social sectors were beginning to show distress (Ó Tuathaigh 1990). From the mid 1700s on, one of the most pressing concerns was the rapid rise in population especially among the small farmers, labourers and cottiers. It is difficult, however, to be sure of exact numbers for this period as most figures were based on estimates and not on actual statistics, which were largely unavailable at that time (McDowell 1994). Those that were available are considered to be unreliable (Lyons 1973). The figures cited here are based on Foster (1989), Ó Tuathaigh (1990), and McDowell (1994) and suggest that Ireland went from a population of two and a half million in 1767 to over four million by 1781, reaching nearly five million by the turn of the century.

It is generally agreed that there were many factors, rather than one specific reason, which led to the almost doubling of population (McDowell 1994). Most commentators, however, suggest that the rise of the potato was one of the principal causes although, O Gráda (1989: 16) asks the question “did the potato cause Ireland’s population explosion, or vice versa?” Certainly the potato came into its own in the second half of the eighteenth century when the expanding economy of that period led to the increased cultivation of the crop. Improvement of farming practices – especially land reclamation – became a priority for many landowners. Growing potatoes was found to be particularly valuable in the reclamation of previously unsettled and poor land as it was effective in the cleansing and restoration of the soil (Lyons 1973, Ó Scannláin 1999). Potato cultivation resulted in the spread of population to previously unsettled, mountainous and bogland areas where, well manured, “the potato flourished in these seemingly unfavourable conditions” (Sexton in Lalor 2003: 889). Scottish engineer, Alexander Nimmo, who was appointed in 1814 to investigate the possibilities of drainage and cultivation in the bogs of Connemara, reported how ‘cottagers’ on the lands of a member of the
O’Flaherty family from Renvyle were re-settled on the bog which “they reclaimed with potatoes and seaweed, treating it afterwards with the sand of the shore, which contains calcareous matter, the effect has been very great” (Nimmo in Ní Scannláin 1999: 29). In this manner some 1000 acres of land were reclaimed in an area that Nimmo considered “one of the most uncultivated parts of Ireland”. For landowners this was a boon, as Lyons (1973) indicates:

…not only would landlords be assured of a cheap supply of labour for the cultivation of their crops, but it might actually pay them to permit, or even encourage, the multiplication of small holdings (either by the reclamation of new land or by the subdivision of existing farms) on which the life sustaining potato could be grown. It might pay them because the potato, being economical as well as nutritious, would not only support a tenantry numerous enough to provide an adequate labour force, but would release for profitable cash-crops land that might otherwise have been needed for subsistence. (Lyons 1973: 20)

The fact that the potato was ‘economic and nutritious’ was a major factor in the change of attitude to marriage among the poorer small farmers, cottiers and labourers. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, later marriages were the norm because of land inheritance issues. The climate of the late eighteenth century, however, was somewhat different and “given a scrap of land the Irish peasant could throw up a cabin to shelter his family and grow the potatoes which formed their staple diet” (McDowell 1994: 5). Early marriages led to a rising birth rate, which contributed to the rapid growth in population, particularly among the poorer sectors of society. As Lee (1989: 4) explains, “labourers and cottiers married earlier than small farmers, who in turn married earlier than larger farmers”. A lowering of the death rate in the late eighteenth century has also been suggested as a factor in the rising population of that period. Ó Tuathaigh (1990: 6) observes that this has been linked to a decrease in “some of the killer diseases” as well as to the high nutritional status of the potato, although he does point out that “rapid population increase was a phenomenon throughout much of Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century”.

One of the direct consequences of the overall disproportionate rise in population and over-dependence on the potato was the deepening of one of the greatest social problems of the time, the issue of poverty. By the opening years of the nineteenth century the decline in the living standards of an ever-increasing section of the Irish
population had reached disastrous levels with accounts from visitors of the time portraying a picture of a destitute people who were experiencing great distress decades prior to the Great Famine and with little or no assistance available to them:

But one dreadful, ever living truth, like a spectre haunts the traveller at every step; that Ireland’s poor, above all others, are the most miserable, the most forgotten, and the most patient of all beings. (Nicholson 1847: 203)

The effect of this poverty on the condition and structure of rural society was profound and was compounded by the interrelated problems of over-population and increased dependence on the potato as the sole food of the lower classes. Poverty was not restricted to rural areas. The poverty in some of the overcrowded districts of Dublin was overwhelming. Large areas of the Liberties, for example, were crowded with unemployed people living in squalid slum conditions. This was replicated in many other large towns throughout Ireland in the early years of the nineteenth century. The brunt of the poverty, however, was felt in country areas as, by 1841, four-fifths of the population of Ireland were “rural dwellers” (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 146), with the census of that year indicating that some seventy percent of that population were “either landless or dependent on inadequate holdings of less than five acres and that while the percentage was much below this figure in some of the eastern counties it was as high as eighty five in Mayo” (Lyons 1973: 38) with the result that:

On the eve of the Famine the poverty of Irish smallholding and labouring families, a rising share of total population, was legendary. The poor were wretchedly housed – two-thirds of the entire population huddled into sparsely furnished, tiny mud cottages or their urban equivalents – and poorly clothed, and often hungry for two or three months of every year. (O Gráda 1989: 23)

A number of commissions were set up throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century to investigate the problem of the Irish poor. The Commission of 1833 recommended a series of measures, aimed at reactivating the Irish economy after the Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815). The Commission rejected the workhouse system, already in operation in England, as it felt it would not be a cost effective method for dealing with the almost two and a half million people who were in distress for much of each year. In its place it proposed an ambitious plan for relief which included an assisted emigration programme as well as substantial public
works (Ó Tuathaigh 1990, McDowell 1994). Instead of following this far-reaching proposal, hasty government deliberations led to the establishment of workhouses in Ireland, and, in 1838, the English Poor Law of 1834 was extended to Ireland (Lyons 1973; Gray 1995; Ní Scannláin 1999). This act provided for the division of the country into unions and for the construction of workhouses based on the English system. There were initial reservations that the rural poor would not seek relief in the workhouses as availing of such relief generally meant surrendering one’s plot of land (Lyons 1973). However, this was not the case as:

In 1841 there were thirty-seven workhouses in operation and during that year over 30,000 people sought relief within their doors. By 1846 all 130 unions were operating and on the closing day of that year there were 94,437 people lodged in the workhouses. (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 114)

2.4 ‘The Wearin’ of the Green’ – Rebellion and Emancipation

The final decade of the eighteenth century was a time in which the groundwork for modern Irish nationalism was laid, having been “set in motion by Wolfe Tone, the United Irishmen and the Rising of 1798” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1998: 59). In addition, this decade saw the formation in 1795, of the Orange Society, a group “destined to play a significant role in the subsequent history of Ireland” (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 7). It was also the time of the rise to fame of the Liberator, Daniel O’Connell, who, having witnessed the violence of the French revolution at first hand in 1793, believed in peaceful agitation to achieve rights on behalf of the Catholic population. (uí Ógain 1995). While Ireland had its own parliament since 1782, over two-thirds of the people of the country were not represented. Omitted groups included the Catholics, Presbyterians and other Dissenters. These groups were required to financially support the Church of Ireland through the payment of tithes. Payment led to deep resentment and was one of the primary causes of pre-Famine emigration, especially from the northern counties. In 1791, influenced by the ideas of the French and American revolutions, Theobald Wolfe Tone wrote a pamphlet entitled ‘An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland’. In this he encouraged reform, both parliamentary and social, which he felt could be achieved by the joint efforts of Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters. Accordingly, the Society of the United Irishmen was founded in October of that year in Belfast with a Dublin branch following a month later in November 1791. Initially the United Irishmen campaigned for political and economic
reform but their struggle for change caused alarm in administrative circles and they were banned in 1794. This coupled with “the recall of Lord Fitzwilliam and the re-assumption of coercive measures that followed it” (O’Connor, Emmet, MacNeven in Carty 1966b: 72) paved the way for rebellion. The United Irishmen restructured, becoming a secret underground organisation, and they considered the possibility of an uprising. Through Wolfe Tone’s contacts they enlisted the support of the French. Tone encouraged the French to invade Ireland and in 1796 with Tone on board, a French fleet led by General Hoche, attempted to land at Bantry Bay. A combination of poor weather and even poorer sailing skills prevented the fleet from landing and they returned to France. Tone, in his journal, described nearing Bantry Bay aware that the renowned Hoche was on a missing frigate:

December 22nd. This morning, at eight, we have neared Bantry Bay considerably, but the fleet is terribly scattered; no news of the Fraternite. I believe it is the first instance of an admiral in a clean frigate, with moderate weather, and moonlight night, parting company with his fleet. Captain Grammont, our first lieutenant, told me his opinion is that she is either taken or lost, and, in either event, it is a terrible blow to us all. (Tone in Carty 1966b: 78)

Tone unwillingly returned to France declaring that “England has not had such an escape since the Spanish Armada” (Tone in Carty 1966b: 82). In May 1798, without French assistance, the leaders of the United Irishmen initiated a rebellion. All over Ireland tension filled the air as the various battles took place. Dublin was also the scene of much terror and suspense. The wearing of the colour green was looked upon as suspicious by the authorities who saw it as a sign of support for the United Irishmen. One account recorded by historian W. J. Fitzpatrick from a Mrs O’Byrne, when she was over a hundred years old, highlights the atmosphere of the time. On her way to make some purchases at a market in Thomas Street, Dublin, Mrs O’Byrne decided to wear her green bonnet of the previous season. Unaware of the implications of wearing the colour green, she became concerned on finding herself the object of a great deal of attention. While walking on narrow streets she was further surprised to hear voices whispering ‘God bless your colour m’am!’ but on reaching the main streets she became alarmed as the streets were full with soldiers and a number of people “regarded her bonnet with so fierce a glare that she thought they had a notion of plucking it from her head” (Fitzpatrick in Carty 1966b: 77). On arriving safely at her home she discovered her household had been worried about her as they had heard that:
...several females during the tumult of the day had been rudely insulted, and roughly treated, for wearing ribbons or garments of green hue, one most respectable lady having had a gown of the obnoxious colour sliced from her body by the sabre of a loyal trooper. (Fitzpatrick in Carty 1966b: 78)

Without French assistance, the rising collapsed after a few weeks but not before the death of thousands including the leaders Tone and Fitzgerald. A direct consequence of the failed 1798 rebellion was the passing in 1800 of the Act of Union. This came into force in 1801 and resulted in the Irish parliament being removed to London. This meant that MPs were now based in London and, with many landlords leaving, life in Dublin became quite altered:

As for the civic culture of the Georgian Ascendancy, it declined along with the decay of Dublin – generally represented by early nineteenth-century observers and novelists as an echoing shell, full of grand but redundant buildings. The House of Parliament became and remained the Bank of Ireland. (Foster 1992: 154)

However despite the failure of the 1798 rebellion, agitation for better circumstances for Catholics continued under the direction of Daniel O’Connell. Vehemently opposed to violent methods, “he utterly disapproved of the United Irishmen and indeed informed the government authorities of a possible French invasion in Bantry Bay in 1796” (McMahon 2000: 15). He formed the Catholic Association suggesting that it be open to anyone who could pay one penny a month. This was known as Catholic Rent and resulted in the creation of one of the largest mass political organisations in Europe (Owens in Lalor 2003). O’Connell travelled all over Ireland organising monster meetings and Catholic Emancipation was finally granted in 1829. In that same year Cyrill Demian of Vienna patented the accordion.
Chapter 3
Enter the Accordion – Early Days and Beginnings

On the 6th of May 1829, Cyrill Demian, a piano and organ maker in Vienna, applied for a patent for a new instrument called the accordion (Wagner 1995; Chambers 2004). This new instrument, whose name comes from Akkord, the German name for the major triad chord produced when the press notes are sounded together (Smith 1992; Chambers 2004), was based on the principle of the ancient free reed and while it was the first time that the accordion was mentioned in a patent, the groundwork for the invention had been laid many years previously with the introduction of the free reed to Europe in the mid-eighteenth century. Along with Wheatstone’s patent for the symphonion – the forerunner to the concertina – also in 1829, the invention of these two instruments were important milestones in a journey which had begun many centuries previously.

3.1 The Free Reed

In the classification of instruments devised and published by Erich Von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs in 1914, the accordion is categorised as an aerophone where the instruments are catalogued based on the way “in which air is made to act on the instrument” (Nettl 1964: 213). Sound in such instruments is produced “by the vibration of air” (Diagram Group 1976: 14). They include blow hole and whistle mouthpiece flutes, single reeds, double reeds, instruments with cup mouthpieces, free aerophones and free reeds. The accordion, like the concertina and mouth organ, is a member of the free reed section and is classified under “412.132 Sets of free reeds” by Von Hornbostel and Sachs. The free reed can be described as “a flexible lamella fixed at one end to a surrounding frame through which it can pass when oscillating” (Smith 1992: 156). Free reeds differ from beating reeds which strike against another object to produce the sound whereas the tongue of the free reed vibrates freely within its surrounding frame. As with all reeds, the free reed relies upon air passing through it, whether it is mouth blown or bellows blown. In the accordion the end keyboards, which are joined by expandable bellows, drive air over the reeds (Smith 1992; Missin 2002). The earliest known example of a free reed instrument is the Chinese Sheng which means ‘sublime voice’. This
The instrument was first described in China over 3,000 years ago and is just one of a group of free reed instruments in East Asia which are mouth blown. Others include the Korean Cho, the Laotian Khen, along with their Japanese relative, the Shó and many others. These instruments were significant features of court and temple music for thousands of years (Doktorski 2001; Smith 1992; Romani and Beynon 1980). The origins and evolution of the accordion owe much to these ancient instruments.

In the free reeds used in those ancient traditional instruments, the tongue of the reed was cut from the surrounding reed plate and is described by Missin (2002) as “idioglottal”. He uses the term “heteroglottal” to describe the free reed which developed in Europe. The reed in this instance was attached to a separately made reed plate as opposed to cut from it and could “have either one reed plate per note, or one reed plate with multiple slots and corresponding reeds” (Missin 2002). In describing the differences between the ancient free reed as used in Asian countries and that developed in Europe and used to great effect in industrially produced instruments such as the accordion and concertina, Smith (1992: 158) observes that “for a constant driven oscillation to be developed, the lamella must be set accurately within the frame”. Like Missin (2002) he notes that in East Asian free reed instruments “the lamella is cut out of the frame itself” and positioned in the middle of the frame whereas in the European free reed instruments the lamella, rather than being “located centrally within the frame” is fastened to one side of it directly above an opening in the frame. Air pressure can be applied to either side of the Asian free reed and this causes it to oscillate “identically in each case” while the European free reed only sounds when air pressure is applied to the “side of the plate on which the reed is mounted” (Smith 1992: 158). In the case of the accordion and concertina, according to Breathnach (1971: 88), “each pair of reeds is so fastened that one reed is sounded when the body or bellows of the instrument is inflated or drawn out, the other when the bellows is deflated or pressed inwards”.

3.2 The Free Reed in Europe

There are many theories about how the free reed travelled to Europe and its exact arrival time. The explorer Marco Polo, returning from his travels in the thirteenth century, has been suggested as a source for the arrival of these instruments as have
the Tartars via Russia (Doktorski 2001). Claims that the free reed was known to ancient Greeks as proposed by Hermann Smith in his book *The World’s Earliest Music* (Missin 2002) are also considered a possibility as many Asian instruments were introduced to Europe through the Silk Road from the East. However, there is no evidence for any of these theories and so theories they remain (Missin 2002; Doktorski 2001; Smith 1992). Another popular conjecture is that the Sheng was introduced from China in 1777 by Jesuit missionary priest, *Pere Amiot*, thus inspiring instrument makers of the time to use the free reed principle in the construction of a number of new and experimental instruments (Romani and Beynon 1980; Smith 1992; O’Shea 1996). However, other sources suggest that during the 1740s the Chinese Sheng had already become popular among the court society of St Petersburg through the playing of Johann Wilde, the inventor of the nail violin, while Ahrens (2006: 210) notes that “these instruments were in European collections from the early seventeenth century”. Wilde’s playing of the Sheng brought the instrument and its workings to the attention of the Danish physicist, Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein. After studying how the Sheng worked, Kratzenstein, who was interested in inventing a speaking machine (Ahrens 2006), used the principle of the free reed to create an instrument which produced five vowel sounds (Doktorski 2001). The results of this experiment were reported in “a detailed description of the acoustical properties and the construction of organ pipes with free reeds” (Ahrens 2006: 210). This was published in 1781 and Kratzenstein received recognition for his invention from the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences in 1782.

Kratzenstein’s invention stimulated further experimentation with free reeds resulting in a number of new instruments. One of these was Kirsnik’s harmonica, the predecessor of the harmonium (Eydmann 1995b; Doktorski 2001). This had an organ style keyboard operated by the right hand and bellows which were pumped by the left hand. Vogler’s Orchestron, completed in 1790, was built on the same principles as Kirsnik’s harmonica “but on a larger scale, like an organ, with four keyboards of sixty three notes each and a pedal board of thirty nine notes” (Doktorski 2001: 13). Vogler travelled throughout Europe during the mid-1780s “spreading the gospel of the free-reed pipes” (Ahrens 2006: 210). One of the simplest of the new free reed instruments was the German Aeoline invented in the 1810s by Bernard Eschenbach and Johann Schlimbach:
These simple mouthorgans consist of a metal plate to which are riveted a number of free reeds, usually tuned to play a chord, though chromatic versions were also made. They were the first commercially successful European free reed instruments and led directly to the invention of the accordion, the English concertina (via the symphonion), the German concertina and (of course) the modern mouth organ / harmonica family. (Chambers 2004: 1)

By the early nineteenth century the free reed was being used in the development of a number of instruments which employed bellows as the source of air needed to drive the free reed. Examples of these included the “bellows-blown aoline and aolodicon of Johann David Buschmann and the physharmonika of the Viennese instrument builder Anton Hackel” (Eydmann 1995b: 24).

In a few short years these new instruments using the free reed principle could be heard in London as illustrated in an 1825 edition of the Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review:

At the dinner of the Royal Society of Musicians, on Thursday the 21st of April, two youths from Germany, of the name of Schulz, and their father, performed on two guitars, and an instrument unknown as yet in this country, the Phys-harmonica. (Mackenzie Bacon 1825: 205)

The Phys-harmonica was described in the article as being about the same size as a “dressing case or a writing desk.” with “a small set of black and white keys similar to the piano forte”. The sound was produced on the instrument by working a pulley and a wheel with the foot and the tone of the instrument resembled that of an oboe. In another concert in London in 1826, the Schulz family, as well as playing the phys-harmonica, which was described as being “very pleasing, both in composition and the manner in which it was performed” also introduced another newly invented instrument which used the free reed principle, the aolodicon:

In the second part of the entertainment was introduced a second new instrument, called the aolodicon, which appeared to possess powers of considerable extent, but whose predominant character was great tenderness of expression, and sweetness of tone. We learn that his majesty has twice sent for these young artists and their father to Windsor, where they have had the honour of exhibiting these new inventions, and of obtaining his Majesty’s approbation. (Ring Workman et al. 1826: 398)
In 1822 the use of bellows with small mouth blown free reed organs was further developed when German clockmaker, Christian Friedrich Ludwig Buschmann modified his mouth blown aura or mundaeoline by adding a button keyboard and bellows, which were worked by hand. He patented this instrument as the handaeoline and many consider this to have been the precursor to the accordion patented eight years later by Cyrill Demian (Monichon 1958; Romani and Beynon 1980; Smith 1992; Eydmann 1995b).

3.3 Cyrill Demian and the Accordion Patent

Cyrill Demian and his two sons Karl and Guido lived at No. 43 Mariahilfer Strasse in Vienna where they worked as organ and piano makers. On the 6th May, 1829, they presented “a new instrument – Accordion – to the authorities” (Demian in Weyde 2000). The instrument was described in great detail in the patent documents and in a translation from High German to German and from that to English much can be learned about Demian’s first accordion:

Its appearance essentially consists of a little box with feathers of metal plates and bellows fixed to it, in such a way that it can easily be carried, and therefore travelling visitors to the country will appreciate the instrument. (Demian in Weyde 2000)

Chambers (2004) has described Demian’s first accordion as made up of a series of aeolinas, five in total, arranged inside a wooden box to which bellows and keys were attached. The patent documents describe how the system, known today as press and draw, operated – “each clave or key of this instrument allows two different chords to be heard, pulling the bellows a key gives one chord, while pushing the bellows gives the same key a second chord” (Demian in Weyde 2000). Surviving instruments indicate that Demian’s first accordion played only chords. While simple melodies could be played this could only be done “with the respective chordal harmony for every melody note” (Chambers 2004: 5). The instrument was also to be played left-handed which is the opposite of the way accordion players play today:

The instrument is held with the left hand in such a way that the claves are below, and the four fingers can play on the claves as they wish. The right hand moves the bellows, not upwards, but sideways, and moving the bellows faster or softer result in the expression of piano through crescendo to forte. (Demian in Weyde 2000)
Demian’s first instrument, as shown in the patent, had only five keys but by July of that same year he was making accordions with up to ten keys. The instrument spread quickly and attracted immediate interest. It became more melodic in a very short time with various systems being employed such as dampening the sound of unwanted reeds so that only one note would sound, and a reduction in the number of reeds used so that pressing on each key would result in a single note when the bellows were pushed and another single note when the bellows were drawn. By the mid 1830s accordions with right-handed keyboards and keys known as spoon-bass keys were available (Chambers 2004).

It is known that Demian’s accordion had reached London as early as 1830 as, on the 5th of June that year, a Mr. Faraday gave a lecture “on the application of a new principle in the construction of musical instruments” (Ring Workman et al. 1830: 369). The principle in question was the free reed and the lecture was based on information provided by Charles Wheatstone. During the evening, Wheatstone’s symphonion, the precursor to his later concertina, was demonstrated and a Chinese Sheng was also on display. Just over a year after Demian had patented the accordion in Vienna it was also demonstrated at this lecture in London:

Another application of this principle was then shewn in the accordion, invented at Vienna, which consists of ten chords, put in action by a portable bellows for the hand and regulated by finger keys. The harmonies of this instrument are very full and organ-like, but it is limited in compass. (Ring Workman et al. 1830: 369)

Despite the limitations of the instrument as mentioned in Wheatstone’s lecture, the accordion became instantly popular. Instrument makers in Paris began manufacturing accordions as early as 1830, copying Demian’s model but using a right-handed keyboard. Resiner, Fournceaux and Busson were some of the earliest makers with Busson using the name flutina on his accordion (Romani and Beynon 1980). Germany and Italy were also important centres for the production of accordions with instruments from Germany arriving in London in early 1831 as an advertisement in May of that year for Willis and Co. Music shop in London demonstrates:

HAVE lately received from Germany a fresh supply of the ORGAN EOLIAN, or ACCORDION, a newly-invented Musical Instrument, on which persons unacquainted with Music may in a few hours perform several airs. (The Harmonicon May 1831)
3.4 Tutors for the Accordion

With any new instrument it was important for buyers of the instrument to acquire knowledge of how it should be played and to this end, tutors began to be published for the accordion almost immediately, with early examples providing much helpful detail in regard to how the instrument should be played and the repertoire recommended for it. The early tutors also indicated how quickly the accordion developed and evolved from the initial instrument invented by Demian. One of the earliest in Austria was Adolph Muller’s *Accordion Schule* which was published in Vienna between 1833 and 1835 (Monichon 1985). This illustrated and described early modifications to the instrument which allowed for the playing of single notes on the accordion (Chambers 2004). In America, in 1843, a forty-page tutor called *The Complete Preceptor for the Accordeon* was published in Boston by Elias Howe Jr. Of particular interest on the title page of the tutor are the words “containing a scale for the common or whole toned, and also a scale for the semitoned or perfect accordeon”. This would appear to indicate that just fourteen years after Demian’s invention, two-row accordions were available. Diagrams of the scales possible on these instruments were included and confirm that what was being termed a ‘perfect accordeon’ did indeed have chromatic possibilities. Valuable instructions on how to play this instrument as well as how to sit when playing were also given:

The letters D and P placed over the notes, show when they should be drawn and pressed – D for Draw, P for Press. The figures placed under the notes, show which key to raise, the numbers counting from the top of the instrument. The player should be in a sitting position, with the foot raised upon an ottoman or stool, with the instrument resting perpendicularly on the left knee, with the inside of the thumb of your right hand, take hold of the brass bar at the back of the instrument, and let the fingers come directly over the keys; with the thumb and the three first fingers of your left hand, take hold the white wood on the bottom of the instrument, and the fourth finger on the valve key. The beginner should commence very slow, and not jerk the bellows. But a few hours are required to learn to play, by closely observing the above rules. (Howe 1843: 2)

Samples of initial tunes to be attempted included “Sweet Home,” “Blue Eyed Mary” and “Augusta’s Favorite,” which is known today as “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” The above tutor suggests that a beginner would be playing within a few hours while the following tutor promises “a complete mastery of those fascinating instruments”:

*A Preceptor for the accordion or flutina containing ample instructions whereby the general rules and principles of music, and a complete mastery of those fascinating*
instruments, may be obtained without the aid of a master; to which are added numerous airs as exercises, from the works of popular and standard composers, with the fingering correctly marked by Henry West, R. A. of Music. (Squeezytunes 2006)

In 1852 James Cruickshank of Aberdeen produced a tutor called *Cruickshank's Accordion and Flutina Teacher* which contained “Theoretical and Practical Instructions, Scales, Exercises, Illustrative Drawings, &c. with a Collection Of The Most Popular Airs, selected and adapted to these instruments.” This was published in Edinburgh and in London and was priced at one shilling. A series of six detailed drawings illustrate how the accordion or flutina should be held and played. Another page of this tutor gives comprehensive diagrams and details of the scales which can be used on accordions describing them as a “First Set of Scales for the French Accordion and Flutina”. Three different types of scales are given. The first is a “Scale For Accordions of 8, 10 or 12 Keys”, the second is a scale for accordions “with 10 Keys and Semitones”. These accordions had long keys and short keys and the tutor indicates that “the short keys are chiefly for the semitones”. The last scale provided is described as a “Scale for the Perfect Accordion” and again substantiates the idea that two-row accordions with chromatic possibilities were available as early as the first half of the nineteenth century (Cruickshank 1852).

### 3.5 The Free Reed arrives in Ireland

The period encompassing the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was one of unprecedented invention and in particular, as outlined earlier, marked an extensive phase of investigation and development in the design and manufacture of new musical instruments.

Innovation and change in certain classes of musical instruments was an important feature of musical life in Europe and North America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (Edymann 1995: 17)

Edymann saw this activity as taking place in two main areas, those being “the invention of new musical devices” and “the improvement and adaptation of the design of existing instruments” (Eydmann 1995b: 17). Not all of the instruments had a very long life but certainly there were many and varied kinds. Instrument
makers from Europe travelled widely promoting their instruments with many arriving to London from the mainland of Europe within a short time of the invention of the instrument. Close proximity to Dublin ensured many visits from these entrepreneurs anxious to publicise their new inventions.

New instruments arriving into Ireland continued to be a feature of musical activity throughout the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. The Kaufmann family from Dresden were in Dublin for a series of concerts in October 1851 (Freeman’s Journal, 28 Oct, 1851). Kaufmann was associated with the invention of a number of instruments which included a Trumpet-Automaton, Claviarur Harmonichord and Chordaulodion (Hubbard 2006). In an advertisement for a “Grand Concert” in the Antient Concert Rooms in Great Brunswick Street (Freeman’s Journal, 28 Oct, 1851), the programme for the event indicated that all these instruments as well as the Symphonion and Orchestron would be played by Kaufmann and his sons and daughter. Their repertoire included pieces from Mozart, Handel, Donizetti and Mendelssohn as well as a “Grand Fantasia on National Melodies performed by the whole of the instruments” (Freeman’s Journal 28 Oct, 1851).

The Great Industrial Exhibition, held on Dublin’s Leinster Lawn from May to October 1853 (Saris 2000), attracted many inventors to the city – among them, numerous instrument makers. One such visitor was Herr Sommer, who performed on the Sommerophone in the “Exhibition Buildings – Promenade and Winter Garden”. Sommer, from Weimar in Germany, had previously exhibited his newly invented Sommerophone at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. Accompanied by a Mr. O’Rorke on organ, he was available to perform from three until five o’clock. His diverse repertoire included Cavatina from Robert le Diable, Kathleen Mavourneen and one of his own compositions titled “Farewell to the Exhibition, as played before her Majesty at the Great Exhibition of 1851” (Freeman’s Journal, 19 Jan, 1854). Sommer performed again on Wednesday, January 25th at “Brother Murphy’s Grand Masonic Concert” held in the Antient Concert Rooms in Great Brunswick Street. The advertisement for this concert appeared on the previous day in The Freeman’s Journal where Sommer was described as “the Inventor and Eminent Performer on the Sommerophone”.

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It also indicated that he was performing “by the special permission of the committee of the Exhibition Building”.

Products of the Industrial Revolution, including new and modern instruments, many using the free reed principle, continued to appear in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century with mass production making these new inventions accessible to ever increasing sections of the population. Bohlman (1988: 125) argues that, as a result of modernisation, “the instrumentarium of the folk musician expands, admitting new instruments while rendering others obsolete”. But of all the modern instruments to arrive in Ireland, it was the accordion and its English cousin, the concertina, which were to have the most significant impact on the history of Irish traditional music.

3.6 Enter the Accordion – First Sightings in Ireland

Breathnach (1971: 88) suggests that the accordion, along with other members of the free-reed family “appeared in one shape or another” in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier, a London music shop, Willis and Co., advertised the availability of accordions from Germany as early as May 1831. In 1829 this company also had a shop in Dublin at No. 7 Westmoreland Street where the simplest of the Free Reed Instruments, German Aeolians, were available for purchase (*Freeman’s Journal*, 30 Dec, 1829). On Monday May 23rd 1831 the Dublin branch of Willis and Co. placed an advertisement in *The Freeman’s Journal* offering German accordions for sale in their Dublin shop. While this notice does not establish when exactly the accordion reached Irish shores, it does provide one of the earliest mentions of an accordion in Ireland and concrete evidence that the instrument was in the country a short time after Demian’s patent of 1829.

Concerts described earlier, such as those performed by the Kaufmann family and Herr Sommer, were an established part of the musical life of many capitals in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and Dublin was no exception (Boydell 1990). These concerts, which will be discussed in more detail later, were often invaluable in the promotion of new musical instruments. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, concerts had also become an
important feature of musical life in the cities and towns outside of the capital (Lawrence 1999) and it is in this context that initial references to the use, in Ireland, of the free reed instruments, the accordion and concertina, can be located. Apart from the newspaper advertisement of 1831 offering German accordions for sale in Dublin, one of the earliest mentions of the accordion and indeed, the concertina in Ireland can be found in a review of a concert performed in Londonderry in 1835. A critic in The Londonderry Journal of June 9th mentions the accordion in an unfavourable comparison with the concertina, which was played by Giulio Regondi (Lawrence 1999). The concertina very quickly became a concert instrument and therefore featured more often than the accordion in contemporary Irish newspapers, which were aimed at the middle and upper classes. While the concertina is not the focus of this thesis, nevertheless, a brief overview of the early days of the instrument in Ireland would be helpful at this point for a number of reasons.

The concertina began life in Ireland in the same decade as the accordion and while the concertina was very evidently adopted by the upper and middle classes, as can be seen from contemporary accounts; there is a lack of documentary evidence with regard to the contexts of the early days of the accordion in Ireland. French nobility and upper classes instantly adopted the accordion as soon as it arrived in that country with the French King Louis-Philippe, who was the father of six children, obtaining one during the French National Exhibition of 1834 (Monichon 1985). Consequently, I believe that the contexts where both the accordion and concertina were adopted during the initial years in Ireland were similar and therefore by examining the environment of the concertina during its early existence in the country it will be possible to gain an insight into the early life of the accordion in Ireland.

One of the important differences between the two instruments was that the concertina had a number of champions in Ireland, as will be seen later. These musicians were very prominent in the advertising of the period but the accordion had no such champions and as a result does not appear in contemporary accounts. As there is little mention of the accordion in middle and upper class drawing rooms in the early days of its arrival into Ireland, it would be easy to postulate that the instrument was instantly taken up by the lower classes, a theory widely held with regard to the adoption of the instrument in other countries:
However, early prices of the instrument in Ireland indicate otherwise. The cost of the instrument would have been prohibitive for the majority of the lower classes and through advertisements for concerts and various music shops as well as an examination of wages during the period under discussion it will be demonstrated that it was the moneyed classes who first used the instrument during its earliest decades in Ireland although, perhaps, not on the concert stage.

3.7 The Concertina – A Concert Instrument

For the first few decades of its existence, the Wheatstone English concertina was more comfortably at home in the drawing-rooms of the upper and middle classes. (Atlas 1996: 5)

The concertina was developed by Charles Wheatstone from his 1829 symphonion and Chambers (2004) believes that Wheatstone “would seem to have combined elements of Demian’s accordion with elements of his own symphonion (including the fingering) to produce his prototype concertina” (Chambers 2004: 8). Although the firm of Wheatstone dated the first concertina as 1829 in their literature of the 1950s, Chambers believes circa 1833 to be a more accurate date of manufacture. This is based on evidence from an early concertina tutor book which stated that “it was not till the end of the year 1833 that the instrument named the concertina was invented” (Chambers 2004: 8). Wayne (1991) also acknowledges the close relationship of Wheatstone’s first concertina to Demian’s accordion. However, he suggests circa 1830 as the earliest date for a concertina:

It is evident from the two extremely early concertinas in the C M Collection with serial numbers in Roman numerals that Wheatstone was producing a type of concertina closely related to both the symphonium and Demian accordion by about 1830. One in particular, the ‘open pearl pallet’ model, numbered XXX11 or ‘32’ (Item C1517) exhibits the formative 24-key ‘English’ layout of the Symphonium, together with the exposed pearl pallets and ebony levers in common with the earliest European accordions being produced in Vienna by Demian from about 1829. (Wayne 1991: 123)
As mentioned earlier, the concertina was played in Ireland as early as 1834 when the musical child prodigy Giulio Regondi, as well as playing guitar during a concert tour which lasted almost a year, also “performed on Wheatstone’s patent concertina” (Lawrence 1999: 1).

During the year 1834 – 35, Regondi, accompanied by his father, performed at a series of fifty-nine concerts in various locations including Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Wexford, Belfast, Clonmel, Kilkenny, Londonderry, Coleraine, Strabane, Limavaddy and Dublin (Lawrence 1999). Regondi was only eleven years old at the time but his accomplishments on the guitar had previously caused a sensation in London, as did the fact that he also played on a new instrument at the time, the concertina. While there is a difficulty in describing musical instruments – and particularly their sound – before the arrival of sound recording (Gammon 2000), a number of reviews and reports on the early career of Regondi give us some insight into the sound of the concertina in the early days of its existence. In 1835 Regondi gave a series of concerts in Wexford and in a review which appeared in The Wexford Freeman of Jan 31st 1835, a critic described how:

Master Regondi also performs on a newly invented instrument called a concertina, which besides being of great power produces the sweetest and most varied tones. It is one of the most beautiful inventions our musical world can boast of. (Lawrence 1999: 6)

The sweetness of the concertina is also commented on during the Belfast series of four concerts given by the young Regondi. These took place at the “Assembly Rooms Exchange and were patronised by John Agnew Esq.” (Lawrence 1999: 6). A review of Regondi’s first concert, which appeared in The Guardian and Constitutional Advocate of Friday 8th May, 1835, included mention of his skill on the concertina as well as the following description of the sound of the instrument:

In his hands the instrument called the concertina emitted a succession of sweet and silvery sounds, now and then resembling the tones of the Dulciana stop of a well tuned organ; and again the trembling modulations of the Eolian harp. (Lawrence 1999: 6)

The young Regondi also performed in Londonderry, on June 5th, 12th and 13th in 1835. A review of the June 5th concert given at the Corporation Hall
and published in *The Londonderry Journal* of June 9th, 1835, contains a detailed description of the Wednesday evening performance (Lawrence 1999). Of particular interest to this work is the mention given to the accordion when describing the young Regondi’s performance of “The Last Rose of Summer”:

> He played it with much taste on a new instrument called the concertina, which appears to us to be an improvement, and a very decided one, on the accordion. It is a pleasing instrument though of no great variety and is likely to come into very general use. (Lawrence 1999: 7)

The reference to the accordion and the fact that the new concertina was seen as “an improvement and a very decided one” is an indication that the accordion was being played in Ireland for some time before the arrival of the concertina. It could also be inferred that, unlike the concertina – which, as discussed, appears to have spent the first few decades of its existence being favoured by the upper and middle classes (Eydmann 1995b; Atlas 1996), the accordion may have become associated with the lower classes in a shorter space of time leading to the instrument being perceived in derogatory terms. Nonetheless, prices of the instruments would appear to indicate otherwise and this will be examined in more detail in Chapter 6.

That the concertina was patronised by the nobility and the gentry is borne out by an advertisement in *The Freeman’s Journal* of Monday December 23rd 1850 which was one of a series of advertisements that appeared throughout the month of December. These were placed by Joseph Scates, another champion of the concertina, who, at the time, had a shop called ‘The Concertina Repository’ located at 28 Westmoreland Street in Dublin (*Freeman’s Journal*, 23 Dec, 1850). Scates had been an employee of the Wheatstone firm in London and was the first person to make concertinas in Ireland. At Dublin’s Great Industrial Exhibition of 1853 he “exhibited three English system instruments of his own manufacture, as well as several made by Wheatstone” (Worrall 2007: 6). In the mid 1850s he had a shop at 26 College Green and during the early 1860s he had premises at 16 Westmoreland Street. This was sold to the firm of Cramer and Co. in 1865 (*Freeman’s Journal*, 29 Nov, 1865). His first and subsequent advertisements for the 1851 “Concertina Concerts” were directed specifically toward the nobility and gentry:
Rotundo, Concertina Concerts – First Performance of the kind in this Country.
Mr. Joseph Scates begs to announce to the Nobility and Gentry, that he purposes giving a series of three Concertina Concerts, interspersed with Vocal Music, in the ROUND ROOM of the ROTUNDO, commencing January 7th 1851. (Freeman’s Journal, 23 Dec, 1850)

The advertisement also indicated that Scates had secured the “valuable services of Mr. George Case Concertinist at her Majesty’s Theatre” as well as Mr. Joseph Case “acknowledged the most eminent Bass Concertinist”. Along with Joseph Scates and his wife, who was performing for the first time in Dublin, the “quartette” would perform music from “the most favourite operas” with Mr. George Case introducing “a new solo each evening”. Reserved seating was 3s. This appears to have been expensive as most reserved seating for other concerts at the time cost 2s. while promenade tickets could be had for 1s. A military band was also “to attend each evening”. In a later advertisement placed in The Freeman’s Journal on Jan 4th 1851, the programme for the concert was given. In all, fifteen pieces of music were to be performed including vocal pieces. There was to be an interval of ten minutes “for Promenading in the Pillar Room” during which the Military Band would perform. Military bands performing during the interval seemed to be a feature of concerts at this time as can be seen from a number of advertisements of the period such as the concert advertised in The Freeman’s Journal on the 28th September 1850, where concertina virtuoso Giulio Regondi was to perform in what was billed as his last appearance in Ireland:

Kingstown Assembly Rooms, Mr. Gustavus L. Geary begs leave to announce to the inhabitants of Kingstown and its vicinity that he purposes giving a grand MORNING CONCERT on THIS DAY (Saturday), 28th September, for which he has expressly engaged Signor GIULIO REGONDI (being most positively his last appearance in this country). (Freeman’s Journal, 28 Sept, 1850)

A military band was to perform during the interval. Admission to this concert, which was held at 2pm, was 1s. with reserved seats costing 2s.

3.8 The Spread of the Accordion – A Middle Class Instrument
I have noted earlier that the accordion was in Ireland as early as 1831 when it was advertised for sale in The Freeman’s Journal. In 1835 it was referred to unfavourably
in a newspaper report in *The Londonderry Journal* of June 9th. However, no indication of the context in which the accordion was played was given in that piece and so we cannot be certain exactly what type of music was being played on the instrument. Nonetheless, the tone and context of the article could indicate that, as with the concertina, which was played extensively by the young Giulio Regondi during the early decades of the nineteenth century, the accordion would also have been used for the performance of pieces suited to the musical tastes of the nobility and gentry. While this could be perceived as quite a tenuous link at best, a number of factors point to the possibility. The speed of the development of the accordion was unprecedented with new features and improvements being added to the instrument very quickly. By 1836, it appears that the accordion was already being used in France for the composition and performance of western art music. Louise Reisner, the daughter of one of the earliest Parisian accordion makers, performed her own composition, *Thème varié très brillant pour accordion méthode Reisner*, during recitals of contemporary romantic music of the time, which she regularly presented at well-known concert halls in the city. She dedicated her composition to the amateur players of the instrument (Monichon 1985; Doktorski 2001). Demian, in his patent of 1829, suggested that:

> As this instrument can be made with 4, 5 and 6 or even more claves, with chords arranged in alphabetical order, many well known arias, melodies and marches, etc. may be performed similar to the harmony of 3, 4 and 5 voices, with satisfaction of all anticipations of delicacy and vastly amazing comfort in increasing and decreasing sound volume. (Demian in Weyde 2000)

The mention of arias among the pieces, for which the instrument was suited, indicates that the accordion was initially aimed at the upper classes. Early printed collections and tutors specifically for the accordion include illustrations of elegantly dressed women and men playing the instrument (Eydmann 1995b). However, whether it was actually used in a concert performance setting during its earliest days in Ireland is doubtful. Eydmann, discussing the accordion in the Scottish context, believes that:

> …these instruments, with their quiet brass reeds, delicate cases with mother of pearl ornaments and highly decorative bellows were confined to the domestic setting and never challenged the popularity of existing instruments or the new English concertina which was consciously developed for professional concert use. (Eydmann 1999: 596)
The focus of this thesis is the journey undertaken by the button accordion into Irish traditional music. The musical contexts encountered along the way are an important part of the story of the journey into tradition. Therefore, the following two chapters will discuss music in Ireland both before the accordion arrived and during the earliest years of the instrument’s existence in the country.
Without the pre-existence of a vibrant traditional musical community in Ireland before the arrival of the accordion it is doubtful that the instrument would have prospered as it did. The accordion was patented in 1829 and as has been discussed, was definitely in Ireland by 1831. However, contemporary evidence appears to indicate that the accordion was not in use by the traditional music community until later in the nineteenth century, although it co-existed alongside the tradition before eventually joining it. While the focus of this thesis is the journey of the accordion into traditional music, a general discussion of Irish music in pre-accordion Ireland, as well as during the early days of the accordion’s existence in the country, will be undertaken at this point to illustrate the importance of music to all people living on the island of Ireland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and the subsequent openness of the tradition to a new instrument.

4.1 ‘The Irish Seem At All Times to Have Been Fond of Music’
– Subcultures in Irish Music

In any discussion of the music of this period, it is important to note that two distinct groups existed in the realm of music-making in Ireland – the Anglo Irish ascendancy class who looked east and to Europe for their inspiration, and the lower classes, mostly rural dwellers, who were the guardians of what we know today as traditional music. These groups reflected the population of Ireland, which for the most part was divided into two sections that Carolan (1990: 4) describes as “the colonised” and “the colony”. It was in the direction of the music of the colonised that the accordion appears to have gravitated most in its early journey into tradition, but it would not be until the latter decades of the nineteenth century when this part of the journey would finally be accomplished.

In observing that two distinct groups existed in music making in the Ireland of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it is also imperative to acknowledge
that harpers, pipers and dancing masters, who, for the most part, were itinerant musicians, came under the influence of both cultures. McCarthy (1999: 43) proposes that, by the nineteenth century, a number of subcultures existed in music in Ireland. She refers to these as “various streams of musical life in Ireland” and notes that:

Music as culture played a major role in defining the identity of subcultural groups. The English and Anglo-Irish population identified primarily with European art music; the poorer native Irish participated in a music culture that developed as a folk music in colonial society. Certain historical developments led to the cross-fertilisation of Anglo and native music subcultures. (McCarthy 1999: 43)

Slobin (1993: 89) suggests that “subcultural musicians keep one eye on their in-group audience and the other on the superculture, looking for useful codes and successful strategies, while a third, inner eye seeks personal aesthetic satisfaction”. Moloney (2000) observes that the changing fortunes of harpers during this period resulted in significant changes to their repertoire. In an attempt to accommodate the different musical tastes of the Anglo-Irish gentry, who were chiefly interested in western art music of the period, many harpers incorporated elements of this music in their repertoire. Moreover, the inclusion of traditional tunes, adapted for the harp, indicates a need for new audiences and suggests that “travelling harpers were also thrown into close contact, often possibly for the first time, with the folk music of the country people” (Moloney 2000: 7).

Pipers of this time also interacted with both groups although; it does seem likely that the majority of pipers played their music among the traditional music community and especially for dancers as will be illustrated later. Donnelly (1994) provides a fascinating insight into this interaction during the early nineteenth century. In February and August 1816, Patrick O’Connor, a blind piper from Limerick, gave two concerts in Kilkenny city. These were advertised extensively and given great publicity in The Moderator, Kilkenny’s newspaper of the time. Patrick O’Connor was described as “The Celebrated Performer on the Union Pipes” and it was stated that the piper “Will have the honour to give, to the Nobility and Gentry of this City and County, A Grand Musical Entertainment” (Donnelly 1994: 82). Charles Ferguson was another such piper. Also blind and from Limerick, he settled in New York during the 1850s where he worked as a professional piper. Like the harpers, many of these pipers did not play the dance
music of the day. Instead they preferred to modify their repertoire to suit the tastes of the ‘Nobility and Gentry’ at whom they were aiming their music. Ferguson played at church fairs and picnics with another piper, William Connolly, who played music for dancing while Ferguson played mostly airs and slow pieces for a listening audience (O’Neill 1913; Donnelly 1994).

The blind Galway piper, Paddy Conneely, was also known to have a high opinion of his own musical talents. Petrie’s contemporary account indicates that Conneely “will only play for the gentry or the comfortable farmer, and will not lower the dignity of his professional character by playing in a tap-room or for the commonality” (Petrie 1840: 108). Conneely’s music was transcribed by a number of collectors of the time including Henry Hudson who indicated that the blind piper was a hard taskmaster, always insistent that the correct setting of the tune should be taken down. O’Brien Moran finds this to be “surprising and amusing” and suggests that Conneely’s “role as musician allowed him to transcend social barriers, placing him on an equal footing with his collectors with whom he could discuss his music” (O’Brien Moran 2007: 109). Unlike the pipers mentioned above, however, Conneely did play the dance music repertoire of the time. Petrie likened him to Paganini and commented that he was “simply an excellent Irish piper—inimitable as a performer of Irish jigs and reels, with all their characteristic fire and buoyant gaiety of spirit” (Petrie 1840: 106).

4.2 Music of the Colony – Music of the ‘Nobility and Gentry’

The subcultures which existed by the nineteenth century were the direct result of the rich legacy of musical activity during the previous century. Grattan Flood, writing about the period, commented on the large amount of musical establishments to be found in Dublin:

Probably one of the best evidences of the cultivation of music in Ireland in the latter half of the eighteenth century is the number of music publishers and musical instrument makers in Dublin at that period. In 1800 there were ten flourishing music shops, namely, Rhames, Gough, Hill, Hime, Lee, Holden, M’Calley, M’Donnell, Power, and Southwell, nearly all of which were music-publishing firms. There were also eight harpsichord and piano manufacturers, and three makers of wind instruments—also makers of pedal harps, Irish harps, bagpipes, and fiddles, and two organ builders. (Grattan Flood 1905: 313)
Without doubt, Dublin was a musical capital of note during the eighteenth century. Newspapers of the day attest to the vitality of music in the city where, during the mid to late eighteenth century, concerts promoted by various musical societies for charitable purposes were the mainstay of musical performances in Dublin. The money raised by these ventures “made a considerable contribution to the founding and maintenance of at least eight Dublin hospitals” (Boydell 1990: 99). The Rotunda was one such hospital and the attached Rotunda Gardens, which were opened in 1749 by Dr. Bartholomew Mosse, provided the people of Dublin with a consistent series of concerts featuring the best of music and performers for nearly a half a century. A band of eighteen to twenty musicians was regularly employed and over sixty concerts of vocal and instrumental music were performed each year (Boydell 1990).

Published programmes for these concerts give an indication of the music popular with the middle and upper classes or the ‘nobility and gentry’ as they were referred to in many newspaper advertisements of the time. In the period leading up to 1760, the music of George Frederick Handel was fashionable as was Italian baroque music with composers such as Vivaldi, Geminiani and Corelli particularly favoured. “Indeed, Dublin during this period was regarded as a centre of importance for European Art music” (Ó Súilleabháin 1982: 4). The last quarter of the century saw a change in musical tastes with the music and classical style of the composer Haydn being favoured, as well as the introduction to concert programmes of variations on Irish melodies:

The occurrence of pieces with a specifically Irish flavour, especially among the vocal items, had been a feature of Dublin programmes since the 1740s, when ‘Eileen Aroon’ (spelt in many different ways) became an almost obligatory item in the repertoire of any visiting singer. (Boydell 1990: 105)

The inclusion of traditional airs in concerts, where they were performed as solo keyboard pieces or in concertos, was a popular trend in the musical programmes of concerts, not just in Ireland, but also in Scotland and Wales during the closing decades of the eighteenth century. In Ireland, they continued as an important feature of concert programmes well into the nineteenth century. A concert advertised in The Freeman’s Journal of Saturday May 3rd 1851 includes mention
of a “Quartette” performance of “Shannon’s Banks” which was arranged by R. M.
Levey along with a piece to be played by Mr. Joseph Scates on “Solo concertina
– Introduction and Variations on Irish Airs” (Freeman’s Journal, 3 May, 1851).
Scates was a concertina maker based at 27, College Green in Dublin. Originally
from England, he moved to Ireland around 1850.

As well as the use of traditional airs in concerts at the time, the eighteenth
century also saw the first publications of Irish traditional music “in any
considerable quantity, and it was the first century in which Irish music was
published in Ireland” (Carolan 1990: 1). From 1724, when the Neale brothers
published A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish Tunes, which were set for the
violin, German flute and hautboy, a number of collections of Irish music were
published culminating at the end of the eighteenth century with Edward Bunting’s
landmark 1796 publication, Ancient Irish Music (Carolan 1990; Moloney 2000).

4.3 Music in Nineteenth Century Ireland
– Significance and Benefits

As previously discussed, the nineteenth century was a time of great significance in
the evolution of a number of musical instruments, particularly those of the free reed
family. Eydmann (1995b) notes that the period was also one of great musical change:

In terms of musical form and practice, this change was linked to new technical
and stylistic demands of composers and performers, changes in orchestral and
ensemble structure and new expectations of sound character, expression,
dynamics and tone-colour and texture. There was also the emergence of new
musical organisations and institutions, new performance opportunities, an
increase in the number and variety of concerts and an emerging emphasis on
virtuosic solo performance in halls which presented players and instrument
makers with acoustical conditions and problems of an entirely new order.
(Eydmann 1995b: 17)

The changes discussed by Eydmann related, for the most part, to professional or
amateur musicians of the middle and upper classes. For the majority of the Irish
population during the early part of the nineteenth century these advances and
changes had no impact on their musical practices. However, towards the latter part
of the nineteenth century, this would change with the adoption of a number of new
instruments, including the accordion and the concertina, into the family of
instruments on which Irish traditional music could be played.

In writing about music in the nineteenth century, Russell (1987) identified three
“key processes, expansion, diversification and nationalisation” at work in the
music of the period and suggested that there was “a huge expansion in musical
activity of all types, as even the most random set of statistics illustrates” (Russell
1987: 1). One of the areas of most development was a concerted effort to
introduce music to the lower classes. Music was seen as something that could
improve the minds and morals of this sector of society as illustrated in the writings
of a Scottish commentator who mentioned the accordion when encouraging
musical development in the 1880s:

We know nothing better than music for bracing the exhausted energies, and fitting
the mind or body for renewed labour. It would be well if all parents would kindly
courage and desire of their children to be possessed of a musical instrument.
The flute, the accordion or concertina, the piano, the violin - all these are valuable
aids to the cultivation of the musical faculty; and the use of them can never be too
much encouraged by parents. (Eydmann 1995b: 72)

The middle classes, seeking to lead by example, organised music classes, choirs
and bands which offered the potential of bringing together people of different
classes and backgrounds, as well as providing the positive influence of music
which, it was believed, would lead to the betterment of the self, an important
ideal in Victorian times (Russell 1987; Eydmann 1995b). Music was seen as
multi-faceted and reformers suggested that, among other benefits, it was useful
in elevating the condition of the poor. It was also considered helpful for health
– singing, for example, was promoted as a preventative measure against the
dreaded nineteenth century disease, tuberculosis (McHale 2007).

4.4 The Temperance Movement and Music in Ireland

Another purpose in bringing music to the people was the desire to limit the power
of alcohol in the lives of the working classes:
At the heart of the earliest attempts to provide ‘decent’ popular musical recreation was the desire to limit the place of drink in working-class culture. The 1820s and 1830s were worrying decades for observers of working-class social life… in particular, reformers were anxious to break the ever-strengthening connection between the publican and popular entertainment. (Russell 1987: 19)

During the early nineteenth century, excessive alcohol consumption was seen as one of the great social evils of the time. It was believed that it destroyed health and family life as well as fostering anti-social behaviour. Organisations which encouraged temperance were formed throughout nineteenth century society in an effort to counteract the effects of immoderate drinking. America had many temperance societies with one of the earliest being the Sons of Temperance, a secret society set up in 1842 “to reform drunkards and to prevent others from becoming drunkards” (Stelling 2009). All over Europe a similar situation existed – nowhere more so than in Britain and Ireland. The temperance movement in Victorian England focused on providing alternative forms of recreation for the lower middle and working classes and music played a significant role in their attempts to stem the excessive drinking habits of the nation:

They begin to feel that there is no other way to defeat drink but to outrival it with attractions of a higher kind – such as music, cheap railway excursions, cheap concerts, and cheap rural galas. (Smiles in Bailey 1987: 59)

In early nineteenth century Ireland, illegal distilling – which had thrived since the latter decades of the eighteenth century – continued to prosper and contributed greatly to the problem of excessive drinking among the lower classes in both rural and urban locations, although Murphy (2003) points out that:

the consumption of alcohol was actually not great among the poorer classes because of its expense. As a result poorer people tended only to engage in occasional periods of heavy drinking at events such as weddings, funerals, markets and patterns, though because of its public nature this created the false picture of a much higher rate of overall consumption. (Murphy 2003: 36)

Legal distilleries also added to the problem of excessive alcohol consumption and Kohl, travelling in Ireland in the early 1840s, commented on the extent and influence of drink suppliers in the Ireland of the mid-nineteenth century:
The distillers, brewers and publicans were a more extensive and numerous class in Ireland than in any other country, and were in a position to exercise great influence over their humbler fellow-countrymen. (Kohl 1844: 27)

In 1838, one of the most unique mass mobilisations of people ever to take place in Ireland was set in motion when Father Theobald Matthew took over the leadership of what was then the Cork Total Abstinence Association (Foster 1989; Murphy 2003). Matthew realised early on in his crusade that there was a need for a substitute for alcohol in the lives of his newly converted teetotallers and like many reformers in Britain and Scotland, turned to music to fill the void left by abstinence from alcohol. McHale (2007: 167) argues that “the importance of the temperance movement in Ireland, particularly in the pre-Famine period, cannot be underestimated” and she further suggests that the “role of music within the movement is seminal to our understanding of popular culture and social improvement in nineteenth century Ireland”. The scale of the success of the temperance movement in Ireland was unprecedented in the years between 1838 and 1843, with the temperance campaign becoming the “chief agent for social and cultural improvement at that time” (McHale 2007: 167).

As mentioned, music featured strongly in the temperance movement’s programme for reform. Temperance bands were formed throughout the country and these groups of musicians were regularly heard at temperance meetings and festivals. They became increasingly important in spreading the message of temperance. The music played by the bands included hymns, the words of which extolled the merits of abstention. These were often set to the music of composers such as Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Bach and in 1843, at the peak of the temperance movement; many of the hymns were set to a number of Moore’s more popular melodies in a book called Temperance Melodies for the Teetotallers of Ireland. William McNamara, the author of the book, included only the words for the hymns which McHale (2007: 181) argues could indicate that Moore’s Irish Melodies had by that stage “spread across the classes”.

However, according to one eyewitness of the time, the music played by these bands was not always of the highest quality. During the early 1840s, Johann Kohl
(1844: 26), writing about a temperance meeting in Kilrush, at which Father Matthew was present, described the fervour and awe with which this “famed apostle of temperance, the most prominent man in Ireland, with the exception of O’Connell” was greeted. Kohl also made clear his dislike of the bands:

Suddenly the cry rose, “He comes! He comes!” and I heard at the other end of the street one of those detestable musical displays with which the temperance men generally open their processions and solemnities. I ought not, perhaps, to speak harshly of anything intended to serve as a decoration to so good a cause, but, often as I have heard these temperance bands, and I never could bring my ear to discover anything like harmony in their combinations. (Kohl 1844: 26)

Despite Kohl’s protestations about the sound of the temperance band, he provides some interesting details about the music they played. When Father Matthew arrived they played a rousing version of “See the Conquering hero comes!!” while later, in between the numerous speeches, “the temperance band in the gallery played Irish and English national melodies”. However, he again alludes to the questionable quality of the band describing how even “though their leader beat time most indefatigably, he found it impossible to keep his performers together” (Kohl 1844: 28).

Singing was an even more powerful way to bring music to the masses and accordingly, it very quickly became part of any temperance gathering. Sight-singing classes were established throughout the country inspired by the visits and classes given by Joseph Mainzer. A well-known German sight-singing instructor, Mainzer’s successes in teaching large numbers of people from London to Paris had been widely reported. His arrival in Cork in August 1842, at the invitation of Fr. Matthew, resulted in an increased use of music to mobilise masses to the temperance cause with upwards of 1,200 people at a time reported to be attending his sight-singing classes (McHale 2007).

4.5 Music of the Colonised – ‘Traditional’ Music and Dancing

Of the subcultures mentioned at the start of this section, the music enjoyed by the ascendancy classes or the nobility and gentry has been discussed – as have the
earliest publishing of traditional music and the importance of music in nineteenth century life in general. However, as the accordion eventually found itself among the traditional music practitioners of the latter half of the nineteenth century it is important, at this point, to provide an insight into the contexts in which its journey into tradition took place. Therefore, the following sections will be concerned with establishing the musical practices of the countryside where traditional music was an important part of the social fabric of rural life. Repertoire, instrumentation and settings for the performance of the music during the nineteenth century will be considered as will the important role of dance to the rural population of the time.

The difficulty in forming a reconstruction of what traditional music was like during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century has been noted by Vic and Sheila Gammon:

There is great difficulty in trying to study popular music, mostly oral and aural music, from a period before sound recording. It is very difficult to reconstruct or imagine what a town band sounded like in 1830. We have to rely on scanty and indirect information, often from hostile witnesses, in an attempt to extend our understanding. Nevertheless, there is accumulating evidence which affirms that popular music making had a coherent style which differed markedly from the performance practices and conventions of Western art music. (Gammon and Gammon 2000: 124)

In attempting any reconstruction of what Irish traditional music was like in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, our knowledge of that tradition is dependent on a number of resources, which include the work of the music collectors of the period, together with the travel diaries of visitors to the country during that time. Their contemporary accounts of and comments on the traditional music of the time reveal the importance of music and dancing to the people of rural Ireland in the decades prior to the arrival of the accordion into that tradition.

4.6 ‘Dancing is Very General Among the Poor’

There is a scarcity of direct information specifically related to traditional music and dance, particularly in pre-Famine Ireland but – from the varied sources mentioned above – it is possible to construct a picture of the musical life of the
people in the decades before the Great Famine. Certainly “dancing was considered an integral part of social gatherings” (Brennan 1999: 15) as was the accompanying music played for the dance. Ó Gráda (1989: 65) remarks that in contrast to “the very bleak picture of social life in Ireland after the Famine” as mentioned by many earlier historians, Ireland in pre-Famine times “seemed a gregarious and cheerful place, where family ties extended far and people were neighbourly”. Ó Tuathaigh concurs with this picture of Ireland prior to the devastating effects of the Famine years:

Pre-Famine peasant society, for all its poverty, had plenty of sport and gaiety about it. Music and song were woven into the very fabric of society and the fiddler and uillean-piper were kept busy at weddings and wakes, fairs and markets. There was no shortage of dancing; hurling was widely popular, as were other tests of strength and skill, such as weight-lifting and bowls. Fairs, pattern days and regattas provided numerous foci for social activity and merriment. The excitement of the fair lay as much in its fringe activities—jugglers, entertainers, music, dancing and drink—as in the actual business of buying and selling cattle and horses. (Ó Tuathaigh 1990: 150)

Travellers to Ireland, who wrote on many aspects of life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, provide us with some of the earliest accounts of traditional music and dancing in pre-Famine rural Ireland. The eighteenth century commentator, Arthur Young, who travelled throughout Ireland between 1776 and 1779, observed that music and dancing was very important to the people of rural Ireland:

Dancing is very general among the poor people, almost universal in every cabin. Dancing-masters of their own rank travel through the country from cabin to cabin, with a piper or blind fiddler; and the pay is sixpence a quarter. It is an absolute system of education. Weddings are always celebrated with much dancing; and a Sunday rarely passes without a dance; there are very few among them who will not, after a hard day’s work, gladly walk seven miles to have a dance. (Young 1780: 36)

Other travellers in the latter years of the eighteenth century were also impressed with the Irish passion for music and dancing, a passion which was indulged frequently at crossroads which were the great social meeting place where a piper or fiddle player provided music for dancing for many an hour. One English visitor, Rev. Dr. Campbell, observed in 1775 that Irish girls were particularly keen to dance and were exceptionally good at it:

The Irish girls are passionately fond of dancing. And they certainly dance well, for last night I was at a ball and I never enjoyed one more in my life. There is a

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sweet affability and sparkling vivacity in these girls which is very captivating. We frog-blooded English dance as if the practice were not congenial to us; but here (in Cashel) they moved as if dancing had been the business of their lives. (Campbell in O’Neill 1913: 419)

In the early years of the nineteenth century, despite the poverty which was prevalent and growing among the lower classes of society, music and dancing continued to be popular pastimes. Edward Wakefield writing in 1812 noticed that music and dancing were very common and that the fiddle could be heard in various directions as a traveller passed by -“The Irish seem at all times to have been fond of music” (Wakefield in Carty 1966b: 14). Some seven years earlier, John Carr toured Ireland in 1805 and noted that a Sunday in Ireland spent among the ‘peasantry’ was very similar to the same day in France:

After the hours of devotion a spirit of gaiety shines upon every hour, the bagpipe is heard, and every foot is in motion. The cabin on this day is deserted, and families in order to meet together and enjoy the luxury of a social chat, even in rain and snow, will walk three or four miles to a given spot. (Carr in O’Neill 1913: 417)

Asenath Nicholson was an American evangelical who had been in Ireland for three years before the Great Famine began (Gray 1995). In her writings she describes the Irish as “fond of dancing” and relates how “a child is taught it in his first lessons of walking” (Nicholson1847: 98). In writing about the Irish love for music she notes that “the bagpipes and fiddle are ever at their feasts, especially the latter; and the blind performer always receives a cordial God bless you” (Nicholson 1847: 98). Staying in a cabin among the “peasantry” of Co. Kilkenny, Nicholson describes a Sunday afternoon invitation to a field dance, which she declined. However, later on that evening, dancers young and old came to her cabin and performed for her there:

About sunset on Sabbath evening, just after returning from Johnstown, where I had attended church, the cabin door opened, and a crowd of all ages walked in, decently attired for the day, and without the usual welcomes or any apology, the hero who first introduced me seated himself at my side, took out his flute, wet his fingers, saying “This is for you, Mrs. N. and what will you have?” A company were arranged for the dance and so confounded was I that my only answer was, “I cannot tell.” He struck up an Irish air, and the dance began… they danced for an hour, wholly for my amusement, and for my welcome. (Nicholson 1847: 90-91)
4.7 ‘One of the Trinity of Peasant Entertainers’

– The Dancing Master

The above accounts indicate the importance of music and dance as pastimes in pre-Famine Ireland, implying that along with the piper and fiddle player, the dancing master was a highly respected figure. Described by Captain Francis O’Neill (1913: 421) as “one of the trinity of peasant entertainers” the visiting dancing master was a major figure in the traditional music communities of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. O’Neill puts the prominence of the dancing master down to the fact that for “the Irish peasantry dancing was a passion, hence the necessity for a teacher” (1913: 421). Dancing masters were well established in Ireland from the middle of the 1700s on and their arrival in a townland or village was seen as a “signal for universal fun and relaxation” (Lenihan in Donnelly 1993: 78). They usually stayed in one area for a period of six weeks and during that time taught both music and dancing to the local children. The dancing masters generally moved within a well-defined area with each dancing master respecting another’s territory. A local farmer often provided a barn or kitchen for the visiting teacher and in some regions the local people built special structures for the dancing classes (Breathnach 1971).

The basic steps of the jig and the reel were the first to be taught and these steps proved very useful in the round or group dances devised by the dancing masters. Solo dances such as the reel and jig as well as set or figure dances were created and taught by the dancing masters to their more talented pupils with the well-known set dance “The Blackbird” being said to have been composed by Kiely, a Limerick dancing master” (Breathnach 1971: 55). Quarterly fees, for a period of six weeks, were usually paid to the dancing master but these differed in many areas. Sometimes a weekly rate was acceptable and also payment was made according to the dance taught. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century “the charge in Kerry was 10/- per quarter, 5/- for the dancing master and 5/- for the musician” (Breathnach 1971: 53). Many of the dancing masters were themselves excellent musicians and often taught music as well as steps for dancing.

There were a number of different types of dancing master in vogue during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among these were the dancing masters
who changed their names and asserted that they had been trained in France. These individuals tended to dress in a pretentious manner, “displaying all the insecurities attendant on social mobility” (Donnelly 1993: 75) as well as copying the manners and attire of their usually well-off students:

For instance Mr Doolan of Dublin, called himself Dulang – a name which is neither French nor Irish, English nor German, but which might be French, if spelt Dulin, accentuating the last syllable, and pronouncing it a la Francaise. (Lenihan in Donnelly 1993: 77)

Many of these ‘frenchified’ dancing masters aimed their teaching at the nobility and gentry – as can be seen from the following advertisement carried in The Freeman’s Journal of Thursday, December 19th, 1839:

FINISHING INSTRUCTIONS IN DEPORTMENT 
AND DANCING

ROTUNDO

Mr Oustaing, Mr Richard, and Miss Oustaing, have the honour to intimate to the Nobility and Gentry, that their ACADEMY at the ROTUNDO has commenced for the season, and will be held particularly Select, being under the most distinguished patronage. Days of Attendance – Tuesdays and Fridays for Ladies at One O’Clock. Also, a separate Academy for Young Gentlemen at Eleven O’Clock.

Mr. Oustaing will attend Private Families, assisted by his daughter. Gentlemen are instructed on the Evenings of Tuesdays and Fridays, at Mr. Oustaing’s Residence, 34 UPPER SACKVILLE STREET.

As with the previous dancing master who called himself Dulang, it is also possible that the name Oustaing could be an attempt to make the name Heuston, for instance, sound more French in an effort to attract the attention of the upper classes. In an article published in The Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator in November 1867, the journalist and historian, Maurice Lenihan (1800-95) gave a vivid and fascinating portrayal of some of the dancing masters he encountered during his youth. According to Lenihan, the leading teacher in the ‘South of Ireland’ when he was young was the ‘elder Garbois’:

Some used to say that he gallicised his name to appear fashionable, and that his real apostrophe was the old Irish one of Garvey. Be that as it may, he was an extremely well-dressed, well-mannered, gay and pleasant gentleman, somewhat below middle size. He never appeared at school-hours except in full dress. His hair, which he wore in dark profusion, was oiled and curled and parted in the style of the Prince Regent. He taught in Waterford, Wexford, Carlow &c. In the college
of Carlow he was a prime favourite; and his blind fiddler, in the drab livery, was a real picture. (Lenihan in Donnelly 1993: 76)

In a different representation of the importance of dancing to the Irish people an advertisement in *The Freeman's Journal* of the 5th December 1845 advised that the Mechanics’ Institution Annual Full Dress Ball would take place and that an “efficient quadrille and Waltz Band will be in attendance” – this on the eve of the Great Famine.

### 4.8 Preserving the Ancient Music – The Great Collectors

The richness of the dancing tradition, as evident from the many accounts left by visitors to Ireland, is a clear indication that music among the rural people was very plentiful, with one of the primary functions of music being for the dance. Another indication that this was so was the extent of collecting during this period. The mid-nineteenth century saw an enormous interest in the collection and preservation of the music of the people or ‘folk’ not just in Ireland but also in England and all over Europe (Gammon 2000). However, when using the information gleaned from these sources to build up a picture of what traditional music was like at the time, it is important to consider a number of points.

Collectors of this period “were motivated by a love of the music fuelled by patriotic and sometimes nationalist zeal” (O’Brien Moran 2007: 94). But while they may themselves have played arrangements of traditional melodies, they could not be considered traditional musicians apart from a few exceptions, most notably towards the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The musical background of most of the collectors was rooted in the classical tradition. Consequently, the music collected from traditional musicians was presented in a very different way to that of its original performance, with most of the earlier collectors adding piano accompaniment to the melodies in the published versions. Barra Boydell notes that:

…the transcription into notation of music of an aural tradition, carried out by musicians from a literate and thus distinct musical background, involves translation: the music is necessarily reshaped according to the concepts and parameters of notation systems developed by and for what is effectively a ‘foreign’ literate musical world, as well as by the person making the transcription. (Boydell 2007: 52)
Many of the early nineteenth century collectors made significant and intentional changes to the music they collected, making it obvious that their publications were not intended for the people from whom they had collected. It is possible to surmise that the changes were made in an effort to try to make the music of the rural people accessible and acceptable to the well-educated Anglo-Irish society and the amateur musicians of the drawing rooms who were the public for whom these collections were intended. Breathnach (1971: 112) suggested that Bunting may actually have “persuaded himself that he was correcting or improving the music” while in the case of Petrie, Breathnach believed that either the collector or his daughter manipulated the original transcriptions of the airs “in many instances to meet what were then regarded as correct notions of harmony” (Breathnach 1971: 110). James Goodman, one of the later collectors, based his reason for including certain tunes in his own manuscripts on the fact that, while these tunes were already printed in Petrie’s collections, “the settings are generally quite different from mine and, on the whole, are not so thoroughly Irish as my versions” (Goodman in Shields 1998: 117). The question must also be asked as to whether these early collectors were working from a perspective of saving the music from the musicians themselves. O’Brien Moran comments:

There is an impression that some of the collectors, and George Petrie in particular, felt they were preserving the culture on behalf of the ‘folk’ who did not fully appreciate it and were helpless to prevent its demise. (O’Brien Moran 2007: 96)

Whatever the answer to the above question, there can be no doubt that the ‘great collectors’ of the nineteenth century did indeed regard themselves as preserving the ancient music of Ireland with, for example, Goodman in the introduction to his 1861 volume stating that “the labour of writing has been rendered easy by my desire to preserve the music of my native province” (Goodman in Shields 1998: 4). Many of the collectors were also members of the Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland, which was founded in 1851. As a result, they were often selective in what they chose to collect – possibly applying an antiquarian bias towards some of the pieces offered and consequently seeing the music as dying, almost dead as opposed to living and ever changing. Petrie, one of the most prominent of the mid-nineteenth century collectors, displayed a less than tolerant attitude to new forms of dance music which were in vogue at the
time and were being incorporated into the repertoire of many traditional musicians, including the Galway piper, Paddy Conneely:

Paddy can play not three tunes, but three thousand; in fact, we have often wished his skill more circumscribed, or his memory less retentive, particularly when, instead of firing away with some lively reel, or still more animated Irish jig, he has pestered us, in spite of our nationality, with a set of quadrilles or a galloppe, such as he is called on to play by the ladies and gentlemen at the balls in Galway. But what a monstrosity – to dance quadrilles in Galway! (Petrie 1840: 106)

Of particular relevance to this work is the lack of reference by any of the collectors to new instruments such as the accordion or concertina. In the case of the collectors from the mid-nineteenth century, it could be suggestive of the fact that the accordion and concertina had not yet been adopted by traditional musicians. However, in the case of later collectors it could be inferred that, as well as being resistant to new dance forms and tune types, they were also somewhat resistant to the introduction of new instruments, seeing them perhaps, as detrimental to the preservation of this ancient music. Certainly O’Neill falls into this category and in his various publications comments on what he sees as the demise of Irish traditional music. His only references to the accordion and melodeon were in derogatory terms (O’Neill 1913). Vic and Sheila Gammon (2000: 23), writing about traditional music collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain, are in agreement with the above reservations and while they acknowledge the debt owed to collectors who “undoubtedly rescued a great deal of music that would otherwise have perished” they express disquiet regarding the “set of notions about music and music making among the lower orders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” which were established at that time:

In recent years the work of these collectors has been subject to a strong and necessary re-examination. Not surprisingly, the collectors have been found to be people of their own time, who articulated their own artistic and cultural concerns and prejudices through their work. (Gammon 2000: 23)

Boydell (2007) also concurs with the above regarding collections of aural musical traditions, but believes that these reservations should be further extended to include all literary references to Ireland including travel diaries, novels and other writings, as well as to the portrayal of Irish musicians and dancers in the iconography of the time:
The author describing a musical performance or dance, the artist portraying musicians and dancers, each selects according to their particular literary or visual perspectives and requirements, and those of their readership or public. The identity both of the author or artist and of their public has a major bearing not just on what is represented, but on what meaning lies behind the representation, whether literary or visual. These questions, which have been termed ‘visual politics’ within the context of iconography, are of particular interest for the nineteenth century portrayal of Ireland and Irish music. (Boydell 2007: 53)

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied, that without the work of this pioneering group of individuals, our knowledge of what the music of the Irish countryside was like in the nineteenth century would be greatly diminished. This was the time of the arrival of the accordion to Ireland and, while the instrument did not become assimilated into the traditional music community until later in the century, the work of the traditional music collectors of that period is central to our knowledge of the instrument’s journey into that tradition and to our understanding of the music in which it eventually settled.

Edward Bunting was the first person that we know of “who collected and published Irish music obtained from traditional musicians at first hand, ‘in the field’ so to speak” (Moloney 2000: 11). Bunting’s collections, the first of which was published in 1796 containing 66 airs, along with his unpublished manuscripts, provide a tantalizing window through which it is possible to gain some insight into the music being played by traditional musicians of the time. Although the harp had been adversely affected by the destruction of the old Gaelic aristocratic class during the seventeenth century, it was still seen as the classic Irish instrument during much of the eighteenth century with “an obsessive focus on the harp as the iconic representative of ‘ancient’ Irish music and culture” (Boydell 2007: 55). By the 1770s, though, the harp was gradually being replaced by the union or uilleann pipes and by the close of the eighteenth century the music of the harpers was in rapid decline. Nevertheless, “while the harp tradition was in decline, a new growth of traditional music was taking place among the peasantry and much of what we now call traditional music in contemporary Ireland evolved in this way” (Ó Súilleabháin 1982: 4).

The decline in the fortunes of the harp tradition prompted the setting up of the Belfast Harp Festival, which was held in July 1792. At the age of nineteen, Edward
Bunting was engaged to transcribe the music played by the harpers in the Assembly Room of the Belfast Exchange where the festival took place. This ignited his enthusiasm for the music of the native Irish and he embarked on a number of visits to different parts of the country in his efforts to notate the music, which he mainly transcribed from harpers and singers in Derry, Tyrone and later in Mayo and other western counties (Breathnach 1971; Moloney 1992; O’Sullivan 2001). Like many subsequent collectors, Bunting’s musical background was in the classical tradition of which he was very much a part. He served as organist in three churches in Belfast and was heavily involved in the organisation of the Belfast Music Festival of 1813 during which he played one of Mozart’s piano concertos as well as conducting “the first Belfast performance of Handel’s Messiah in Dr. Drummond’s church” (Moloney 2000: 13). Although he had been “particularly cautioned against adding a single note to the old melodies” (Breathnach 1971: 109), Bunting’s publications of the music he had collected did not adhere to this warning. Moloney (2000: 58) notes, in his defence, that, in the transition from draft copies to fair copies, Bunting applied very few changes to the original transcriptions and that it was only “when Bunting began to arrange material for piano that most of the editorial alterations took place”. She further implies that Bunting was aiming his publications at a particular market as “the volumes would be of little use to the musically non-literate traditional musicians and harpers who were his sources, and therefore he tried to cater for the amateur musicians amongst the middle and upper classes” (Moloney 2000: 58). However, despite the shortcomings contained in his published collections, the community of Irish traditional musicians owes a great debt to Edward Bunting and his efforts on behalf of the collection and publication of the native music of Ireland. Through his manuscripts and publications our understanding and awareness of the music making of both the rural and urban poor, among whom traditional music thrived, is substantially increased. He also provided “a wealth of information on the harp tradition and on the music of the harpers” (Moloney 1992: 26).

Bunting influenced a whole generation of collectors who gathered and published an extensive amount of traditional melodies throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Called “Famous Collectors of Irish Music” by Captain Francis O’Neill in his 1913 publication *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, they included George Petrie (1790-1866), the Hudson brothers, William (1796-1853) and Henry (1798-1889), William Forde (c. 1795-1850), John Edward Pigot (1822-
Breandán Breathnach (1971), O’Neill (1913) and in more recent times, O’Brien Moran (2007) have provided an in-depth description and analysis of the lives and works of the prominent collectors of Irish traditional music in the nineteenth century. O’Brien Moran (2007: 113) believes that the collectors “have left an interesting musical map, albeit generally without song texts, of Ireland prior to the social and cultural upheaval caused by the Great Famine… offering an insight into the performance style and repertoire before the Famine”. Therefore the works of the collectors and in particular the works of later collectors, Joyce, Goodman and O’Neill, along with the writings of observers of the time, will be used to determine what instruments and tune types were played among the traditional music community of the nineteenth century i.e. the community of musicians who, in the second half of that century, adopted the accordion and moved it further along its journey into tradition.
Chapter 5
The Nineteenth Century ‘Folk’ Musician

The accounts of music and dancing in Ireland given by most visitors to the country in travel diaries written before the Great Famine, do not include mention of the accordion or concertina and, as discussed earlier, neither do the printed collections of the time. Thus, it can be surmised that these instruments had not yet reached the traditional music community in any great numbers prior to the Famine. It also corroborates the theory that the free reed instruments were probably not in use by traditional musicians, to any great extent, until the latter decades of the nineteenth century. As we have seen, pipes and fiddle dominated the instruments in use in pre-Famine Ireland, particularly for the accompaniment of dancing. The Harp, which for many years had enjoyed an elite status in Irish musical history, was in rapid decline by the close of the eighteenth century, with only a handful of harpers available to play at the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival. However, the harp had never really been associated with the dancing of the rural people. After the breakdown of the old Gaelic order the dispossessed harpers found new audiences among the Anglo-Irish gentry and the prosperous farmers, where harp music was used for the accompaniment of songs and the playing of solo instrumental pieces. Some of the harpers, in response to their changing circumstances, played other instruments more suited to the accompaniment of the dancing of the country people. Bunting noted that Patrick Linden, one of the harpers he collected from, also played the violin when playing for ‘wakes and merry meetings in his neighbourhood’ (Bunting in Moloney 2000: 129).

5.1 Musical Contexts in Pre-Accordion Ireland

One of the most important contributors to information about traditional music in Ireland in pre-Famine times was the collector Patrick Weston Joyce. Of all the nineteenth century collectors, Joyce was probably the nearest to the people for whom traditional music was part of their daily lives (Breathnach 1971; O’Brien Moran 2007). His 1909 collection, with its preface and notes on the music, musicians and singers from whom he collected, contains a wealth of information and gives us a fascinating insight into the musical and everyday life of a community in rural Ireland in pre-Famine times. Joyce was born in Ballyorgan,
near Kilfinane, Co. Limerick, in 1827 but, while still very young, moved with his family to Glenosheen, in the heart of the Ballyhoura Mountains. As that part of Co. Limerick was then a Gaeltacht, Joyce was a native Irish speaker and grew up in a rural setting where music was central to his upbringing. There were pipers, fiddlers, fifers, whistlers and singers in abundance in the locality and he observed how the music and songs “were in the air of the valley; you heard them everywhere – sung, played, whistled; and they were mixed up with the people’s pastimes, occupations and daily life” (Joyce 1965: vii). Itinerant musicians were a prominent feature of life in rural Ireland during the nineteenth century. The collector and writer Captain Francis O’Neill noted that:

The Folk Music of Ireland, intimately associated with the joys and sorrows and pastimes of the people, has been preserved from generation to generation among the peasantry and perpetuated largely through the agency of the minstrels whose wandering mode of life was well calculated to effect that purpose. (O’Neill 1913: 102)

Wandering musicians were always welcome to Joyce’s locality as they were important carriers of new tunes or songs, which were “pretty sure to be learned and stored up to form part of an ever-growing stock of minstrelsy” (Joyce 1965: vii).

Like Joyce, Captain Francis O’Neill was born into an area rich in music. During the first half of the nineteenth century the home of his maternal grandparents in Drimoleague in West Cork was a known venue for travelling musicians and his mother, raised in these musical surroundings, had a great store of songs and tunes which she had memorised in her youth. O’Neill’s father, who was a prosperous farmer in Tralibane, three miles from Bantry, also sang songs in both Irish and English (Carolan 1997). O’Neill was born in Tralibane in 1848 during the Great Famine but his accounts of the abundance of music and musicians in his locality suggest that this area appears “to have recovered quickly from the worst effects of the Famine” (Carolan: 1997: 5). O’Neill’s writings indicate that there were professional and amateur musicians playing traditional music during the nineteenth century. In his home place, the instruments in use were fiddles, flutes and pipes, which could be heard at frequent dances held at crossroads and in farmhouses. Peter Hagerty was one of two professional pipers in the district and the young O’Neill “not yet in his teens listened for hours with awe and delight to
the music of Peter Hagerty’s pipes” (O’Neill 1913: 229-30). Hagerty was a piper of about fifty years old who was blind as a result of smallpox and the young O’Neill was obviously very taken with Hagerty and his pipes:

With what wonder and curiosity we youngsters gazed on this musical wizard, as he disjointed his drones and regulators and tested the reeds and quills with his lips… Being young and insignificant I was put to bed, out of the way, while the others went to enjoy the dance next door. It just chanced that the piper was seated close to the partition wall… Half asleep and awake the music hummed in my ears for hours, and the memory of the tunes is still vivid after the lapse of fifty years. (O’Neill in Carolan 1997: 6-7)

During the summer, every Sunday afternoon, Hagerty played at Colomane Cross “the event of the week to the peasantry for miles around” (O’Neill 1913: 230). According to O’Neill, the piper was much in demand, not just for the weekly dances but also for christenings, weddings, and other festivities especially throughout the winter months. Despite being enamoured with the pipes, Francis O’Neill began playing music on the flute, learning from a neighbour, Mr. Timothy Downing, whom he described as “a gentleman farmer of illustrious ancestry living in Tralibane” (O’Neill 1913: 410). O’Neill expressed regret at having lost “by early emigration the opportunity to learn the fiddle” since Downing was also regarded as one of the finest fiddlers in the district (O’Neill 1913: 410).

At the same time as the young O’Neill was learning to play music and while he was still at national school, another collector, who made a major contribution to our knowledge of traditional music in the nineteenth century, was serving as a Church of Ireland curate in Ardgroom, some forty miles away. In 1861, the Rev. James Goodman who had moved from Dingle in Co. Kerry, was preparing fair copies of his collection (Carolan 1997), much of which was amassed from the “playing of Munster pipers” (Goodman in Shields 1998: 4) and especially from a piper named Tom Kennedy. Born in Dingle, Co. Kerry on the 22nd September 1828, into a Church of Ireland family where he was the third child, Goodman, like O’Neill, had played the flute in boyhood and also played the pipes in later years. Goodman’s environment was conducive to music with its strong tradition of singing, in both Irish and English, along with a vibrant piping tradition. Evenings of music, song and dance often took place at the Goodman home which was visited by, among others, the piping brothers, Andy and Tom Kennedy, the
latter responsible, as indicated above, for many of the tunes in the Goodman collection (Shields 1998: xii). James Goodman spoke Irish and, from an early age, expressed a strong interest in the native music of his locality where no music was sweeter in his ears “than the surpassingly sweet music of Ireland” (Goodman in Shields 1998: xii). He was unusual among the collectors of the time, apart from Joyce, in that he lived among the people whose music and song he not alone played but also collected (Shields 1998). Goodman himself was very aware of the advantages of his situation with regard to the collection of that music:

In making a collection of Irish music I had some advantages which few others possessed, in as much as I can play on the Irish bagpipes (the instrument best suited for these old airs) besides which I have an accurate knowledge of the Irish language so that, when noting down an air, I have always made it my business to take down the words as well. I have thus become possessed of a multitude of Irish songs by means of which I am not only enabled to remember the airs, but also to give that expression to the music which the words require. (Goodman in Shields 1998: 118)

The above three collectors, along with their predecessors, give a wide window through which one can view the world of traditional music in the nineteenth century and in particular the music as it was before, during and after the Great Famine. Breathnach (1985: 15) suggested that the dance music collected from the piper Tom Kennedy was perhaps the “most important part of Goodman’s work, being as it is a census of the music of West Kerry in Pre-Famine times”. Many of the early collectors of Irish music however “were among Ireland’s intellectual and social elite” (O’Brien Moran 2007: 94) and it must be supposed that they were not affected, to any great extent, by the catastrophic events of the Great Famine although, Goodman, who was about nineteen years old at the height of the Famine in 1847, would have been keenly aware of his family’s involvement with “the missionary movement to convert Catholics to Protestantism” (Shields 1998: xi). Dingle was a prominent centre for such missionary work and James, along with his father Thomas and his brother John were active in this work. Nonetheless, given what we now know about that appalling period in Irish life, it is very difficult to reconcile the collecting of Irish traditional music, which was taking place at the time, with the scale of destitution, deprivation and death which prevailed during the Great Famine.
It is known, for example, that the collector William Forde, who was a flute player, travelled throughout Munster and Connacht in 1846 and 1847, at the height of the Famine. His search for tunes resulted in ‘a splendid store’, as described by his friend John Pigot (O’Sullivan 1958: 81). In August of the following year, 1848, Forde travelled to Cavan where he was successful in collecting a further store of music while the aforementioned John Edward Pigot also collected extensively in Connacht and Munster between the years 1840 and 1850 (O’Sullivan 1958). There are many examples in Joyce’s 1909 work too, which suggest that, in some levels of society, traditional music and song were still engaged in during the time of the Famine.

In a note to eighty-seven pieces of music acquired from William Forde, Joyce provides interesting detail about some of the music collected by Forde in 1846:

The following 87 airs… were taken down by Forde, in 1846, from the playing of Hugh O’Beirne, a professional fiddler of Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim. O’Beirne was a man of exceptional musical taste and culture, with a vast knowledge of Irish music gleaned from the purest and most authentic sources. He placed his stores of knowledge and his musical skill unreservedly at the service of Forde, who mentions him everywhere through his collection. It does not appear that Dr. Petrie ever came across him. I am greatly pleased that it has fallen to my lot – through Forde – to rescue O’Beirne’s name from oblivion – so far as “good black print” can do it; for he well deserves to be commemorated. (Joyce 1965: 296-7)

A letter, written by Forde in September 1846 to John Windle of Cork states “here I have found a Piper, Hughe Beirne, who has given about 150 airs” (Forde in De Brun 1981: 25). Thus, it appears that Joyce may have been mistaken when he described Beirne as a professional fiddler. Joyce also collected music and song in his own locality around the time of the Famine and indicates that a great number of tunes and airs were “taken down from Ned Goggin, the professional fiddle player of Glenosheen, Co. Limerick” (Joyce 1965: 11). Singers, fife players, pipers and whistlers also contributed to Joyce’s collection at this time clarifying that sectors of Irish society at the time remained relatively unaffected by the events of the Great Famine. However, in Forde’s letter mentioned above, while there is no direct reference to the Famine of the time, a hint is given that all might not have been well when he states that: “the piper H.B. has been dying for the last two or three years… stirabout and bad potatoes were working fatally on a sinking frame – but a mutton chop twice a day has changed Hugh’s face wonderfully” (Forde in De Brun 1981: 25).
5.2 Instrumentation

Evidence from the collections and travel diaries of the period, as well as from the later writing of Captain Francis O’Neill, confirm that, for the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, the pipes and fiddle were the dominant instruments in use, particularly among the professional players and itinerant musicians of the time. The iconography of the era features many paintings with idealised scenes of the piper playing for the rural poor (Boydell 2007). However, from the writings of O’Neill and, particularly his *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* first published in 1913, it is clear that pipers in the nineteenth century played in many varying contexts.

In fact, O’Neill used terms such as Gentlemen Pipers, Famous Performers on the Irish or Union Pipes, Famous Pipers and Pipers of Distinction in categorising the pipers included in the index to *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (O’Neill 1913). In the preface to the biographical sketches outlined in the book he commented on the decline of the harp but noted that the fortunes of the ‘Union bagpipe’ had increased:

> Accomplished performers on this improved and highly developed instrument became as famous as their predecessors, the harpers. They filled theatrical engagements in the principal cities of the Kingdom, and even entertained royalty on numerous occasions. (O’Neill 1913: 7)

The pipes were considered the favourite instrument of the dancers. “Indeed piping offered a respectable livelihood for any youth, who, physically incapacitated, could not hope to earn a living as an agricultural labourer, servant or tradesman” (Breathnach 1985: 6). Dancing masters invariably played the pipes or the fiddle and if they were not musicians themselves, would bring a piper or fiddler along with them. Arthur Young, the eighteenth century writer described how “dancing-masters of their own rank travel through the country from cabin to cabin with a piper or blind fiddler” (Young 1780: 36). Pipers and fiddlers not only provided music for the dancing masters’ classes but often they also played for dancing at crossroads and other venues in the neighbourhood (Breathnach 1985). Musical dancing masters were also important sources of new tunes when they arrived in an area. Joyce, in his 1909 publication, included tunes collected from piper and dancing master, Dave Cleary in Kilfinane, close to his homeplace of Glenosheen. Among these were a hornpipe called *Ardlamon*, which he got from the dancing master in 1842, along with a
piece called *Young Jenny the Pride of Our Town* which was described as a jig and song air taken down from Dave Cleary in 1844 (O’Keeffe 2003).

The Flute was also used by traditional musicians of the nineteenth century. Captain Francis O’Neill played the flute and stated that:

…no musical instrument was in such common use among the Irish peasantry as the flute. From the penny whistle to the keyed instrument in sections it was always deservedly popular, for unlike the fiddle and the bagpipe it involved no expense beyond the purchase price. Complete in itself, the flute needed but a wetting to be always in tune, and disjointed or whole could be carried about without display or inconvenience. (O’Neill 1913: 409)

However, despite repeatedly indicating that flute players were numerous in every corner of Ireland, O’Neill’s accounts of musicians playing the instrument are considerably less than those for pipers and fiddle players, with just eight musicians discussed in a chapter titled ‘The Flute and its Patrons’ (O’Neill 1913). He cited the fact that “as most Irish fluters were amateurs, or rather non-professionals, few are the imprints which their footsteps have left on the sands of time” (O’Neill 1913: 410). He also added that flute playing was “too arduous for any but the young and robust” and since “musicians of that class rarely took to the roads like the pipers and fiddlers, their fame at best was only local” (O’Neill 1913: 411). A further explanation for the low numbers of flute players in O’Neill’s biographical accounts may be found in Breathnach’s (1971) suggestion that the flute could have been a late addition to the tradition with an arrival date of earlier than the eighteenth century unlikely. Where there is mention of the instrument in the eighteenth century, it is called a German flute as in the 1724 *A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish Tunes*, which were set for the violin, German flute and hautboy.

In his memoirs, the harper, Arthur O’Neill, described a visit to the home of Mr. Jones of Streamstown, Co. Sligo towards the end of the nineteenth century. Mr. Jones was a patron of music and had four sons and three daughters who were all musicians. Arthur O’Neill was present at a meeting of forty-six musicians in the house where “the musicians played in the following order”:
Carolán (1997) believes that by the early decades of the nineteenth century the simple-system wooden flute began to be played by traditional musicians in Ireland. As with the accordion and concertina, the flute, prior to its use by these musicians, appears to have been the preserve of the better off classes with the result that “it may still have had an aura of its more privileged beginnings, and it was an instrument rarely played by professional traditional musicians” (Carolán 1997: 7). It is interesting therefore, to note that at least four of the collectors of traditional music during the nineteenth century played the flute as opposed to fiddle or pipes. Forde, O’Neill, and Goodman all played the flute and, while the latter did also play the pipes, it appears that he had reached manhood when he began to play those (Shields 1998). Joyce was known to carry a fife in his pocket:

I generally carried in my pocket a little fife from which I could roll off jigs, reels, hornpipes, hop-jigs, song tunes etc without limit. (Joyce in Seoíghé 1987: 10)

As the fife was played in the same manner as a flute, it is possible that he played that instrument also. Certainly there were flute players in his area, one being Daniel Maloney, who was born in 1844 near Kilfinane, close to Joyce’s homeplace. He was described as “the most distinguished performer on the German flute in a family noted for its fluters” (O’Neill 1913: 412).

Hastings (1999: 130) considers the fife, which appears to have enjoyed widespread use in nineteenth century Ireland, to be the ancestor of the modern flute and the forerunner of the tin whistle. Although it was more commonly associated with the military music of the many British army regiments scattered throughout the country, the example mentioned above of Joyce playing dance music on it when he was younger, as well as references to fife players such as
Bill Sheedy, from whom he collected in 1844, suggests that the instrument could have been in common use among traditional musicians. While there is no significant mention of the instrument being used by dancing masters or travelling professional musicians, Joyce did perform on the fife for dancers while he was at school. The school was held in a large upstairs room while the landlady lived downstairs with her family. Joyce described how he and many of the students would arrive up to half an hour earlier than the master in the mornings:

…and then out came the fife and they cleared the floor for a dance. It was simply magnificent to see and hear those athletic fellows dancing on the bare boards with their thick-soled, well-nailed heavy shoes – so as to shake the whole house. And not one in the lot was more joyous than I was, for they were mostly good dancers and did full justice to my spirited strains. At last in came the master; there was no cessation, and he took his seat, looking on complacently ‘till the bout was finished when I put up my fife and the serious business of the day commenced. (Joyce in Seoighe 1987: 10)

As noted earlier, the flute was also used for dancing when the American evangelical, Asenath Nicholson welcomed a party of dancers to the cabin she was staying in Co. Kilkenny prior to the Great Famine.

Pipes, fiddles, and flutes of many different kinds, including the whistle and fife, were the main instruments in use among the traditional music community of the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. The jews harp must also be mentioned and while references to it are rare, it too was used by traditional musicians in that period and possibly, was played for dancing. O’Neill makes reference to it stating that “the appearance of a piper, fiddler or fluter, or even a man with a jews-harp was sufficient to draw a crowd of the youth of both sexes to enjoy a dance or listen to the music” (O’Neill 1913: 112). An account from the last quarter of the nineteenth century tells of a Kerry piper who played for ball nights in his area. He also played the flute and was considered the best jews-harp player in Ireland. He used to play two jews-harps together using his little fingers and could play the ‘Fox Chase’ with the two jews harps together (Ó Rócháin 1973):

Ard-cheoltóir ab ea Sean Fox agus bhiodh m’athair in éineacht leis ins na ball nights. Sheinneadh sé na piobai agus fluit agus ba é an seinteoir triumpa ba bhreatha a bhí in Éirinn. Sheinneadh sé dhá triumpa lena dhá lúidín. Ba mhór an bua a bhí aige agus sheinneadh sé An Maidrín Rua leis an dá thriumpa. (Ó Rócháin 1973: 2)
5.3 Repertoire

The popularity of dancing among the rural people ensured that the majority of the music played on pipes, fiddles, flutes and other home produced instruments during the nineteenth century was essentially dance music. While there were certain pipers who played only airs and slow pieces, as has been discussed, they appear to have been in the minority. Again, the nineteenth century collectors provide invaluable information with regard to the tunes and tune types played by traditional musicians of the period. Bunting, who was originally employed to take down the music of the harpers at the 1792 Belfast harp festival, was so taken by the music that he embarked on a lifelong career of collecting and publishing it. His manuscripts provide us with some of the earliest examples of the types of music being played by the traditional music community in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While reservations have been expressed earlier on a number of issues regarding the collecting and publications undertaken by Bunting, the fact still remains that his manuscripts are a major repository of the dance music pieces current at that time. In fact many of the tunes collected by Bunting are still played by traditional musicians today (Moloney 2000). His manuscripts indicate that Bunting collected a wide variety of material from traditional singers and musicians. This included airs, jigs and set dances as well as a few pieces composed by Carolan. According to Moloney (2000), there are no examples of hornpipes or reels in the pieces collected from traditional musicians. However, a number of Irish single reels were included, along with marches, quicksteps and retreats, in a manuscript of 124 items which Moloney (2000) suggests could have been collected from musicians of military origin.

In his preface to *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs* (1909), Joyce, in an account of the dance tunes in use just before the Great Famine, illustrates the wide variety of dance music being played in Munster at that time:

> The Dance tunes that prevailed in the Munster counties, twenty-five or thirty years ago [i.e. about 1845], were chiefly the Reel, the Double Jig, the Single Jig, the Hop Jig, and the Hornpipe. (Joyce 1965: xix)

This is confirmed by Goodman in his introduction to Volume 1 of his manuscripts, where he indicated that he had included “nearly 700 airs, for the most part Irish
ones, of every description, Jigs, Reels, Hornpipes, Marches, & Slow Airs in endless variety” (Goodman in Shields 1998: 3). As with today’s traditional music – and presuming that Joyce listed the tunes in order of popularity – the reel, which, Joyce states was in common or two-four time, seems to have taken pride of place. There were three types of jigs in vogue before the Famine. The double jig and single jig were both in six-eight time but they differed in that the bars of the double jig “usually consisted of six quavers in two triplets”, while the single jig had bars with the triplet of the double jig “generally, though not invariably represented by a crochet followed by a quaver” (Joyce 1965: xix). According to Joyce, the third jig type described by him, the hop jig, also known as the slip jig and slip time, was “almost peculiar to Ireland” (Joyce 1965: xix), a theory previously proposed by Petrie (Breathnach 1971: 6) “who expressed the opinion that the hop jig evolved from a class of ancient Irish vocal melodies”. Breathnach, however, disagreed with Petrie’s premise and alluded to early English collections where numerous tunes in nine-eight time can be found. Like the reel, the hornpipe played just before the Famine was in common or two-four time and Joyce stresses that “it was played not quite so quickly as the Reel” (Joyce 1965: xix). Set dance tunes, which related to a specific dance with some variation in measure and length, were also common in pre-Famine Munster. Joyce attributed the names of the dance tune types to the manner in which they were danced except for the hornpipe. He also indicated that men, unaccompanied by a partner, performed both the hornpipe and set dance (Joyce 1965: xix).

While Joyce did not include quadrilles in the list of dance tunes being played in Munster in 1845, an example of a quadrille is contained in his 1909 collection Old Irish Folk Music and Songs where it is simply called “Old Irish Quadrille”. The tune is in two-four time and, while there are no indications as to where the tune came from, advice is given to play it “with spirit: not too fast” (Joyce 1965: 131). This would suggest that it was collected later in the nineteenth century as Petrie’s accounts of the quadrille, danced by the ladies and gentlemen at the balls in Galway during 1840, indicated that the quadrille was a “drowsy walk” where the dancers looked “as if they were going to their grandmothers’ funerals” (Petrie 1840: 106). It seems more likely that the quadrille in Joyce’s collection was played for the more rapid set dancing which had evolved through the dancing masters
from the middle of the century. Likewise, William Forde collected a number of tunes from a “Michael Walsh, a good professional fiddler” (Joyce 1965: 336) from Strokestown, Co. Roscommon. Among them was a dance tune type in common time titled “A Country Dance”. A number of these were printed in Joyce’s *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs* and as with the quadrille above, were to be played “with spirit: not too fast” suggesting the possibility that they were also linked with the various figures of the newly popular set dances which were beginning to impact on rural communities from the mid-nineteenth century on. By the end of that century, music for set dancing was being actively collected by Francis Roche who defended the inclusion of these tunes in his publications:

> It may be objected to by some that the work contains matter foreign to a collection of Irish music, such as Quadrilles, or “Sets,” as they are popularly called, and other dance tunes also. That objection may be admitted as regards their origin, but they have become Irish by association, and so long as the people dance Sets, etc., it is better they should do so to the old tunes in which their parents delighted, rather than be left depending on those books from across the water containing the most hackneyed of Moore’s Melodies mixed up with music hall trash, and perhaps a few faked jigs and reels thrown in by way of padding. (Roche 1927: 7)

In discussing the repertoire and performance styles of vernacular musicians and singers in England in the decades before 1850, Vic and Sheila Gammon (2000) draw attention to what they describe as “the eclecticism of lower class musical culture” and suggest that “this culture drew its repertoire from a wide range of available sources, including oral tradition, ballad sheets, psalms, popular songs, popular church music, military music and popular dance tunes” (Gammon and Gammon 2000: 124). The Irish traditional musician in the nineteenth century was no different, and there are many examples of musicians incorporating tunes from varied sources into their repertoire, such as the piper Paddy Conneely playing the new quadrilles and galoppes for the collector George Petrie in 1840 (Petrie 1840), or the dancing masters playing and teaching minuets and country dances in the period after the Napoleonic wars (Breathnach 1971). The music of military bands, which were to be found in every corner of Ireland during the nineteenth century, was also assimilated into the repertoire of the traditional musician reaching as far as the Blasket Islands off the West Kerry coast, where the military two-step ‘The Barren Rocks of Aden’ was played as a polka (Ní Chaoimh 1992). While there are a number of pieces in waltz time included in Joyce’s *Old Irish Folk Music and*
Songs, many are song airs without text. Two examples were recorded as waltzes in 1997 on the CD *Re Joyce*. Both are very much associated with Joyce’s homeplace, Glenosheen. ‘Jem the Miller’, (no.163), was collected by Joyce from Ned Goggin, the fiddle player from Glenosheen who was a major source of music for Joyce during the years 1844 to 1850. Another example, ‘The Piper’s Wife’, (No. 22), was collected from the singing of neighbour Mrs Mary MacSweeney of Glenosheen around 1848 (O’Keeffe 2003).

The dance music repertoire among traditional musicians of nineteenth century Ireland also appears to have been very regionally based. Maloney (2000) concurs in her analysis of the various tune types collected by Edward Bunting and suggests that the fact that he only collected airs and jigs along with some Carolan pieces from traditional musicians, could indicate that perhaps hornpipes and reels did not form part of the traditional musician’s repertoire in Connacht and the north-western parts of the country. However, one must also bear in mind that it could have been a conscious decision on Bunting’s part not to collect these rhythms since they may have been viewed as foreign influences at the time. Nevertheless, the possibility of reels being part of the repertoire of early nineteenth century traditional musicians in the northern counties is strengthened by the inclusion in Bunting’s manuscripts of Irish single reels among a group of tunes which, as mentioned earlier, could have been part of the repertoire of a musician with a military background. Moloney (2000) suggests that these military tunes give a glimpse of the assimilation of items from traditional music of the time into the military repertoire. Another hint that the traditional music of nineteenth century Ireland was quite regionally based is provided in the writings of Joyce who states that when he first came to Dublin, in the early 1850s, he discovered that many of the tunes he had collected and learned in his own area prior to the Famine were “unpublished, and quite unknown outside the district or province in which they had been learned” (Joyce 1965: vii). This suggests and lends credence to the fact that many tunes were still local and very much part of a regional style and repertoire. Joyce further discovered from the Forde and Pigot manuscripts that a similar situation existed in other areas of Ireland where different tunes could be found in the traditional musician’s repertoire (Joyce 1965).
Another interesting feature of Irish traditional music repertoire in the nineteenth century was the fact that the cross fertilisation of Irish and Scottish music appears to have already begun in earnest during that period, with many Irish traditional musicians incorporating tunes from Scotland into their repertoire. Evidence of this can be found in the collections of Joyce, Forde and Goodman all of whom include tunes which can be sourced to a number of Scottish collections from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. ‘Johnny from Gandsey’ for example, was published by Joyce as a reel which he had learned in his childhood and “committed to writing from memory” (Joyce 1965: 13). A strathspey version of this tune called ‘John of Badenyon’ was published in James Aird’s six volume collection (O’Keeffe 2003) the first of which was published in August 1782 with the title A Selection of 200 Scots English Irish and Foreign Airs, adapted to the Fife, Violin, or German Flute. The tune was known to be popular among Scottish fiddle players who immigrated to Cape Breton Island in the wake of the notorious highland clearances of the mid-eighteenth century and it can also be found in the Skye Collection, first published in 1887. Another reel, which Joyce states was written down from his own memory, was ‘The Fifer’s Reel’ (Joyce 1965: 44). This was included in the collections of the renowned Gow family who were prolific composers and publishers of the fiddle music of Scotland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is called ‘Miss Johnston’ in the Gow Collection and its composition was attributed to a Mrs Robertson (O’Keeffe 2003). A tune collected by William Forde called ‘The Nine Points of Knavery’ and included by Joyce in his 1909 collection Old Irish Folk Music and Songs can also be found in the 1887 Scottish Skye Collection where it is known as the ‘Nine Pint Coggie’ and while it could be argued that, since Forde collected in the mid 1840s the tune could possibly be Irish, it is, however, more than likely of Scottish origin. ‘Guiry’s Reel’ which was also included by Joyce is another tune with Scottish links. Joyce indicated that it was one of twenty-four tunes in two very old and well-written manuscripts sent to him in 1873 by a Mr J. O’Sullivan from Bruff in Co. Limerick. Known in Scotland under the title of ‘Lady Montgomery’, its composition has been credited to Lord Eglington who was Col. Hugh Montgomerie (1749 – 1819), an M.P. for Ayrshire in Scotland (Hunter 1988). The tune was also published in Ryan’s Mammoth Collection in Boston in 1883 (O’Keeffe 2003). Goodman also included tunes with Scottish titles such as ‘Killicrankie’ and ‘Neil Gow’s Second Wife’ along with an unnamed strathspey and a minuet with the title ‘Orange and Green’. All of these were marked with a K which
could suggest they were written down from Tom Kennedy, the piper who was Goodman’s most important source. However as Goodman failed to leave detailed explanations for this K it has also been suggested that the K could mean tunes from Kerry (Shields 1998). Nevertheless, the first option does seem the more likely. Thus we find that in West Kerry, just before the Great Famine, the traditional music repertoire, in addition to containing reels, jigs, hornpipes and airs, also included tunes from Scotland and music associated with the new dances coming in from abroad such as minuets and quicksteps.

5.4 ‘The Land of Song is No Longer Tuneful’ – Traditional Music and the Great Famine

There is a vast array of literature available on the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. Numerous scholars have extensively documented the causes, devastating effects and aftermath of this period in Irish life, which Ó Gráda (1989: 57) likened to “the Bolshevik Revolution in Russian history or the Great War in British” in the sense that the Famine was “the great divide in modern Irish economic and social history”. Among the many writers on various Famine related topics are those included in Edwards’ and Williams’ 1956 landmark contribution The Great Famine, Studies in Irish History 1845-52 (1994) as well as Ó Gráda (1989, 1993 and 1994b); Pórtéir (1995a, 1995b) and Gray (1995). Contemporary newspapers such as the Illustrated London News and the Cork Examiner also recorded chilling accounts of the suffering and deprivation experienced by large sectors of the Irish population during Famine times. McHugh (1994) provides a different perspective on the Famine through his analysis of information, gleaned from the answers to a questionnaire on the Great Famine which was distributed by the Folklore Commission during the 1940s. Much of this was answered by direct descendants of Famine survivors. Pórtéir (1995b: 17) who edited these recollections in an effort to give a voice to the ordinary people who suffered worst during the Famine, believes that not only can traditional material such as that collected by the Irish Folklore Commission “offer us an opportunity to view the events of the Famine from a perspective rarely afforded us by other sources, it also paints a picture of what was believed to have happened by the generations who lived directly after the tragedy”. Schrier (1997) meanwhile, focused on the social, economic and religious impact which emigration had on
Ireland both during and after the Famine although Murphy (2003) does point out that emigration from Ireland had already been taking place on a fairly substantial scale prior to the events of 1845 – 49 suggesting that “in the years between Waterloo and the Famine, one million went to North America, half a million to Britain and thirty thousand to Australia” (Murphy 2003: 104). Ó Gráda (1994a: xiv) concurs with Murphy’s assessment of pre-Famine emigration noting that “there had, of course, been a considerable measure of emigration from Ireland before the Famine”. He suggests that “emigration during the early 1840s had been 50,000-100,000 a year” (Ó Gráda 1995: 254). Emigration to Britain had begun many centuries earlier and “by the late eighteenth century there were already sizeable Irish settlements in some British towns and cities, particularly London and Lancashire” (Ó Tuathaigh 1981: 151). The intense influx of immigrants to predominantly urban centres continued to increase considerably in the early years of the nineteenth century, reaching a peak during the years of 1845-51 (Ó Tuathaigh 1981).

The Great Famine marked a fundamental watershed in all aspects of Irish life. Cunningham (1997) believes that the catastrophe can be understood on a number of levels:

...as a regional tragedy which affected the west most severely; as a class tragedy which nearly wiped out the labouring population; as a cultural tragedy, which devastated those communities where the Irish language and culture were strongest. (Cunningham 1997: 3)

The history of Irish traditional music and its culture was also much changed. Musicians, singers and dancers in the communities affected by the Famine suffered in the same way as their audiences and like them were assigned “to the mass grave, the workhouse, and the coffin ship” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1999b: 117). O’Neill (1913) describes how the Famine affected the piper, Paddy Conneely who, prior to the Famine, had lived in what Petrie had described as comfortable circumstances:

The Famine years proved disastrous to him in many ways. Sadness instead of gaiety universally prevailed, and music had lost its appeal even were our hero – then in broken health – capable of furnishing it. Paralysis gradually sapped his strength and he passed away in 1850, relieved of anxiety for the welfare of his two boys, who were cared for by the Christian Brothers. (O’Neill 1913: 215)
O’Neill however, also acknowledges that the role of the piper and fiddler in Irish music was being challenged prior to the Famine when “brass bands, nearly as numerous as the branches of the temperance societies instituted as a result of Father Matthew’s crusade, drove the Union piper and fiddler out of fashion” (O’Neill 1913: 153). Mr and Mrs Samuel Carter Hall, who travelled throughout Ireland prior to the Great Famine, also noted the threat posed by temperance bands to the livelihood of the piper (Ó hAllmhuráin 1999b).

Newly composed song texts in both Irish and English were few in number during the Famine period. Nevertheless, those that are extant illuminate the changing environment of the traditional musician and singer, both during and after that period (Ó Gráda 1994b, Ó hAllmhuráin 1999b). In discussing what he terms the ‘changing habitat’ of the traditional musician and singer, Ó hAllmhuráin (1999b: 118) observes that “as well as indexing local fatalities, hunger, and emigration, the Irish songs also lament the lack of gaiety and courtship, music and matchmaking which clearly characterized the social life of rural communities before the Famine”. In songs such as ‘Amhrán an Ghorta,’ from the Dingle peninsula and the Clare song ‘Lone Shanakyle’ graphic images of the tragic scale of the Famine in these areas are portrayed. Believed to have been written by an anonymous female (Ó Gráda 1994b), ‘Amhrán an Ghorta’ mourns the change in music making and merriment which the Famine triggered and attacks the Poor Law Guardians for failing to provide suitable relief for the local people:


The poet Thomas Madigan (1797-1881), from Kilrush, where 3,900 people died in the workhouse during the years 1847-49 and are buried in a mass grave in Shanakyle on the outskirts of the town, composed the song of exile ‘Lone Shanakyle’. He depicts the appalling realities of Famine in Kilrush and its surrounding areas with workhouses, overcrowded beyond capacity, as well as piles of coffin less bodies and quick-lime burials (Ó hAllmhuráin 1999b). Songs from Connacht tell a similar story. ‘Na Fataí Bána’ (The White Potatoes) written by Peatsái Ó Callanáin from Craughwell in Co. Galway, describes overcrowded
hospitals and workhouses with survivors eating yellow meal twice a day (Ó Gráda 1994b). Ó Callanáin also remarks on the hopelessly inadequate wages given to the poor who worked on the public road schemes and contrasts the “flagrant indifference of the rich, whose tables are laden down with food and drink, with the helplessness of the hungry poor who no longer have the will to live” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1999b: 120).

The collector George Petrie also acknowledged that the Famine had changed the landscape of traditional music in Ireland noting that “the land of song was no longer tuneful” but was replaced by an “awful, unwonted silence, which, during the Famine and subsequent years, almost everywhere prevailed”. He commented on the extent of the loss of “the Irish remnant of the great Celtic family” (Petrie 2003: viii) and acknowledged the large amounts of musicians, singers and poets who left Ireland during and after the Famine, leaving in their wake an emptiness for the generation which followed:

Of the old, who had still preserved as household gods the language, the songs, and traditions of their race and their localities, but few survived. Of the middle-aged and energetic whom death had yet spared, and who might for a time, to some extent, have preserved such relics, but few remained that had the power to fly from the plague and panic stricken land, and of the young, who had come into existence, and become orphaned, during those years of desolation, they, for the most part were reared where no mother’s eyes could make them feel the mysteries of human affections – no mother’s voice could soothe their youthful sorrows, and implant within the memories of their hearts her songs of tenderness and love, – and where no father’s instructions could impart to them the traditions and characteristic peculiarities of feeling that would link them to their remotest ancestors. (Petrie 2003: viii)

Emigration was a major feature of Irish life in the aftermath of the Great Famine and as mentioned above, musicians were not exempt from its effects. An occupation, which had once proved so fruitful, especially for those afflicted by blindness, no longer provided sufficient employment and musicians who could do so were forced to emigrate. A major factor, which exacerbated the position of traditional musicians in the aftermath of the Famine, was the renewed opposition of the Catholic clergy to Irish traditional music and dancing. O’Neill (1913) believed strongly that the Catholic clergy in Ireland were instrumental in the marked decline in Irish music in the post Famine period. He had personal experience of how a new parish priest “having no ear for music or appreciation
of peasant pastimes, forbade “Patrons” and dances of all kinds in the parish” (O’Neill in Breathnach 1977: 117). This resulted in hard times for the local blind piper Hagerty who, up until then, had provided a comfortable living for his wife and family through his dance music played at Colomane Cross. After the priest’s decree “the poor afflicted man, thus deprived of his only means of making a livelihood, finally took refuge in the poorhouse – the last resource of helpless poverty and misfortune – and died there” (O’Neill in Breathnach 1977: 117). The clergy had exhibited anti-dancing feelings throughout history, but the people had always been “quietly but firmly determined to follow their own will in the matter” (Brennan 1999: 121). In Dingle, Co. Kerry the parish piper Tom Kennedy “enjoyed a certain affluence until dancing was prohibited by the parish priest whereupon he was reduced to poverty and distress” (Breathnach 1985: 15). He joined the local missionary group and became a ‘souper’ and was the major source of tunes for the collector Canon Goodman. Nonetheless, for the majority of musicians, the Famine had changed their natural environment and people were particularly affected by the decrees of the Catholic clergy. Miller (1984: 534-535) suggests that the reason why the Catholic clergy held such sway at this time was “simply that the Famine, by eliminating the bottom strata of Irish agrarian society, wiped out that segment of their flock which would have been least amenable to the kind of discipline they had tried to impose”. In this atmosphere where they were no longer able to make a living at their usual occupation of playing music for the dancing, those pipers and fiddlers who could do so, left Irish shores resulting in O’Neill’s comment:

The capricious exercise of authority which forced the discontinuance of the time-honored crossroads and farmstead dances gave the death blow to Irish minstrelsy and music, and made Ireland the anomaly among nations - a land without pleasures or pastimes. (O’Neill 1913: 154)

Thus, thousands of Irish traditional musicians were among the 1.8 million people who left Irish shores for America between 1844 and 1855, with an estimated 350,000 of these believed to have come through Canadian ports (Moloney 1992:16). Those who survived the perilous journey across the Atlantic tailored their craft for new audiences and venues and adapted their playing to new performance locations such as music halls, vaudeville and other performance contexts. Many musicians chose to settle in Canada in areas such as Quebec, Montreal and Newfoundland where they quickly became part of the musical
traditions there, while others crossed the border into the United States. A glance at O’Neill’s *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* gives an indication of the amount of Irish musicians in America in post-Famine times and also of the various musical situations they found themselves in. The blind piper Patrick Flannery, for instance, was a native of Ballinasloe, Co. Galway, where he was a renowned musician from his youth. He was well advanced in years when he arrived in New York City in 1845. According to O’Neill (O’Neill 1913:204), “money was showered upon him as he played in the streets, so keen was the appreciation of his wonderful music”. Another piper who arrived in America in 1850 was Kildare musician, John Hicks who was one of the most popular pipers with a mixed or an American audience “because of his versatility in playing all kinds of modern music, including polkas, waltzes and schottisches” (O’Neill 1913: 225).

Those who remained in Ireland in the aftermath of the Famine faced major alterations, particularly in rural life, which experienced a major re-ordering of its class structure. According to Hirsch (1991: 1116 – 1117), rural Ireland was changed significantly “by the dominant growth of small-farmer proprietorships, the relentless decrease in population in the wake of the Famine, and the virtual destruction of a viable Gaelic-speaking community paralleled by a significant growth in English-literacy rates”. A respondent to the Irish Folklore Commission’s questionnaire on the Famine described what happened in his locality when sixty-two small farmers left the Hudson Estate in Glenville, Co. Cork to emigrate to America:

> Then commenced the change. The idle houses were razed to the ground. The fences levelled and large regular fields from 50 to 70 acres each took their place. The stones of the houses were used for building. A demesne wall about ten times the size of the original demesne was the result. (Póirtéir 1995b: 254)

In pre-Famine Ireland a practice known as rundale was the most widespread method for the distribution of land. This involved clusters of houses known as clachans where extended families lived and worked the land, growing potatoes for food and oats to pay the rent. Associated with the rundale system was the practice of booleying where livestock were moved to higher pastures during the crop-growing season (Ni Scannláin 1999; Bell and Watson 2008). The rundale system facilitated rapid growth in population as well as much sub-division of land and from the mid-nineteenth century many landlords sought to reform this agricultural
practice by re-distributing their tenants. One such landowner was Lord George Hill in Gweedore, Co. Donegal. In his writings shortly after the Great Famine, he described how he managed to persuade his tenants to abandon the rundale system, eventually accomplishing the re-distribution of his some twenty thousand acres of land. This involved the majority of his tenants having to move house, literally, from their former small clusters to the new farms:

This, though troublesome to them, was not a very expensive affair; as the custom on such occasions is, for the person who has the work to be done, to hire a fiddler, upon which ‘engagement’ all the neighbours joyously assemble, and carry in an incredibly short time, the stones and timber upon their backs to the new site: men women and children alternately dancing and working while daylight lasts, at the termination of which they adjourn to some dwelling where they finish the night, often prolonging the dance to dawn of day, and with little entertainment but that which a fiddler or two affords. (Hill in MacAoidh 1994: 30)

While it would be difficult to believe that tenants joyously assembled to move their entire houses, the above account, albeit through the perhaps rose-tinted spectacles of a landlord, does provide us with evidence that while traditional Irish music was seriously challenged by the depletion of its stock of musicians in the years after the Famine, it still survived in the rural countryside despite the changing face of the traditional musician’s habitat.

It was in this context that the accordion, which, as already discussed, had been in Ireland from the early 1830s, began the process of assimilation into the body of instruments on which traditional Irish music was performed. While hard evidence of the exact date of its adoption into traditional music is unavailable, it is clear that a number of factors, namely the decline in the number of pipers (O’Neill 1913), the growing popularity of set dancing (Breathnach 1971) and the availability of lower priced instruments, provided an opening for the introduction of the accordion into traditional music.
Chapter 6
Enter the Accordion
– A New Voice in Irish Traditional Music

The latter half of the nineteenth century was indeed a testing time for traditional music in Ireland. Many musicians and commentators felt the music had been decimated as a result of the Great Famine, and they lamented the passing of the old ways. O’Neill (1913: 153) believed that it was pointless elaborating on “the demoralizing influence of the Famine years… on Irish music and minstrelsy” as the effects of it were everywhere to be seen. Writing about an “able pipemaker” named Harrington from Cork, O’Neill describes how “discouraged by the direful condition of affairs resulting from the Famine, Harrington emigrated to America and all trace of him was lost” (O’Neill 1913: 159). Nevertheless, it could also be argued that the latter half of the nineteenth century was one of the most important periods in the history of Irish traditional music, since it was during that time that the instrumentation of the music changed significantly. Up to the time of the Famine, as has been outlined in the previous chapter, the pipes, fiddle and various forms of flutes and whistles were the dominant instruments in use for playing traditional music. In the wake of the Famine, this pattern was altered with the addition of the free reed instruments, the accordion and concertina.

In 1845 the writer William Makepeace Thackeray travelled to Ireland with the express purpose of writing his Irish Sketch Book, portraying the Irish people. On a visit to Killarney he attended a stag hunt after which he was taken to the lawn of Kenmare Cottage, a popular picnic location for the gentry. There he encountered an old piper “making a very feeble music with a handkerchief spread over his face”. Some yards away “a little smiling German boy was playing an accordion and singing a ballad of Hauff’s” (Thackeray 1845: 114). Could this be the first indication that, on the eve of the Famine, the accordion was beginning to make its way into the hearts and hands of the traditional musician? Street musicians were a common sight on the main streets of towns and cities during this period (Penny Journal 1841) and such musicians were also to be found at rural picnics and other social occasions. Previously the pipes had provided most of the entertainment, but the above example of the little German boy playing the accordion, some yards
away from an old, feeble piper, is almost a harbinger of what was to come. However, prices of accordions as they appeared in contemporary newspaper advertisements would continue to indicate that, for the next two decades at least, the accordion was to remain the preserve of the better-off sections of society.

There is a strong likelihood that it was indeed through street musicians that the accordion and the concertina first made their way into the music of the ordinary people. The portability of the new free reed instruments does seem to have made them instantly attractive to this itinerant group. Another and possibly more important factor in the adoption of the free reed instruments by the lower classes was the continually dropping price of both accordions and concertinas from the mid 1860s onwards. In attempting to ascertain the status of the accordion and the contexts in which it was found in its earliest decades in Ireland, i.e. if it was used initially by the better-off classes, and at what point the instrument began to be taken up by people who played what we now term traditional music, contemporary newspapers are central to research in this area, as advertisements for concerts and music shops provide a valuable source for the earliest indication of prices and types of accordions available in Ireland in the decades after the Famine. The Freeman’s Journal in particular provides some interesting and helpful information, especially for the period encompassing the mid 1850s. The following sections will outline the journey of the accordion from the status of a middle class instrument to that of a new voice in traditional music. It will show how initial high prices dictated that the accordion was the preserve of the better-off classes in its earliest days in Ireland. It will also trace the pattern of falling prices throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth century as well as the introduction of cheaper instruments. These changes resulted in many working class and rural musicians gaining access to the instrument and helped the accordion further along its journey into tradition.

6.1 Concerts, Music Shops and the Accordion

In the early 1850s, prize concerts proved to be a popular form of entertainment among middle and upper class society in Dublin and were also, it seems, a novel method of attracting a large audience, as described by an unknown correspondent in The Living Age, published in 1851, who wrote that:
…a new scheme for obtaining a full audience has been successfully tried in Dublin. A cottage piano, a cornopean, an accordion, and other instruments were distributed as prizes among those who took tickets of admission. The concert is described as not of the first order, but the audience were quite satisfied with the excitement of the lottery. (Anon 1851: 287–88)

In The Freeman’s Journal of Monday September 15th 1851, one such concert was announced along with details of a change of venue:

Mr. Levey begs to announce that in consequence of some legal difficulties connected with the Theatre Royal, it is quite impossible that his Entertainment can take place at that establishment as announced. Mr. Levey has therefore taken the above suite of rooms for the GRAND PRIZE CONCERT, which will now take place on SATURDAY EVENING Next, 20th Instant; and notwithstanding the serious loss which he must sustain in consequence of the change, Mr. Levey will still distribute the following VALUABLE PRIZES, as originally intended. (Freeman’s Journal, Sept 15, 1851)

The valuable prizes mentioned above included a first prize of a Rosewood Cottage Pianoforte with a second prize of a “first Class Cornopean, with Bradshaw’s new patent valves, manufactured, by Robinson and Bussell, and with all the latest improvements, value £9 9s”. Third prize was “A beautiful Accordion, of the best, and newest description, from Mr. Bray’s, Westmoreland Street, value £5 5s”. The last prize offered was “an elegant and complete edition of Moore’s Irish Melodies (music and words), as published by Robinson and Bussell”. It was promised that the concert would be “varied and attractive, including all AVAILABLE TALENT”. Ticket prices were 3s for reserved seats and 2s for Promenade with the drawing of prizes being open to all (Freeman’s Journal, 15 Sept, 1851). The price quoted of £5 5s for the “beautiful accordion” is an indicator that the instruments were in general use among the wealthier classes in Ireland.

From October to December, 1851, further advertisements appeared in The Freeman’s Journal for prize concerts hosted by a Mr. Mackintosh in a venue advertised simply as “Music Hall”. (Freeman’s Journal, 28 Oct 28, 4 Nov, 8 Dec, 1851). No indication of an address for this establishment was given but mention at the end of the announcement that “Mr Henry Russell will shortly visit Dublin for a limited engagement” coupled with the fact that it was published in the Dublin based newspaper, The Freeman’s Journal, leads one to believe that the “Music
Hall” was situated in Dublin. Also advertised in the same paper was a prize concert billed as “The Grandest Prize Concert Yet Given in Dublin” where Senora De La Vega announced that her fourth grand prize concert would take place in the concert hall of the Mechanics’ Institute at Lower Abbey Street “on a scale of attraction unprecedented in Dublin”. Senora de la Vega was to be assisted “by the principal Vocal and Instrumental Talent of Dublin” and a “Splendid Military Band” was also to be in attendance.

Mr. Mackintosh’s series of concerts are of particular interest to this work in that “after the concert of vocal and instrumental music” a number of musical instruments, among them accordions, were included among the prizes offered or, as the contemporary account in The Living Age suggests, raffled at each of the three events. In the October and November concerts of 1851, as well as the main prize of a “magnificent pianoforte” valued at £50, “six accordions” were offered as prizes each night along with the “two excellent violins, a beautiful concertina with 48 notes” and a number of “handsome guitars” (Freeman’s Journal, 28 Oct, 4 Nov, 1851). Apart from the magnificent pianoforte valued at £50, no reference was made to the price or value of the instruments, but in the third concert, which was advertised by Mr. Mackintosh on the 8th of December 1851, “three handsome accordions” were offered with a value of £3 while a “first-class new, London-made concertina” was valued at £12 12s. (Freeman’s Journal, 8 Dec, 1851). These prize concerts are of specific importance to our knowledge of the earliest days of the accordion in Ireland as they provide a guide to the value and possible prices of the instrument in the mid-nineteenth century. The difference in the prices of £5 5s and £3 suggests that different types of accordions were available at this time and, while one must bear in mind that the value of the prizes may have been inflated for the purpose of the concerts, the price values presented above confirm that the accordion was indeed the preserve of the wealthy classes. Other items offered as prizes at the December concert included “a very beautiful gold watch highly ornamented” valued at £20 as well as “two superb work boxes” valued at £7. As the average weekly wage for an agricultural labourer in the period 1850 –54 was 5.88 shillings (Turner 2002: 191-92) these items along with the accordions and other instruments were obviously included with the intention of attracting a wealthy audience.
The accordion had attracted immediate interest from its earliest arrival in Ireland and another indication that the instrument was in general use among the moneyed classes by the early 1850s appears in *The Freeman’s Journal* of Monday, March 10th 1851. Henry Shade of Shade’s Cheap Music Mart of 1, Parliament Street, placed an advertisement for “Pianoforte Tuning, Buffing, and Regulating”. He announced that he had engaged “competent Artists” in those departments with the result that he could “undertake with confidence any repairs, however difficult” – and that his terms would be found to be “extremely moderate”. He stated that “parties residing in the neighbourhood of Kingstown, Killiney, Rock, &c” were to be charged three shillings for tuning. A line at the bottom of the advertisement read “Accordions carefully Tuned and Repaired, or Exchanged”. As already outlined, accordions had been available in Ireland from the early 1830s, and therefore it is not surprising that in 1851 they were available in Shade’s Cheap Music Mart where they could be exchanged, from which it can be understood that the instruments were in widespread use and that Mr Shade sold accordions in his music shop, although this was not specifically alluded to in the advertisement. It is also interesting to note that at this stage accordions could be tuned and repaired.

By 1855 another music shop called Shade and Son, possibly of the same family, was operating from 32, Westmoreland Street in Dublin. An advertisement for “Musical Christmas Presents” illustrates the variety of accordions available as well as the different prices of the instruments. French accordions could be bought from six shillings to seven guineas while “rich-toned Paris-made flutinas” ranged from 28 shillings to five guineas. Other instruments available at the time were Cornopeans which cost from 40 shillings upwards as well as “Eight Keyed Cocoa Concert Flutes” selling for 25 shillings. “All Modern Songs, Quadrilles, Waltzes, Polkas, &c., &c.,” were half price (*Freeman’s Journal*, 22 Dec, 1855). As discussed earlier, music was considered a valuable recreational pastime during the 1800s. The above notice, in addition to providing important information regarding prices and types of accordions available by the mid-nineteenth century in Ireland, supports the idea that the accordion was, by then, popular among the better off classes as, by the mid 1850s, accordions and concertinas were included in the list of desirable instruments on which to play and to receive as Christmas presents.
Joseph Scates, the concertina maker who described himself as “Professor and Manufacturer”, also offered musical Christmas presents in advertisements for his shops. In December 1852 he advertised the concertina as “an elegant musical present” or “an elegant Christmas or New Year’s gift” of which he had a large selection costing from three to five guineas each. The use of the word elegant suggests that his advertisement was pitched at the upper classes and possibly at the female section of that society. Scates also sold flutinas and dulcet accordions and indicated that concertinas could be “exchanged or lent on hire” (*Freeman’s Journal*, 27 Dec, 1852). Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the popularity of and demand for the accordion among the wealthier classes is reflected in the number of music shops in Dublin which offered many different models for sale. As well as the shops of Joseph Scates and Henry Shade, accordions and flutinas could also be bought in J. Bray’s “Musical Establishment” in Westmorland Street and D’Olier Street, and “Henry Bussell’s music shops at Westmorland Street and Fleet Street”. They were sold alongside other popular instruments of the day such as pianofortes of every description, harmoniums from Paris, Wheatstone’s concertinas, guitars by Ponormo and Rudelfo’s octichord guitars, Amati, Steiner and Perry violins as well as cornopeans and single and double action harps (*Freeman’s Journal*, 26 Jan, 27 Jan, 1854). Free reed instruments were also penetrating into other parts of Ireland at this time, as shown by an advertisement for Wheatstone patent concertinas with 48 keys, which was advertised for £3 3s. in the *Galway Vindicator* of Saturday, August 18th 1860.

### 6.2 A Significant Milestone – Accordion Prices Reduce

The first signs of prices lowering for the free reed instruments became evident on the arrival of German concertinas, which were significantly cheaper than the English-made Wheatstone instruments and those made in Dublin by Joseph Scates. Nonetheless, it was to be some years before accordions and concertinas became available at a price suitable for the lower classes. On December 13th, 1854, Joseph Scates, who at that time had a shop called ‘Harmoniums and Concertina Manufactory’ at 26 College Green, invited attention to his new solo or drawing room concertinas, similar to that used by Giulio Regondi. Interestingly, in the same advertisement he also offered German concertinas as well as the French
accordions known as flutinas, from seven shillings to twelve guineas each. On Sat, December 1st 1855, along with his own concertinas, which were priced from 3 to 12 guineas, he also claimed to have “the largest assortment of best Paris flutinas, Accordions, Organic flutinas (with keys like the pianoforte), and German concertinas from 7s to 6 guineas each.” Instruments could also be tuned, repaired or exchanged. In this advertisement, an indication is also given that a mail order system for distributing free reed instruments was in place as it was stated that “on receiving a post office order for 20s., a good German concertina, with self instructor, will be forwarded to any part” (Freeman’s Journal, 1 Dec, 1855). While this could indicate the start of the penetration of the instrument into rural areas, contemporary levels of literacy would suggest that the new and cheaper German concertina was being aimed at the middle class sections of rural society. Prices continued to fall, and by 1860, the price for German concertinas in Joseph Scates’ shop had dropped to between 5s. and 30s. It is interesting to note that tutors or instruction books “from which any person may learn to play in a few hours” were also available at a price of 1s.6d, along with books containing two hundred melodies and two hundred dances for the German concertina, available for 1s. 2d.

Two years later prices had reduced further with plain concertinas and flutinas being available from 3s to £1, as can be seen from the following advertisement in The Irish Times of December 22nd 1862 for “J. Scates’s New Music Salon”, which, by then, had moved to 16 Westmoreland Street:

Having devoted the whole of his New Premises to business, is enabled to offer a large and attractive stock of

- Boudoir Pianofortes, from 25 Guineas to £90
- Drawingroom Harmoniums from 10 Guineas to £75
- Collard and Kirkman Pianofortes (that have been hired) £25 to £35
- Portable folding Harmoniflutes £8
- Organ accordion, on Pedal Stand £8 to £8.10s
- Seraphine Angelica, very portable £8 6s
- English Concertinas, as played by J. Scates in the Art Exhibition and Dublin concerts 3 Guineas to £12
- Organ Concertinas No 1, 15s: No 2, 20s: No 3, £4 5s
- Plain Concertinas and Flutinas from 3s to £1
The above price reduction of between 2s and 10s, while not significantly lower than the 1860 prices, can be seen as indicative of changes in the instrument buying public of the second half of the nineteenth century. Accordions and concertinas began to be provided at different price levels to suit different demands. Ireland was not alone in these trends. Gammon and Gammon (2000: 149) suggest that due to the growing number of urban and rural musicians in England, “the fast developing musical instrument industry found there were profits to be made in catering for the needs of the vernacular musicians whose way of doing things harked back to older musical practices”. Eydmann (1999: 598) believes that in the years after the middle of the nineteenth century, the accordion in Scotland was beginning to experience a fall in status, having lost its air of novelty and exclusivity among the wealthier classes and he suggests that “by the 1860s it had been adopted by all sectors of society including street musicians and evangelists”. In the Ireland of the 1860s, the pricing of the different types of accordions indicates that free reed instruments were certainly beginning to be played by levels of society other than those of the upper class drawing rooms. In 1868, the Irish Correspondent with The Times newspaper in London reported how:

At Nenagh (County Tipperary) Petty Sessions on Saturday two performers of street music, who came from the county of Clare, were severely dealt with by the magistrates for playing Fenian tunes on a concertina. It was proved that a crowd which followed them joined in chorus. They pleaded ignorance of the character of the tunes, but the Bench did not accept the excuse, and sent them to gaol for two months. (Worrall 2007: 13)

Worrall (2007) suggests that, while much of the information available with regard to the occurrence of free reed instruments in Ireland in the two decades after the Great Famine is particular to Dublin, the Nenagh court case mentioned above “is a harbinger of a remarkable growth to a nationwide adoption across the social, political, and geographic landscape in the next few decades”. (Worrall 2007: 13)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that the instrument was adopted by all sectors of society, as Eydmann suggests happened in the Scotland of the 1860s, not least because of the fact that during the period under discussion the vast majority of rural Irish people had little or no disposable income. In the decades prior to the Great Famine “many labourers were not paid wages in cash” (O’Neill 1994: 218) and even if they earned some money through farm work or other
schemes, it had to be paid to the landlord as rent, which could be raised on a whim. In the aftermath of the Famine, many were still living subsistence lifestyles under the British landlord system. The Crosbie family were local landowners in Ardfert, Co. Kerry, and were considered to be benevolent landlords during the time of the Famine. Their cash account book for December 1847 shows that men were paid 8d a day while women and boys were paid 4d a day (O’Connor 1999). If they had worked a full week of six days in the first two weeks of December this would have amounted to a wage of four shillings a week for men and two shillings a week for women and boys. The figure was reduced to 6d and 3d for December 18th when over double the number of men and four times the number of boys were employed on that day. This may have been due to the Famine, which affected the Ardfert area severely, and the fact that “from October 1846 landlords were allowed to sponsor works that would improve their properties, provided they accepted responsibility for all the charges incurred” (Ó Gráda 1989: 47). By any reckoning the above level of wages was well above normal if one compares it to accounts of the sums paid by the Board of Public Works to those working on the Famine relief scheme. According to Ó Gráda (1989: 46) “on average, the Board paid its workers about 12d per diem, enough for a family to subsist on in normal times, but now literally a starvation wage” while O’Neill (1994: 220) writes that the “usual rate of pay was about 10d per day, and though this was supposed to be lower than the value the labourers received from farmers, it was attractive enough to cause the spring work to be neglected”. Oral accounts however, differ substantially with regard to the pay workers on the relief schemes received for working what was frequently a ten hour day breaking stones. Mick Kelly, who was born in 1878, described what it was like around his home place near Castletown-Geoghegan in Co. Westmeath:

My father worked on the Relief Scheme splitting the Hill of Dromore (near Garthy, Castletown-Geoghegan). The pay was 8d., 6d. or 4d. a day, hardly anyone got as much as 10d. a day. It was all task work. The gangers treated the labouring man something cruel. They never gave them time to draw their breath. (Poirtéir 1995b: 151)

Some labourers were paid as little as 2d. a day according to John O’Reilly, a farmer from Glenville, Co. Cork, who heard from his father that “their pay was from 2d. to 4d. a day, while the overseers had the lion’s share” (Poirtéir 1995b: 158). Lee (1989: 8) suggests that “average weekly agricultural wages rose from 5/-
in 1845 to 7/- in 1870 and 11/- in 1914”. This concurs with the Crosbie work ledger of 1871, where a man’s wage for a six day week varied between 6s. and 9s. (O’Connor 1999). These figures, however, do not take into account the lack of continuity in employment and the impact of varying wage rates. Thus, even in 1870, it is likely that an accordion would still have been out of the reach of the ordinary agricultural rural worker when one takes into consideration the costs associated with rent, food and clothing and the fact that much of the available paid work was seasonal in nature.

Despite the above, contemporary newspapers and other documents show that the 1870s and 1880s ushered in a golden era for free reed instruments in Ireland in both English speaking and Irish speaking parts of the country (Worrall 2007). Sales of the instruments expanded to all sorts of merchandisers – not just music shops. Hardware shops, jewellers and pawnbrokers across the country included the accordion and concertina among the many items sold to a growing middle and working class population, indicating that the free reed instruments had become popular mass market items by this time. Thomas J. Connolly’s of Shop Street in Galway was a substantial general merchant’s store, which, during the early 1870s, had a large number of departments, selling a diverse variety of articles. Accordions, violins, flutes and concertinas were offered for sale alongside jewellery, stationery, school and college books, religious books and souvenirs as well as reproductions of oil paintings (Galway Vindicator, 31 Jul, 1875). The face of music shops in Dublin had also changed significantly in the years prior to the 1870s. One of the most prominent importers of accordions and concertinas of all types and prices during the previous two decades was concertina manufacturer, Joseph Scates. Towards the close of 1865, Scates sold his music business to Cramer and Co. and, in a series of advertisements, which appeared in The Freeman’s Journal of November 29th 1865, the transfer of business was announced. Scates made known that the “close of the sale of pianofortes, harmoniums, concertinas and other musical instruments” at his premises on Westmoreland Street would take place on Saturday the 9th of December after which, the business would be conducted by Cramer and Co. (Freeman’s Journal, 29 Nov, 1865). This was followed by a number of advertisements for Cramer and Co., the first of which reads as follows:
Cramer and CO. beg to announce that, having Purchased the Stock, the Lease of the Premises, and the Goodwill of the Business of Mr Scates, they will commence business on MONDAY, the 11th of December with an entirely new selection of the very finest Pianofortes, Harmoniums, and Concertina’s, all by the most eminent makers; and also a very large assortment of the Newest Music by all the most popular writers of the day. (*Freeman’s Journal, 29 Nov, 1865*)

In subsequent advertisements for Cramer and Co. it was stressed that the company possessed “somewhat peculiar advantages in acquiring Pianofortes as well as other instruments of the very highest character” as they purchased “more extensively than any other firm” and were “constantly in communication with the principal London and Continental Manufacturers”. A new system which was called ‘Cramer’s and Co.’s three year system, was announced whereby a three year term could be availed of for payment of the cost of pianofortes and harmoniums “commencing at 10s per month” (*Freeman’s Journal, 29 Nov, 1865*). While there is no mention of a similar system for accordions and concertinas, one has to wonder if the three year term extended to the purchase of free reed instruments.

### 6.3 Arrival of the Melodeon

This period also witnessed the arrival of cheaply manufactured free reed instruments to Ireland, among them the German accordion that became known as the melodeon. In a tutor, *Gems of Song for the Melodion*, published in Glasgow circa 1880, the instrument, which “came rapidly into universal favour with musicians, amateur and professional”, was described as “similar in form and construction to the French accordion” with “one or more stops by which the tone can be varied in an agreeable manner” (Eydmann 1999: 598). Contrary to common belief that the melodeon was confined to a single row of ten keys, the above tutor also states that double and triple rows were available:

> The instrument most commonly used is that with a single row of ten finger keys and one or more stops names ‘Tremolo’, ‘Celestial’, ‘Organ’, or ‘Trumpet’. There are also instruments having single rows of eight and twelve finger keys, double rows with seventeen to twenty finger keys, and triple rows with over thirty keys. Such instruments have generally a variety of stops, numbering up to six, by which a skilful performer can play very complicated and difficult musical compositions. Each key produces two notes – one by opening or drawing out the bellows and the other by closing or pressing it inwards. (Eydmann 1999: 598)
As can be seen from the title of the above tutor, there were various spellings of the word melodeon used and this can also be seen in advertisements for the instrument which began appearing in *The Freeman’s Journal* and other newspapers of the time. In 1880, what appears to be a private advertisement was printed in *The Freeman’s Journal* of December 16th. A “Large Melodian, with six stops” was offered for sale along with “two Musical Boxes, each playing eight airs”. No indication of the price is given, but the seller, who lived at 57 Thomas Street, indicated that the items were in good order and would “sell very cheap” (*Freeman’s Journal*, 16 Dec, 1880). Another advertisement in the same newspaper in 1884 indicated that French accordions were still in use and an accordion made by the renowned French maker, Busson, was offered for sale by a private individual. The advertisement read “Accordeon; French; splendid instrument, by Busson, Paris; handsomely inlaid and in perfect order, for £1; cost £4” (*Freeman’s Journal*, 16 Dec, 1884). The price of this instrument, even at the reduced rate, was markedly different to the melodeons being offered for sale by shops such as O’Reilly’s Music Stores of 19 Wellington Quay, Dublin who offered “musical instruments of every description; Banjos, English and German concertinas, Melodeons, Flutes, Clarionets, largest stock in the Kingdom to select from” (*Freeman’s Journal*, 18 Dec, 1884) and May and Sons, Pianoforte and Music Warerooms at 130 Stephen’s Green who, by November 1887 were selling “useful Xmas Presents in Concertinas and Melodeons from 3s 6d” (*Freeman’s Journal*, 28 Nov, 1887). By the early 1890s, melodeons were being sold in numerous music shops in Dublin alongside all kinds of instruments, as can be seen from this 1893 advertisement:

**Accordeons, Banjos, Concertinas, Tambourines, Niggers’ Wigs, Bones, Violins, Flutes, Melodeons, Drums Band Instruments etc, selling at enormous reductions, during special Christmas sale at R O’Reilly’s, 16 Wellington Quay.** (*Freeman’s Journal*, 18 Dec, 1893)

Accordions, with the French spelling “accordeons”, were listed in the above advertisement suggesting that French made accordions were still popular and in demand in the Dublin of the 1890s. Other shops where the melodeon could be purchased during the 1890s included Kane’s of 169, Capel Street, Cross’ of 33 Wellington Quay, who claimed to sell “every instrument made”, Benson’s, 76 Aungier Street, Higgin’s in Essex Quay and Pohlmann’s of 40 Dawson Street. Throughout 1898, advertisements appeared in *The Freeman’s Journal* with
melodeons as the only instrument promoted, suggesting that there was a great
demand for these mass produced instruments. The following advertisement
offered melodeons at four different prices:

Kearney’s Melodeons; Acme Melodeon, 4s 11d; Pearl Melodeon, 6s 9d; Universal
Melodeon, 9s; Favourite Melodeon, 14s; carriage paid; should be in every home.
Kearney Brothers, 14 Capel Street, Dublin. (Freeman’s Journal, 15 Nov, 1898).

On Saturday Oct 29th, Kearney’s were selling what they termed “Kearney Brothers’
Special Melodeon” which had two sets of reeds and double bellows and was
“reduced from 7s 6d to 3s 11d; carriage 6d extra”. Eydmann (1999) notes how:

Scotland, as with the British Isles as a whole, never developed a native accordion
making industry and remained a consumer of French, German and Italian
instruments. Instruments made abroad were usually ‘badged’ with the name of
the local retailer who often claimed to be the manufacturer. Even small dealers
bought in instruments packaged as their own. (Eydmann 1999: 599)

While accordions began to be manufactured during the late twentieth century
in Ireland, there is no evidence of an accordion making industry in the country
during the late nineteenth century. Therefore it could be assumed that the Kearney
brothers mentioned above, like their contemporaries in Scotland, were retailing
their “special melodeon” as their own. For a price comparison with other
instruments, Pohlmann’s shop in Dawson Street offered melodeons for “5s, 7s 6d,
10s 6d and upwards” in addition to a violin and bow and case for “25s, 30s, 40s
and upwards” and a mandolin which was described as a “genuine Italian
instrument” for £2 2s. (Freeman’s Journal, 12 Dec, 1898).

By the early 1880s, a scarcity of agricultural labourers, due to the affects of large-
scale emigration in the years after the Great Famine, resulted in weekly wages
almost doubling from 4s. prior to the Famine, to 8s. or more by the beginning of
the decade (Donnelly 1975). The combination of cheaper mass produced
melodeons and higher wages ensured that the instrument became more accessible
to traditional musicians in rural parts of Ireland. The availability of mail order
services also contributed to the increased usage of the melodeon among the lower
classes. The Glasgow based company of Campbell and Co., who were the most
prominent importers and retailers of German melodeons in Scotland, offered all
instruments “carriage paid to any address in Great Britain or Ireland” (Eydmann
1999: 599). O’Neill (1913: 413) gave an indication that the melodeon was popular
among musicians who were already proficient on another instrument. Patrick
Fleming, “the premier flute player of the northern baronies of the County
Wexford… for a generation” began playing on the violin and the melodeon in later
life. In discussing Andrew McCann of Newbridge, Camolin, Co. Wexford, “a flute
player of great local fame” and a pupil of the aforementioned Patrick Fleming,
O’Neill (1913: 415) describes how McCann began playing on the tin whistle with
his first tune being St. Patrick’s Day. However, “the melodeon being ‘all the go’,
he acquired commendable proficiency on that alien instrument, but abandoned its
use with the Irish Revival”. According to O’Neill, McCann then took up the flute
and pipes and “not only became an excellent fluter, but a promising piper as well”
(O’Neill 1913: 415).

Vic and Sheila Gammon (2000: 124) applied the term “plebeian musical tradition” to
the “musical performances of vernacular singers and instrumentalists” in nineteenth
century England. They suggest that the earliest recorded musicians are a direct link
to the music of the nineteenth century and that used regressively, information and
material gleaned from such musicians can provide vital understanding of the
traditional music practices of the latter decades of that century:

Our understanding of the older plebeian musical style is derived from both a
reading of contemporary source material and close listening to English
performers of vernacular music who have been recorded over the last ninety
years. These players, whose dominantly aural music making forms a direct
continuity with their nineteenth century predecessors, are the inheritors of the
plebeian musical tradition. (Gammon 2000: 137)

Thus, the earliest recordings of such musicians as P.J. Conlon and Joe Flanagan,
who were both born in Ireland in 1894, and were in effect the second generation of
single row accordion players, may give an indication of the extent of the use of the
instrument within the traditional music community during the latter decades of the
nineteenth century. More importantly, their music offers an insight into how
developed melodeon playing had become during that time. It is known, for
example, that both of Conlon’s parents played the one-row accordion, as did Joe
Flanagan’s father. Likewise the 1916 recordings of Eddie Herborn provide further
such evidence. Herborn, although born in Boston, was believed to have learned to play the melodeon in Co. Mayo when he moved there as a child. Eydmann (1999: 602) notes that “the widespread popularity of the melodeon saw the emergence of a number of outstanding musicians” such as those mentioned above. Their earliest recordings clearly illustrate the various styles that had developed in accordion playing by the turn of the twentieth century as well as the repertoire being played by melodeon players of the time. Their contributions to the story of the accordion in Ireland will be discussed in Chapter 9 when the importance of the role of the individual will be considered in relation to the accordion’s journey into tradition. Chapter 7 will now explore the contexts in which the accordion continued its journey into tradition during the twentieth century, when it became an even stronger voice within that tradition.
Chapter 7
Settling In – Establishing an Irish Way of Playing the Accordion

As we have seen in Chapter 3, the accordion arrived in Ireland as early as 1831. For the first three decades, high prices ensured that the instrument remained the preserve of the wealthy. Falling prices from the 1860s onwards, along with the increased availability of mass produced German instruments and greater disposable income among the rural and lower classes, allowed the accordion to begin what was to become a rapid march along the journey into Irish traditional music. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the earliest recordings of Irish music on the instrument indicate that by the end of the previous century the accordion was firmly established as an instrument on which traditional music was performed. This was a key development in the history of Irish traditional music and coincided with a number of other significant changes in how traditional music was transmitted and played. In the following two chapters, I propose to examine the factors which shaped the directions the accordion travelled along its journey, and helped the instrument to become assimilated and to settle in, so to speak. I will focus on how acquiring the local accent became an important part of the accordion’s journey and on the various changes the instrument has experienced – both physical and environmental. These changes, in addition to placing demands on an instrument struggling to find its place in an already well-established tradition, also played their part in facilitating the adaptation and adoption of this new voice in Irish traditional music.

7.1 Well on the Road – A New Voice Emerges

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the one-row diatonic accordion appears to have been well on the road to becoming accepted as a new voice in Irish traditional music. It had set down firm roots and was spreading its branches in many different directions within its new host community. The accordion was adopted into Irish music with incredible speed, and in very little time, musicians had begun to create a traditional sound on an instrument which had been developed and manufactured
in an environment very different to Ireland. As discussed in the previous chapter, the accordion made its first appearance among traditional musicians in Ireland in its simplest form, a one-row ten-key diatonic instrument. The arrival of the melodeon and reduced prices for mass produced instruments were major factors in the dissemination of the instrument among the rural population. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, as outlined in Chapter 6, the newspaper, The Freeman's Journal, published advertisements for the instrument using the name ‘accordion’ but it was not until the closing decades of that century that the word ‘melodeon’ began to appear regularly. In America, however, the term ‘melodeon’ was in use from before the 1820s for what Loesser (1954: 518) described as “the American piano’s little country cousin”. Known in Europe as a reed organ or harmonium, it quickly became “the piano’s most important rival as a keyboard for home use”. In later years, the enterprising Wheeler and Wilson Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, devised a piece of furniture which incorporated a ‘melodeon’ and a sewing machine and advertised it as the perfect gift to allow the woman in the home to “toil and sing” (Loesser 1954: 561):

They put out a “novelty” in the shape of a combination sewing machine and melodeon; It had the form of a parlor sideboard. When opened, it presented a set of keys; whereas the sewing machine was revealed after the top was turned back. (Loesser 1954: 561)

According to Boston accordion player Joe Derrane, it wasn’t until relatively recently that the term ‘melodeon’ was used in America to describe a ten-key accordion:

It’s only in recent years that I have used the expression melodeon. In all the years when I was playing the so-called melodeon, the ten-key diatonic accordion… it was never referred to as a melodeon, ever, it was a ten key accordion… even the word diatonic was not used that much, there was no need to because basically, that’s all there was… when I started playing there were only ten key accordions, whether they were made by God knows who, by Hohner or whatever, there were a million of those things around. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

By the opening years of the twentieth century, melodeons could be bought in local hardware shops or ordered through advertisements which appeared in newspapers such as The Freeman's Journal, which not only included notices from Dublin based music shops but also advertisements placed by London-based businesses such as the following:
The above advertisement suggests that the London based company were aware of and realised the potential of the Irish market, and it can also be seen as an indicator of the demand for the instrument in Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century. It is interesting to note that in the same edition of *The Freeman’s Journal* of 1906, where the above advertisement is found, a column about a Gaelic League gathering is also included. The musicians at this gathering were the renowned Mrs. Kenny on violin, Mr. Kenny on the pipes and Mr. Cullen on fíodhréidh (whistle). There was no mention of accordions or melodeons at that gathering and yet, by all accounts, the melodeon was gaining in strength from the closing decades of the last century, not just in Ireland but all over the world.

The evidence presented in Chapter 3 shows that the accordion was in Ireland by 1831. However, as has been outlined in Chapter 6, the melodeon or single row accordion, did not become available to the traditional music community until the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Hall (1996) in a discussion about the “heyday of traditional music” suggests that:

Somewhere about 1870 or perhaps as late as 1880 there was a major shift in the social organization of dancing and music-making from the exclusivity of the paid artisan musician and his outdoor public dancing sites to the privacy of domestic dancing and music-making by amateur musicians. For the first time cheap instruments came into the hands of the working population in general and band fifes (acquired for the fife-and-drum bands of the temperance and land-reform movements) and factory made tin whistles, fiddles, mouth-organs, concertinas and melodeons could be afforded and played at home as constructive leisure. (Hall 1996: 79)

Previous to the arrival of the free reed instruments such as the accordion and concertina, Irish traditional dance music was played on the uilleann pipes, fiddle, wooden flute and penny whistle. McCullough (1978) suggests that there is a dearth of information regarding this era:
Irish music and song were also aurally-transmitted idioms that had never been a product of a print-oriented community of musicians or singers, nor had the performance occasions of these traditions been a part of the urban middle-class musical culture that received mention in contemporary newspaper, journals or books. In addition, those reports about Irish music and song that were made by contemporary 19th-century observers were in nearly every instance from the perspective of non-performers of the traditions. (McCullough 1978: xvi)

The major exception to the above was, of course, the body of work encompassing the writings of Captain Francis O’Neill, which illuminate for us the position with regard to instruments most in use from the mid 1850s on. Born in Tralibane, Co. Cork in 1848 the young O’Neill grew up during the 1850s in an area rich in music:

Music, song and dance were an integral part of the largely Irish-speaking rural society in which O’Neill grew up, and his father’s house and that of a sister were venues for neighbourhood dances. Pipers, fiddle players and flute players were frequently heard at crossroad dances in summer and at farmhouse dances in winter. The parish supported two professional pipers in the years after the Famine: Charley Murphy or Cormac na bPaidreacha, who had a regular outdoor pitch at Tralibane Bridge, a few hundred yards from the O’Neill home, and Peter Hagerty, ‘An Piobaire Bán’ who played at the nearby Colomane crossroads. (Carolan 1997: 6-7)

While Hall (1996: 78) argues the point that prior to the Famine and for some time afterwards “instrumental music-making was largely in the hands of” what he terms “artisan musicians”, O’Neill’s writings show that alongside what he often called professional musicians there were also local non-professional musicians, and music was very much part of everyday life. In addition, the collections of Patrick Weston Joyce include tunes collected from such musicians with many of them written down during the Famine years. Francis O’Neill became Chief of Police in the Chicago of the late 1800s and during that time was better placed than most to observe what instruments were chiefly played as he had access to musicians from the 32 counties of Ireland. However, of the 324 musicians profiled by him in his Irish Minstrels and Musicians, first published in 1913, only one accordion player was mentioned. This was Mark Twain and his efforts on “that soul stirring article of music” were described by O’Neill in not very complimentary tones (O’Neill 1987: 471). Melodeon players were also mentioned but in disparaging tones and only when being compared to what O’Neill considered a far superior instrument such as flute or fiddle (O’Neill 1987). As seen in a previous chapter, the melodeon was even described by O’Neill as an “alien instrument” (O’Neill 1987: 415).
It does not necessarily follow that there were not enough accordion players to be profiled, and evidence presented in a later chapter will show that many skilled exponents of the instrument were available in the early days of the Irish music recording industry which began in 1916, just three years after the publication of O’Neill’s *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*. Nevertheless, it could possibly be the first indication of the suspicion and dissent which was to follow the accordion on its journey into tradition. It must, however, also be noted that – although they were mentioned in passing throughout the publication – concertina and banjo players were also omitted from O’Neill’s profiles. Mac Aoidh (2006: 79) observes that “by ignoring the concertina, the mandolin, the accordion / melodeon and tenor banjo the O’Neills were not representing the true width of the tradition” and one can only wonder if this was a sign of how new these instruments still were to the tradition and their level of acceptance or non-acceptance among some of the traditional music community at the time. Moloney (1992) has another explanation, suggesting that the omission of newly arrived instruments in scholarly works relating to traditional Irish music could be explained by the authors applying a somewhat antiquarian bias to their writing. In the case of O’Neill’s *Irish Folk Music: A Fascinating Hobby*, Moloney notes that “it is an idiosyncratic work with an antiquarian flavour in which he gloomily foretells the impending demise of traditional Irish music in America” (Moloney 1992: 50). A similar impression is created in *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* where O’Neill appears to deplore change and to equate newly arrived instruments with this change. In a chapter titled ‘Irish Folk Music Waning’ he commented on the changes which had taken place with the introduction of free reed instruments:

Too true! The old must give way to the new; but what blessings has the change brought to Ireland? Mainly monotony, and melodeons made in Germany. (O'Neill 1913: 109)

7.2 ‘Everybody and His Uncle Played the Melodeon’ – Spread of the Accordion

Despite the apparent non-acceptance of the accordion in some circles, the instrument had penetrated countless traditions by the close of the nineteenth century and “in a short time it swamped Europe and almost conquered the whole world” (Wagner 1995: 6). W. G. Murdoch, writing in the final years of the nineteenth century in
Scotland, commented that “melodeons were as common as blackberries and the twilight hours are filled with their melody” (Eydmann 1999: 601). Traditional musicians in Ireland, in common with their musical counterparts world-wide, were instantly attracted to the instrument and its use very quickly became widespread throughout the country. Fiddle player, Andy McGann, when discussing this issue, commented “There was an old joke I remember – they used to say ‘everybody and his uncle played the melodeon’” (A. McGann, personal communication, 9 Nov 1996). Breathnach (1971: 89) suggested that “the growth in popularity of the melodeon… coincided with the decline of the pipes throughout the country”. However, there were many other reasons for the rapid distribution of the instrument, not just in Ireland but all over the world. Wagner (1995: 6) believes that the unique qualities of the accordion led to its instant popularity:

Firstly it was much louder than all the older folk instruments put together. It could easily be heard in even the wildest pub above the stomping of dancing feet. It was also the prototype of a “one man band” with bass and chords on the left hand side and buttons for the melody on the right, and you could still sing along and beat the rhythm with your feet. The instrument needed no tuning and was always ready to play, but the most ingenious thing about the early one-row squeezebox was that you couldn’t play it really badly. Even if you lost the melody it still sounded fine. (Wagner 1995: 6)

The accordion, or melodeon, as it was more commonly known in the Ireland of the early twentieth century, was new and modern and an initial level of competency on the instrument was relatively easy to acquire – as was often advertised in contemporary tutors for the instrument. Unlike the pipes and the fiddle, which were considered the domain of male musicians (Breathnach 1971: 90), the single row accordion could be played by both men and women and was actively marketed as such from its earliest days. Eydmann (1995b: 64) remarks that “in fact the early free-reed instruments were deliberately targeted at both the male and female markets”. He further outlines how “Demian’s patent for the first accordion made specific reference to its suitability for both sexes and the first printed collections of music and methods for the instrument featured portraits of elegantly dressed women performing on it”. Breathnach (1971: 90) notes that “the melodeon… was responsible for extending music-making among the girls of the countryside”, although he also acknowledges that “in some districts, where fiddle and pipes were still supreme, the melodeon was referred to disparagingly as ‘a woman’s instrument’”. Many of the musicians interviewed throughout the course of this
study indicated that their mothers or other female relatives or neighbours played the melodeon. Joe McNamara from Crusheen started playing on a melodeon given to him by a lady called Jane Tierney:

Jane Tierney gave me the melodeon, no one ever taught me a note on the melodeon... Jane used to give me one she had, an old one. You'd buy one for about ten or fifteen shillings... Jane would give me the melodeon and I'd be raspin' away myself. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

Dan Smith, born near Glenamaddy in 1903, remembered his aunt learning to play the single row accordion from the postman who was “courting her” and remarked that “she was very good for a girl”. Dan then learned to play from his aunt:

Well my aunt Nora used to play accordion, a ten key accordion one of these straight up, keys on the top, three buttons and I liked to listen to her and then she decided to teach me and I was playing with one finger (ilts a tune). Maggie in the Wood was the first tune I ever learned with one finger. (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996)

Felix Dolan’s mother came from Castlebar in Co. Mayo and played her neighbour’s melodeon as a young girl in Ireland. When she came to America in 1929 she wanted to have a melodeon in the house:

There was a woman, Annie Maloney, who lived in Mount Daisy, the village just outside Castlebar, who had a melodeon, that’s the melodeon she played when she was a kid, between, she was born in 1912, so between 12 and 29 she used to go over to that house and play that melodeon. She couldn’t get enough of it you know what I mean and of course... my mother’s father died when she was in the womb so they didn’t have any money and you know, to be able to get your hands on an instrument, a melodeon, was just heaven for her. That was the first thing she wanted to get when we were young, to get a melodeon to have it there. (F. Dolan, personal communication, 9 Nov 1996)

Other factors in the melodeon’s favour included a bright clear tone along with robust reeds which would certainly hold their tuning for longer than the pipes during inclement weather, thus making it ideal for playing at crossroad platforms and other outdoor venues where dancing would have taken place. Indeed Breathnach (1971) suggests that dancing – and particularly the new sets which had evolved from the quadrilles introduced to Ireland after the Napoleonic wars – played a major part in the ready adoption and spread of this new instrument. He
noted that “the change in dancing was responsible, to an extent, for the changing fortunes of the instruments. The melodeon could provide the marked, uncomplicated rhythms which admirably suited the sets, and although it sounded thin and shrill, it could be heard quite clearly above all the hub-bub created by the dancers” (Breathnach 1971: 89). By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the sets mentioned by Breathnach had spread throughout Ireland with each area developing local variants of what was originally a slow and stately dance described by Petrie (1840: 106) as a “drowsy walk”. According to Brennan (1999: 26) “oral tradition and the folk memory tell us exactly how and when the sets were introduced into different areas in rural Ireland”:

Big Mike Newman, who used to frequent the ordinary kitchen dances in the neighbouring parish of Carrick Edmond, introduced the sets in Ballinallee, County Longford. This happened about 1870. Around 1880 a man called Callaghan, a renowned dancer from Flagmount, introduced the sets to Tulla in County Clare. Florrie Brosnahan, a dancing master from North Kerry, we are told, brought them to Uíbh Ráthach in South Kerry around 1890. Dan Furey, the dancing master from Labasheeda, County Clare, remarks that the Caledonian set came into his area around the 1930s, “but did not take over the other sets”, whereas “the old crowd used to dance the ‘Orange and Green’ and the ‘Lancers’. (Brennan 1999: 26) Often known as the “poor man’s pipes” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998), the melodeon quickly became popular as an instrument favoured by set dancers. The press and draw system employed in playing the melodeon gave the player two notes for every button pressed and created a staccato, bouncy phrasing because of the articulation achieved from the alternate pressing and drawing on the bellows. The accordion was, therefore, welcomed at any social gathering where dancing took place. In the early days, from a dancer’s point of view, the music from a melodeon was highly rhythmic, and so the style used by the early single-row players generated great excitement for the dancers with added lift and spirit in the music. This popularity among dancers was to prove hugely important in the destiny of the instrument as it journeyed through tradition.

The dynamic capability of the instrument was to be, perhaps, one of the most crucial factors in the journey towards initial acceptance. The volume of the melodeon, and later the two-row accordion, in addition to their ability to cut through loud crowd noise in pre-amplification situations, were major considerations in the easy welcome accorded these instruments in Ireland. This
was true of many other traditions worldwide which adopted the accordion such as the Texas-Mexican *conjunto*. Scruggs (2001: 216) remarked that “accordions were capable of an impressive level of sound production: one accordionist could be heard above a crowd of dancers” although Pena (1985: 38) felt that the accordion “established itself as the preferred instrument for the musical activities of the tejano folk” because of its “ready availability and inexpensiveness, especially the popular one-row models imported from Germany and Italy”. Snyder (2001: 233) offers an interesting reason for the ready adoption of the accordion in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic, where the couple dance known as the merengue tipico was the main dance of the rural people. In addition to being a “compact affordable instrument” which could be louder than the noise produced by a floor full of dancers, the instrument “was durable enough to survive in the volatile tropic climate that wreaked havoc on European string instruments”.

Whatever the reason for the adoption of a new instrument, the process of acceptance into an existing tradition is an entirely different matter and one which merits further examination. This involves an exploration of the idea that the accordion, or indeed, any new instrument entering a musical tradition, must be versatile enough to take on the accent of that tradition. Furthermore, the tradition which the new instrument enters needs to be strong and resilient and in a position to facilitate the arrival of a new instrument:

> If you have a very strong musical tradition like for example India. India has a tradition that spans centuries. It has been there. It has been embedded in the spiritual consciousness of the people, I mean it is part of their being. So that when this kind of civilisation adapts an instrument, it is really, to a certain degree, insignificant in comparison to the life of a civilisation. The particular instrument will get absorbed into that, you see. This particular phenomenon you can view as an enrichment, an enrichment both in terms of your inventory of instruments, in other words you have more instruments, you have more medium for musical expression. At the same time you also enrich the experience of the instrument. Now it can play another kind of music. (R. Santos, personal communication, 13 Nov 1995)

It appears that the accordion and traditional music in many regions were ideally suited to the above requirements. As Pena (1985: 38) notes when discussing how the accordion became the preferred instrument of the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* tradition “the accordion and its dance repertoire began to take on the earmarks of
a tradition”. This facility to rapidly “take on the earmarks of a tradition” and absorb the local music meant that the accordion very quickly became a new voice in whichever tradition it settled – none more so than in Ireland.

7.3 A New Voice – Acquiring the Local Accent

As we have seen, Ireland was not alone in welcoming the accordion with open arms. Mass production of the instrument was fuelled by the growth of large accordion building centres in Klingenthal in Germany, Castlefidardo in Italy and Tula in Russia and within twenty years this instrument, which had often been derided as little more than a toy, had travelled to and permeated an incredible range of traditions throughout Europe. Communities, which up to then had used pipes or fiddle or some form of flute as their main instruments for the performance of traditional music, now readily adopted the accordion and the instrument immediately became a recognisable and identifiable element of those traditions. By the late nineteenth century, the accordion had arrived in America as part of the extensive wave of emigration from Europe to the New World. In this land of opportunity, the accordion became a point of confluence for many different musical traditions. According to Wagner (1995: 6) “the United States, a land of immigrants, became the main importer of the instrument from the old world and the accordion virus soon jumped from one ethnic group to another”. Everywhere it travelled the accordion quickly became part of the existing tradition:

These instruments have travelled to the far corners of the earth and entrenched themselves in the music of a startling number of cultures. Sometimes missionaries brought them as substitutes for church organs. Sometimes sailors brought them as the only entertainment on a long voyage. Somewhere an immigrant may have stepped off the deck of a ship, holding his only link to home and heritage, an accordion. However it happened, these instruments in many cases now define the music in which they perform. (Shapiro 1995: 5)

In Scotland, Ireland’s closest neighbour, the accordion has been synonymous with Scottish country dance bands, which were part of the social and cultural life of the people from the early years of the twentieth century. Prior to this, the fiddle had reigned supreme, with names like Marshall, Gow and perhaps the most renowned of all Scottish fiddle players, Scott Skinner, being central figures in the
development of Scottish music. However by the closing decades of the nineteenth century this music was experiencing many changes, not least the arrival of a new instrument, the accordion, which, when “first introduced c1850 quickly gained a foothold, posing a serious threat to the reign of the fiddle, eventually superceding it in importance” (Doherty 1996: 35). Without doubt the name most associated with the accordion in Scotland is Jimmy Shand (1908 –2000). Born in the mining village of East Wemyss, in Fife, Shand played the button accordion and for many “was Scottish music” (Gilchrist in Eydmann 2001: 112). Extensive touring with his band, as well as his numerous recordings and compositions, ensured that he became one of the best-known accordionists in the English speaking world. Shand’s experience of playing for dances led him to work with the German accordion makers, Hohner, with a view to producing an accordion suitable for dance-band playing:

He developed a modern three-row diatonic button accordion, the “Shand Morino”, in British Chromatic layout with eighty bass notes (as in a piano accordion), which became regarded by many as the Scottish accordion and attracted a large group of performers throughout Scotland and beyond. (Eydmann 2001: 112)

Quebec is another case in point, where the accordion became absorbed with great ease into the existing tradition. Very quickly, an accordion played by a French-Canadian musician developed a characteristic and distinct Quebecois sound or accent. This music was essentially dance music and reflected the marriage of the Irish, Scottish and French cultures. As in Scotland, the dance was primarily catered for by the fiddle prior to the arrival of the single-row accordions. A typical venue for traditional dance in Quebec was a farmhouse where the kitchen floor would be cleared. The fiddle player and later the accordion player would then sit on the table (Snyder 1995), which functioned as a stage for the occasion. Players from Alfred Montmarquette to Phillipe Bruneaut to today’s Raynal Ouelette, have all contributed in their own way to the development of a uniquely Quebecois accordion sound.

In Quebec, the accordion played alongside the fiddle, while learning its trade, so to speak. In a number of other traditions the accordion eventually replaced, not just one instrument but often, entire musical ensembles. Within the area of the USA, encompassing Southern Texas and Northern Mexico, the style of music known as conjunto had emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a
short time, it had become the dominant form of popular dance music in the region. The accordion had arrived sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, travelling with German immigrants who settled in Mexico and assumed Mexican citizenship (Pena 1993). The accordion was instantly popular in Mexico and before long had filtered through to South Texas where the instrument began to gather strength. By the early 1920s, it had established itself as the leading instrument in conjunto, often displacing those instruments which had previously provided the music:

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, wind and string orchestras were the primary providers of dance music. Accordions began to appear in South Texas around the turn of the twentieth century and effectively replaced these orchestras as the musical accompaniment for dancing. (Scruggs 2001: 216)

The social dance music of southern Louisiana was – and still is – considered a fiddle-based music. Nevertheless, the accordion also found a home there, functioning in both an accompaniment and melodic role. Unlike Tex-Mex music, the accordion did not displace an existing instrument. Instead it appears to have added to an already rich and varied tradition:

As Cajun food and music have come to represent Cajun culture in public rhetoric, so the Cajun accordion has come to symbolize the music, especially the social dance music that had become most widely known. This instrument is also known as a “German-style” diatonic accordion and is actually not at all unique to Cajun music, but Cajuns have adopted it as their own… The cajun accordion is symbolic, not only in terms of material culture, but also in how it sounds when Cajun musicians play it. (DeWitt 2001b: 186)

The above examples raise an important question with regard to the accordion’s acceptance as an instrument on which traditional music can be played. What is it that allows a new modern instrument enter a tradition and in a short time create a sound that is recognisably Cajun, Scottish, French-Canadian or Irish? In the television series A River of Sound (1995), Micheál Ó Suilleabháin spoke about what it is that makes an instrument traditional and suggested that “in some cases, an instrument takes on – into its own body – aspects of the tradition over time”. The idea that the music itself becomes adapted to the new instrument while, at the same time, players develop techniques to assist the instrument become part of the existing tradition, is put forward by Smith (1992). He sees this process as a form of dialogue between the instrument and the music:
When a new instrument is introduced into a musical culture, a dialogue occurs between the instrument and the established musical forms. This dialogue will often reveal some of the tacit musical concepts through which players organize their musical knowledge. Certain techniques are chosen to imitate previously established musical features. (Smith 1992: 216)

During the course of this research it became clear that three significant elements played crucial roles in the development of a recognizably Irish style of accordion playing. Central to this is the idea that the accordion or melodeon appears to have been readily accepted by traditional musicians and dancers from the very early days as a medium on which music for the dance could be played, even though some commentators on the music dismissed the instrument out of hand. Secondly, as in many other traditions, the accordion seems to have relied on existing genres and styles to establish an Irish way of playing with the fiddle and, to a lesser extent, the piping tradition being most borrowed from whether consciously or unconsciously. Thirdly, the impact of individual musicians on the development of the various styles and the directions accordion playing took, particularly during the early twentieth century, is phenomenal, and will be discussed in detail in Chapters 9 and 10. These individuals not alone drew from the existing tradition but also, in the dialogue between their instrument and the tradition, became involved in a form of reinterpretation, devising imaginative and ingenious techniques which helped to move the accordion further along its journey into tradition. In a discussion with Ramon Santos (personal communication, 5 Nov 1995), the topic of how instruments become traditional arose:

This phenomenon I think is universal, in that instruments that are adopted by cultures, societies and peoples undergo a process of assimilation, of change, adaptation, I should say. We see this everywhere. This is to me a natural phenomenon in the sense that the instrument is not really the determinant of the music, but it is the culture that determines the music. The instrument is a medium; it can be adjusted to the musical needs of the society that adopts it. (R. Santos, personal communication, 13 Nov 1995)

With this in mind, it is relevant at this stage to consider the society which adopted the accordion and to briefly examine the contexts which prevailed in Ireland during the opening decades of the twentieth century – the time of the accordion’s settling in period.
7.4 Ready for Change – Irish Society at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

Previous chapters have outlined how the introduction of the accordion coincided with major changes taking place in rural and urban nineteenth century Irish life. The establishment of the instrument as a new voice in Irish traditional music also took place during a turbulent period in Irish history. The early decades of the twentieth century were marked by major conflicts, which included World War One, the 1916 Easter Rising, the War of Independence and an extremely bitter and divisive Civil War (Keogh 1994; Foster 1989; Lyons 1973). Nationalist feeling and identity were prominent, having been fostered and developed by the establishment of a number of organizations during the latter years of the nineteenth century. On Nov 1st 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association, which would promote native games and sports, was founded at Thurles, Co. Tipperary, by Clareman Michael Cusack. The Gaelic League was initiated on July 31st, 1893 with Douglas Hyde becoming its first president. Lyons (1973: 227), speaking of the Gaelic League, suggests that “of all the factors influencing the rise of a new and urgent sense of nationality at the end of the nineteenth century this has come to be regarded as perhaps the most significant, though at the time of its foundation that would have been difficult to predict”. The Gaelic League, while starting slowly, went from strength to strength. Some fifteen years after its foundation, it had over 600 registered branches and had also achieved one of its main objectives, that of the introduction of the Irish Language onto the syllabus of the national schools. While initially founded for the promotion of the Irish language, the organisation became involved in all things Irish – particularly dancing – which they sought to preserve by banning sets or quadrille style dances dismissed by them as foreign despite the fact that they had gained widespread popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Brennan 1999). Old dances were revived and new ones devised, amidst much controversy, but despite all their protestations, set dancing continued to flourish in rural areas with the accordion very much in demand as one of the main providers of music.

Irish society remained predominantly rural during this time “with a backward economy burdened by civil war debts and overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture” (Keogh 1994: 37). The census of 1926 showed that 61 percent of the
Irish population lived outside towns or villages, with 53 percent of the employed population working in some form of agriculture on small to medium sized farms (Brown 1985: 18-19). These people retained an intense continuity with the social models and attitudes which had developed during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Large-scale emigration continued and a higher than average age of marriage prevailed among those who remained in Ireland, with many never marrying. Fitzpatrick (1992: 176) states that “by 1911 over a quarter of 50-year-old women as well as men had never married”. The post-Famine farmer had learned that subdivision of land was not the best way forward and so held onto his land for longer, dissuaded his children from the early marriages that had characterized pre-Famine Ireland, and then left the land to one son. This resulted in emigration being one of the few options open to those of his children who wished to advance themselves and “by the early 1920s… 43 per cent of Irish-born men and women were living abroad” (Brown 1985: 20) while “emigration in the period 1921-31 averaged 33,000 per annum” (Keogh 1994: 37). Bradshaw and Small (1987: 4) note that:

…it is a grim paradox that one of the factors which aided the remarkable renaissance of Irish traditional music in this century was the depopulation of the Irish countryside and the flight of huge numbers of Irish people, among them their musicians, to the United States. Particularly in the 1920s and ‘30s, traditional players found audiences in the taprooms and dance halls of America, as well as opportunities to record and broadcast their music: opportunities they could never have had, however accomplished they were, in the struggling Ireland they left behind. (Bradshaw and Small 1987: 4)

Many great musicians, including ten key accordion players, left Ireland in these circumstances, arriving in America at the dawn of the recording era. Perhaps this was fortunate for the history of the accordion in Irish music as the sound of the accordion, as played by an Irish person, and the extent of the development of that playing, can be heard from as early as 1917, primarily through the recordings of P.J. Conlon. Other musicians who arrived in America during this time emigrated for different reasons – such as Kinsale native, Jerry O’Brien – who would later have a major influence on Boston accordion player, Joe Derrane:

Jerry O’Brien grew up during a period of great unrest culminating with the Easter Rising of 1916 and, in its wake, the armed rebellion against Britain’s proposed partition of Ireland. The young O’Brien, who had become a hedgerow teacher of Gaelic ended up being sought by the Black and Tans and, around 1920, had to be smuggled out of the country to escape hanging. (Varlet 1995: 4)
Those who remained on the land continued to farm in the traditional way, and while many commentators of the time painted grim pictures of life and conditions in rural Ireland, where large families lived in small two or three roomed houses, slowly but surely life was changing as the countryside became exposed to the modernizing effects of town and city life:

The Irish countryman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, while forced by economic circumstances as much as by inclination to retain ways of life that the writers could proclaim as time-honoured traditions, also showed himself adept in acts of adaptation, innovation and even exploitation. He was ready to use horse-driven threshing machines, prepared to experiment with steam, and in the 1930s he began to welcome the tractor, which would render the agricultural labourer increasingly redundant, into his world. (Brown 1985: 87)

This predominantly rural based culture, which was embracing new technology and methods, was the society in which the ten-key accordion or melodeon found itself as it underwent the initial stage of its journey into Irish traditional music. Hood (1990: 105), writing about acculturation and Javanese musical practices, has noted that “the oral tradition in Java was strong enough to adopt and modify cultural manifestations of Arabic-Persian origin according to its own dictates”. Likewise, the arrival of the accordion initiated a period of acculturation that facilitated the entry of the accordion into the Irish music tradition, which in turn was strong enough to accommodate and adapt the new instrument according to its own canons.

7.5 The Accordion – New Technology and its Effects

What were the factors then, that influenced the directions and pathways the accordion travelled in the course of its journey into tradition? What were the challenges and changes it experienced on its way towards acceptance within the Irish traditional music community? Bohlman (1988: 124 -125) argues that “folk music in the modern world undergoes many processes of change, but two large processes – modernization and urbanization – dominate and influence many of the other processes”. He sees the two processes as overlapping, noting that the twentieth century experienced urbanisation on a scale never witnessed before. In detailing the different aspects of modernisation and urbanisation, he suggests that they affect all areas of folk music from transmission to repertoire, style, instrumentation and many more, with each process affecting different key areas:
Modernization often affects most directly the musical and structural aspects of folk music, by altering the way in which oral transmission occurs, for example, or by providing a technology that refashions the role of the performer. Urbanization, in contrast, more directly affects the social aspects of folk music, by supplanting the isolated rural community in which most individuals share in the expressive culture. (Bohlman 1988: 125)

The twin processes of modernisation and urbanisation were to significantly affect the journey of the accordion from its earliest days in existence. The accordion when it arrived in Ireland, was perceived as a contemporary instrument and thus, as a symbol of modernity, was instantly fashionable and attractive. Invented during the nineteenth century, it was a product of the industrial revolution, a period which saw major alterations in traditional societies and which provided much of the modernising technology which would affect the course of traditional music in the coming century. In light of Bohlman’s observation, the accordion may also be seen as “providing a technology that refashions the role of the performer” (Bohlman 1988: 125). The accordion was played in a different manner to the fiddle, the flute or the pipes, although it could be argued that it was quite similar to the pipes in that both hands were employed to play the instrument, a reed was used and both the piper and accordion player made the notes using air pumped into the instrument. Suffice it to say that the accordion was essentially different to the instruments commonly in use for playing traditional music at the end of the nineteenth century and yet, as we have seen earlier, from the very beginning it seemed to fit easily into whichever tradition it met.

The social changes experienced all over Europe by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were immense, with emigrants leaving their home place and travelling in large numbers to urban centres in England, America and Australia. Urbanisation took on a life of its own with the mass movement of great numbers of people from the country to the towns and cities. Alongside these changes in society, there were many new inventions and new technologies which mass production made accessible to more people than ever before. To say that the accordion arrived at an opportune moment in history is probably an understatement. It can be argued that modernisation and urbanisation could have had detrimental effects on many aspects of the Irish music tradition, such as the fear of the death of the tradition on arrival into larger cities. However,
the renaissance of Irish music during the 78rpm era disputes this. The watering down of repertoire by the advent of various media or the ‘cultural grey out’ as argued by Lomax (1968: 4) and discussed by Nettl (1983) was another concern, although Nettl (1983: 346) could not agree “that the greying-out of musical diversity, foreseen by Alan Lomax… is actually taking place”. Bohlman (1988: 124) also challenges the assumption that modernisation is always detrimental arguing that it “encourages new ways of looking at older styles and repertories and sets the stage for revival and revitalization”. According to Bohlman:

Modernization thus creates a bazaar for the confluence of musical repertories and the exchange of musical concepts, and it creates the choice of an appropriate technology to give these repertories and concepts a new voice. (Bohlman 1988: 124)

It would appear that the accordion not only arrived at the right time in history but, in becoming a new voice in Irish traditional music, actually benefited from the historical changes taking place in society during this time. Two changes, which greatly assisted the progress of the accordion, were the invention of the phonograph and the emergence of the radio.

7.5.1 Invention of the Phonograph

Perhaps it is the ubiquitous impact of technology that fixes musical sound on cylinders, discs, cassettes and film that has most significantly affected our musical life and our very conception of music. To this should be added the technologies for mass distribution, such as the pressing of records, duplication of cassettes, and the many later developments but perhaps also radio and television; and then also the technologies for creating music onto the permanent record of sound – electronic, concrete computer-generated composition. (Nettl 1985: 61)

The accordion was invented during the same century as a landmark event which was to have major influence on traditional music everywhere from the end of the nineteenth century. That event, of course, was the invention of the cylinder phonograph – also known as the talking machine. Thomas Edison had been issued with a patent for the phonograph on the 19th of February 1878, less than two months after he had applied (Gellat 1956: 5). This was some 49 years after the accordion had been patented in 1829 by Austrian, Cyril Demian. Consequently, the accordion had
many years to become established before the recording industry began in earnest in America. Less than ten years later, on 26th September 1887, a young immigrant from Germany, named Emile Berliner, applied for a patent for his development of sound reproduction which he named the gramophone. The gramophone differed from the phonograph in that it used flat discs as opposed to cylinders. Gellat (1956: 37) notes that “today the terms ‘gramophone’ and ‘phonograph’ have become synonymous. They were not so in the nineteenth century”.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, both phonographs and gramophones were available in Ireland. On the 4th December 1901, Pohlmann’s of 40 Dawson Street in Dublin offered gramophones and “graphophones” for sale alongside many musical instruments and they could be bought on their “easy payment system” (Freeman’s Journal, 4 Dec, 1901). Kearney’s of 14 Capel Street in Dublin advertised themselves as the “best house for gramophones and phonographs” and advised that they had “thousands of [the] latest records in stock” (Freeman’s Journal, 19 Oct, 1908). Cramer’s of Westmoreland Street, who were the leading stockists of pianos, also advertised “gramophones, all the latest models” and “records in great variety” (Freeman’s Journal, 4 Dec, 1908). At Harris Music Shop, 67 Middle Abbey Street “fourpence was allowed for Broken Records against purchase [of] New Records” (Freeman’s Journal, 12 Dec, 1908). Three years later, Fagan’s of 46a, Capel Street, placed the following advertisement in The Freeman’s Journal:

Accordeons, Christmas Stock arrived, 37 New Improved Models Melodeons from 3s 3d to 60s; finest range in Ireland; Noted House for Violins, Mandolines, Mouth Organs. (Freeman’s Journal, 17 Nov, 1911)

By the turn of the twentieth century two major products of the industrial revolution – the accordion and the recording process – were firmly established in Ireland and both were to play significant roles in the development and direction of Irish traditional music in the decades to come.

The first twenty five years of the twentieth century saw countless Irish musicians depart for the shores of America, and, although it probably wasn’t their intention to record, their arrival in America coincided with what has often been termed the
‘Golden Era’ of Irish music-recording, resulting in a large collection of music and song being preserved on cylinder and 78rpm in their new homeland. Names such as Coleman, Morrison, Tuohy, McKenna, the Flanagan Brothers and many more were among those who recorded for the various recording companies in America. Bradshaw (1996: 18) suggests that “had these players remained at home it is probable that they would have played their music in relative obscurity and would never have had the opportunities that America offered to further their talents”.

Accordion player, Dan Smith, who himself played music in Philadelphia where he settled during the early decades of the twentieth century, was aware as a young boy that Irish musicians were successful in America:

There was some fine music in them days when I was a little boy. My uncles told me there was great flute players playing out and they went to the United States and later they became famous in New York by getting with the other musicians. (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996)

Dan came from Glenamaddy, in Co. Galway as did flute player, Tom Morrison, who was some fifteen years Dan’s senior having been born around 1888 (Hall 1995a). Dan remembers hearing Morrison while working in Philadelphia:

He was a great flute player. Flute and tambourine, Tom Morrison, Morrison and Reynolds, he was famous, everyone went out to buy their records. In Philadelphia where I worked we heard them all on the radio and… Oh I had great music last night one would say, and it was wonderful. (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996)

Records of Irish musicians were so popular and in demand among the Irish community in America that many shop owners, although they might have known nothing about the Irish musicians in question, quickly realised the commercial potential of selling their recordings and made sure to keep a plentiful supply of them in stock:

…and the man that’s selling them he doesn’t know anything about them, Irish music? but he’ll sell them because he’ll get paid for it, people coming in buying it, so you go in there and say to that… music man and tell him you want 33210 Morrison and Reynolds, the famous two and so we went in and the man in the shop looked for 33210 and here it is, that’s it, bought it and took it home and told everybody about it and it spread like wildfire. Everybody else was going to that shop buying them. (D. Smith, personal communication 2 May 1996)
Dan Smith was 93 years old when I interviewed him for this study and his recall of the serial number of a recording made nearly seventy years earlier was incredibly correct. Tom Morrision on flute and Jack Reynolds on tambourine did indeed record a duet on Columbia 33210F in New York during July 1927 (Hall 1995a). This shows the major affect the early 78rpm recordings had on contemporary traditional musicians, not alone in America, but also in Ireland where the arrival of the 78rpm discs of Irish musicians recorded in America always generated great excitement. West Clare fiddle player Junior Crehan, who was renowned for the link he had with the “style and repertoire of an earlier period” (Munnelly 1998: 75), recalled how:

…the records came mostly from America. Tom Lenihan’s house in Knockbrack was a great house for music and fun and dances and nearly every one of the members of his family would come from the States and they’d bring a bag full of records of the best. They were all musicians and they’d bring the best of records… and any nice record Tom’s sister would put on for me. And she would give it to me to bring home and I would be careful of it and bring it back again the next Sunday night… Oh God, there was a great selection in Tom’s house. (Crehan in Munnelly 1998: 79)

Transmission of traditional music would be forever changed. Previous to this, musicians learned repertoire and style from musicians in their own localities and from others in surrounding parishes. With the arrival of the 78rpm, not alone could musicians from other regions and miles away be listened to, but the tunes they played could be heard many times over. Nettl (1985: 61) suggests that “the character of twentieth century music culture has been stamped by the possibility (or burden) of hearing a performance over and over without change”. This repeated listening allowed for the absorption of many varied musical styles and techniques and exerted a profound influence on the existing local and regional repertoire. Junior Crehan spent many nights adding to his store of music by ‘picking up’ tunes from the gramophone:

I’d put on the gramophone and listen to it and tune the fiddle with it and I’d pick up a few tunes. At night time I’d go in the room and bolt the door and let nobody in and I’d pick up a good few tunes off the gramophone. They were the 78 r.p.m. records of Coleman and Killoran and the two Morrisons and Lad O’Beirne. They were mostly all Sligo people. And then there was Hugh Gillespie and Frank Quinn that would play too. (Crehan in Munnelly 1998: 79)
Sean MacNamara, a fiddle player with the Liverpool Céilí Band, remembers how gramophones were used to entertain the guests before the arrival of the musicians and dancers at the house dances in West Clare during the 1940s:

The house dances were something marvellous. They’d start about eight or nine o’clock in the evening, and you only went there by invite because it was a house party. Invites were sent out during the day all round the neighbourhood. And at eight or nine at night, the old people, people my age now, would go. There’d be some musicians there, but even if the musicians hadn’t come, they’d have a gramophone, with Michael Coleman records and all the rest of it. All the New York musicians who were recorded then. And they’d start off the evening with the gramophone, you know. And the old people would be entertained and the young children. But then, maybe about 10 or 11 o’clock, the dancers would start coming in, and the musicians. (MacNamara in McCormick: 2006)

The accordion featured strongly on the recordings of Irish traditional music made in New York in the early decades of the twentieth century. Two of the legendary accordion players from this era were John J. Kimmel, the first person to commercially record Irish dance music played on the ten-key accordion, and P. J. Conlon from North County Galway, one of the first Irish born accordion players to record in America, beginning in New York in 1917. Accordion player Eddie Herborn, who played along with banjo player James Wheeler for Ellen O’Byrne DeWitt’s first recording of Irish traditional music on the Columbia label in 1916, was another, as was Patrolman Frank Quinn. These musicians are central to the story and development of the journey of the button accordion in Irish traditional music, and their contribution to that journey will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9. Meanwhile, methods of recording continued to improve, and by the mid 1920s, the first electric recording had been produced at Westminster Abbey. However, it was “rough at the edges and the record had only a limited circulation” (Gelatt 1956: 164). In the autumn of 1923, a team of researchers, based at the American Bell Telephone Laboratories and led by Joseph Maxwell, began work on developing a system of electrical reproduction which would greatly enhance the quality of future recordings (Gelatt 1956, Bradshaw 1991):

By using a microphone and stylus–head amplifier, the frequency range of recording was extended by two and a half octaves to 100 – 5,000 cycles per second. Bass frequencies never before audible gave body to the music: the extended treble reproduced tone with a definition and clarity hitherto undreamt of. (Bradshaw 1991: 55)
7.5.2 Recording Begins in Ireland – The Early Pioneers

From 1897 to 1900 a number of cylinders were recorded at the Feis Cheoil which had begun in 1897 in Dublin. Organised by among others, the collector P.W. Joyce and the songwriter P.J. McCall, a number of these, which had been recorded on Ediphone wax cylinders in 1899, were given to the Folklore Commission in 1955 (Breathnach 1996a). Musicians recorded during this time included the blind pipers Mickey Cumbaw Ó Súilleabháin from Munster and Dinny Delaney from Ballinasloe Co Galway, as well as the Dublin fiddle player Bridget Kenny, but there is no evidence of accordion players being recorded during the Feis Cheoil.

The first company to record Irish music in Ireland for issue on 78rpm was the Parlophone label, which was originally set up by Carl Lindstrom in Berlin during the 1890s, and was one of a number of companies under the Lindstrom umbrella. In 1925 the “English Columbia company purchased control of the world-wide Carl Lindstrom chain” (Gellat 1956: 198) and in the summer of 1929, Parlophone, by then absorbed into Columbia, sent a recording team to Ireland where they recorded “some 40 individuals and groups performing music and (speech) of several genres, including Irish traditional music” (ITMA 5 Aug 2009).

Prior to this, Irish traditional music on the label consisted of reissues of 78rpms recorded in America as well as discs of Irish musicians recorded in London. (ITMA 5 Aug 2009). The performers during that first recording session included the Cork piper Nelius O’Cronin, the Halpin trio and Treasa Ni Ailpin from Limerick, as well as Miss O’Rourke and Mr Neiland, also from Limerick, playing a fiddle and flute duet. Significantly, the accordion and concertina also featured on these initial recordings of Irish music in Ireland. The concertina player was Billy Roberts of Dublin and the accordion player was Sam Madden from Limerick. Madden played Clonlara Quadrilles on one side and Tipperary Flings on the other side. The tempo of the quadrilles was in what today would be considered polka time for Sliabh Luachra or West Kerry sets, and suggests that Madden was accustomed to playing for the set dancing and couple dances which were associated with domestic music-making in the rural house dances of the time. This also appears to be the first time an accordion was recorded commercially in Ireland, and the inclusion of the free reed instruments alongside the fiddle, flute and pipes could be taken as an indicator that the free reed instruments were well on the road to acceptance among the traditional music community by the end of the 1920s.
In the following year, a further recording trip produced 36 sides of traditional music. Among the musicians recorded then were John Brennan and Tommy Hunt from Sligo, as well as the famed Ballinakill Traditional Players from East Galway. The 1930s produced further recordings which included such musicians as the Fingal Trio (James Ennis, Frank O Higgins and John Cawley), as well as accordionist Michael Grogan who recorded prolifically during the period 1931 - 46 (Hall 2000: 17). With the creation of EMI Records (Ireland) in 1936, recording sessions began to be held in Dublin studios. Musicians also continued to travel to London where many recorded for the Decca label. Recordings were made in Ireland throughout the 1940s, despite the effects of the Second World War. Among the accordion players to record during this time were Sonny Brogan and Bill Harte, who made a number of 78 rpms with the Lough Gill Quartet. Both musicians “are reputed to have been among the pioneers who saw the potential for Irish music-making in the button accordeon pitched in B/C and subsequently devised and disseminated the fingering method” (Hall 1995a: 19). The man who was to have the most impact on the B and C style of playing however was Tipperary born Paddy O’Brien. His recordings for the Columbia Gramophone Company, made the night before he departed for America in 1954, made a lasting impression on all those who heard them and “opened up a whole new approach and attitude towards the B/C accordion” (O’Brien 2009: 10). Gael Linn also became involved in recording on 78rpm during the 1950s, and between 1957 and 1959, produced forty sides. Among the musicians recorded by Gael Linn were fiddle players Paddy Canny, Denis Murphy and Sean Ryan, as well as pipers Willie Clancy and Tommy Reck, and East Galway musicians Vincent Broderick on concert flute and Joe Burke on accordion (Carolan 2004).

### 7.5.3 Emergence of the Radio

Almost as if to complement the invention and mass production of the phonograph, gramophone and 78 rpms, the radio arrived on the scene in the early 1920s, making its first appearance in America where “the radio boom got underway in 1922” (Gelatt 1956: 164). According to Gelatt (1956: 164) “there was not much to listen to, and radio sets were inordinately addicted to whistles and screeches; but Americans took to radio with gusto and cheerfully stayed up until long past
midnight in hope of ‘logging’ a station hundreds of miles away’. Despite the various pronouncements of the numerous phonograph companies that the radio would not be a competitor (Gellat 1956) the public soon realised that, even though the content was not great initially, the sound from the radio was better than the sound produced by victrolas or phonographs and, during the 1920s, the radio really came into its own, offering people unheard of access to all kinds of music:

This pivotal decade in the United States also saw the extraordinary rise in radio as a major communicative vehicle in American life, bringing into people’s living rooms music they were often hearing for the very first time. (Moloney 1992: 6)

The role played by the radio in the traditional music of rural areas was to be immense. Many commentators acknowledge the effects of this new technology in, as (Bohlman 1988) puts it, “refashioning the role of the performer”. In discussing the role played by the new technology in many rural areas, Bohlman (1988: 125) proposes that “the radio clearly exemplifies modernized technology, but it mediates a cultural product that is urbanized: the mass or popular music generated in the city”. Noll (1993), writing about the experiences of Polish and Ukrainian musicians notes that:

The greatest changes in village music practice among Poles in the 1920s and 1930s did not stem from patriotic customs or from song and dance troupes, but from the newly established recording industry, and especially from the radio. More than ever before, urban music affected the practice of the village musician in conclusive and dramatic ways. Although the village music had probably always been subject to constant (if slow) processes of change, the rate of change accelerated drastically in the 1920s, when the village musician entered into a kind of a competition with the radio. (Noll 1993: 147)

Noll describes how the radio introduced urban music from America and Western Europe, resulting in villagers who could afford to do so, overlooking local musicians and hiring musicians for a wedding from the nearest city because it was felt that city music was more fashionable and up to date. This resulted in village musicians altering and adapting their styles and instruments to include newer instruments such as trombone and accordion (Noll 1993).

Doherty (1996: 35) suggests that the advent of the radio, among other factors, inspired a change in the social and cultural situation on Cape Breton Island during
the early years of the twentieth century and observes that “with the coming of the twentieth century, specifically the 1920s, the outside world began to impinge noticeably on Cape Breton”:

The recording industry, radio, television, travel opportunities, out migration, the building of the Canso Causeway linking the island to the Nova Scotian mainland were all factors which were significant in stimulating a social and cultural awakening in Cape Breton. (Doherty 1996: 35)

Likewise the radio brought the music of Cape Breton to the attention of other islands nearby such as Newfoundland where “traditional fiddling, especially that of Cape Breton, was frequently played on Maritime stations” (Quigley 1995: 17). In the Shetland Isles of the 1920s, the radio made its mark on two of the island’s best known musicians, Tom Anderson and Peerie Willie Johnson. Anderson, whose father played the button key accordion, used the radio to earn a living and also to learn new repertoire:

In 1926 he took a correspondence course in radio and soon after set up a small business building radios. He also invested in a silent 35mm film projector, built an amplifier, adapted an old gramophone and travelled the countryside showing silent films and bringing on his dance band for the second half of each evening’s entertainment. He had, as a result, ample opportunity to hear Scottish and other music from radio and records and his band was obviously popular. (Cooke 1986: 25)

Tom Anderson’s partner in music for many years was guitarist Peerie Willie Johnson, who came into contact with the radio during a long period of illness while still very young. Forced to remain in bed for nearly nine months, his favourite pastime was listening to the radio and especially the programmes of the American forces, from which he developed his lifelong interest in jazz. During this time he also began playing – first the ukulele and then the guitar -and became particularly enamoured with the playing of gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt. A chance meeting with Tom Anderson in 1936 led, not only to a lifelong partnership in music, but also to the development of the distinctive style of accompaniment to Shetland fiddle playing which still characterises the sound of Shetland music today (Anon 2009)
7.5.4 The Radio in Ireland

Ireland, like Shetland, Newfoundland and Cape Breton, is an island community, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, none of these escaped the effects of modernisation. Links with the world outside of Ireland, particularly in the previous century, had been facilitated by the emigration of large numbers of Irish people to the cities of England, America and Australia. Their letters, and later, their return visits, kept people at home informed about life outside Irish shores. For the musician remaining at home, the gramophone and 78rpm recordings of the early decades of the twentieth century opened a window on the urbanisation of traditional music and how that music was being played by emigrant musicians in the large cities of America.

The arrival of the radio opened even more windows. The BBC was the first to bring the radio to Ireland when it began broadcasting in Northern Ireland in 1924. On the first of January, 1926, four years after the formation of the Irish Free State, Radio Éireann, under the title of 2RN, made its first broadcast, initially from a small studio in Little Denmark Street in Dublin. Keogh (1994: 36) described this event as “the final modernising image of the new state”. The 1920s was a time of great political instability in Ireland with the country torn by division in the aftermath of a deeply divisive civil war. Therefore, it was felt that the content of the programming schedule on the new station should steer away from any controversy while news and current affairs programmes were also to be avoided (Pine 2005). As a result, music played an important part in the early days of the radio in Ireland. Keogh (1994: 36) suggests that listeners received “an undiluted diet of live music” with “about 80 per cent of transmission time” being dedicated to recitals while Pine (2005: 2) states that “in the absence of current affairs programming, the radio schedule came to be dominated by music and by talks on a variety of subjects judged to be of an ‘improving’ nature”. He described ‘a typical evening’s broadcast in the period 1926-30’ as the following:

8.00: Time and tuning note  
[to enable wireless sets to adjust to the station’s frequency]
8.05: New Gramophone Records
8.15: Cleary’s Instrumental Trio with excerpts from Carmen (Bizet)
8.30: Songs from Joseph O’Neill
8.40: Orchestra: ‘Hymn to the Sun’ (Rimsky-Korskov)
9.00: Songs from Florrie Ackermann (contralto)
9.10: Solo violin: Rosalind Dowse
9.20: Songs (Joseph O’Neill)
9.35: Cleary’s Trio with two Irish airs
9.45: Songs from Florrie Ackermann
9.55: Orchestra: excerpts from The Gondoliers (Sullivan)
10.05: Weather Forecast

(Pine 2005: 48)
2RN was controlled by the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and was financed mainly through licence fees and sponsored programmes. The first director of the new station was Seamus Clandillon, “a gaeilgeoir [gaelic speaker] who had been associated with Patrick Pearse, and a noted performer and collector of Irish songs, who himself was to perform regularly on the new station both solo and with his wife Mairéad Ni Annagáin” (Pine 2005: 4). Clandillon was a keen follower of traditional Irish music and immediately began to feature traditional musicians on the station’s programme schedules. Indeed, the opening night of 2RN featured the renowned musician and collector Arthur Darley, who played three Irish airs as well as a number of classical pieces (Pine 2005). Nonetheless, accordion player Kevin Doyle (personal communication 9 Aug 2007), who was born in 1926, the same year as 2RN was founded, recalled his earliest days listening to the radio and remembers that “there was very little Irish music on the radio in those days”. One musician he recollects hearing was “Tommy Dinan from Mahera near Tulla” who was also remembered by Joe McNamara:

As a matter of fact there’s a man living down the road here about 3 miles, Michael Dinan. His mother is 106 years of age and she played concertina, but an elder brother of Michael’s used to play the fiddle and he was the first Clare man ever to play for Radio Eireann – Tommy Dinan. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2nd Jul 1996)

Kevin Doyle felt that radio didn’t really have much influence on rural musicians in the initial years mainly “because they didn’t get enough of it” since the musicians broadcasting would only “get five minutes maybe ten minutes on the radio in those days, that was usually a Saturday evening” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007). McNamara was in agreement “Oh the Radio was great, the only thing was the programmes were very short” (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996). According to Kevin Doyle, “Ireland was more orchestral” at that time with 2RN putting more emphasis on classical music on the radio. He also observed that “Irish music wasn’t that popular”. While acknowledging that the radio introduced new repertoire to traditional musicians, he pointed out that tunes were difficult to pick up: “We didn’t have instruments and no way of recording of course but I learned tunes I could whistle and hum, lilt tunes you know” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007). Nevertheless, the radio was seen as a great novelty and with the opening of the Athlone
transmitter in 1932, listeners in any part of the country could tune into a transmission with the aid of a valve set (Keogh 1994: 36). Broadcasts of traditional music were welcomed with great enthusiasm:

I’d race over this half a kilometre to my neighbour’s house to hear the radio because none of us had radios we were poor. ‘Twas a wet and dry battery thing with a big pole on the back, anyhow, I’d race over and hear this ten minutes of music and I used to dance around the floor with old Paddy Fogarty. We’d get up and dance, you know, a bit of a hornpipe or something, you know. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug, 2007)

From the early days of 2RN, the accordion could be heard in a number of different contexts. Groups of traditional musicians frequently broadcast on the radio with one of the first being the Aughrim Slopes Trio who auditioned for the station in 1927. The group included accordion player Joe Mills along with fiddle players Paddy Kelly and Jack Mulcaire. Joe and Paddy met Jack Mulcaire when they were invited to play for a dance at the school in Kilrickle near Loughrea (Mills 1976: 16). Thereafter they played a lot of music in Killaghbeg House in Kilconnell, home to the Fahy family. According to Mills, Jack Fahy, father of fiddle player Paddy Fahy, “was one of the best traditional musicians around”:

He would sit in the kitchen listening to 2RN – later known as R.E. – on a “cat’s whiskers” wireless with earphones. He came to the living room one night and told us that our music was away better than what he listened to on 2RN and we should apply for a broadcast. We thought he was getting crazy, because at that time to go to Dublin from Aughrim in Galway was similar to asking someone today to go to the moon and come back to talk about it. (Mills 1976: 16)

Unknown to the group, Jack Kelly applied for an audition for the three musicians and having played for Dr. Vincent O’Brien, they passed the test and made their first broadcast as the Aughrim Slopes Trio. Their broadcasts attracted widespread attention as described by Joe Mills:

I remember on our second broadcast there were five or six people with radio-wireless sets in Ballinasloe. They would turn them on and leave them on their window-sills, so that the public could hear our music. (Mills 1976: 16)

During the 1930s the group had a regular weekly slot playing on Radio Éireann, and broadcasts by the trio as well as their other activities were advertised by local newspapers such as the Connacht Tribune, which announced on June 30th 1934
that “the Aughrim Slopes Trio who are broadcasting from Dublin at 10.40 p.m. on
to-morrow (Friday) night, got first prize for traditional music at the Thomond Feis
last Sunday” (Connacht Tribune 1934: Jun 30th). Hall notes that:

EMI (Ireland) Ltd. was formed as a breakaway from its British parent company
in 1936, and, in its initial burst of cultural independence, explored native talent,
calling on east coast and Midland musicians within easy reach of studios in
Dublin, who had previously proved themselves on 2RN national radio. (Hall
2000: 4)

Thus, for many musicians, the radio was seen as a stepping stone to recording as
with the Aughrim Slopes Trio, who made their first 78rpm in 1928 following their
very successful broadcasts on 2RN. Pine (2005: 320) further suggests that “the
radio appearances were, in fact, a major plank in the band’s strategy of securing
live engagements” and this can be seen in local newspapers where the band were
advertised as the “Aughrim Slopes Broadcasting Ceilidhe Band” (Connacht
Tribune, 26 Dec, 1942).

Another accordion player who featured strongly in the early days of 2RN’s
broadcasting schedule was Michael Grogan. Originally from Winetown, The
Downs, near Mullingar in Co. Westmeath, Grogan had moved to Dublin at the age
of fourteen “where he later worked for the Corporation” (Hall 2000: 17). By 1928
he had broadcast a number of times, both solo and with a trio. He later recorded
duets with John Howard, a fiddle player from Skerries, Co. Dublin. In the early
years of radio, music had to be played live resulting in a dominance of musicians
based in Dublin or near to the capital being invited to broadcast. Consequently, the
fact that Michael Grogan was living in Dublin made it easy for him to attend 2RN
studios, and his broadcasts of 1928 set up “a pattern of regular, but not particularly
frequent, broadcasts of dance-music selections” (Hall 1995a: 11). For musicians
travelling from the country however, circumstances were very different as “low
fees and travelling expenses operated in favour of Dublin based bands and
soloists” (Pine 2005: 321). Tommy Dinan was the first fiddle player from Co.
Clare to broadcast on radio, according to Joe McNamara:

In fact I think he played for 15 mins. He had to go up to Radio Éireann for an
audition at his own expense, stay in Dublin to do the recording for 15 minutes…
That would be… between 25 and 30s I suppose. (J. McNamara, personal
communication, 2 Jul 1996)
Fiddle player, Paddy Canny often travelled to the Radio Éireann studios in Henry Street and Portobello in Dublin from his home in Glandree, in East Clare for live, fifteen minute broadcasts. Although he received a fee for the broadcasts “there was very little left by the time he had taken the return journey of the bus to Limerick and the train to Dublin in addition to his other expenses” (Sheehy 1990: 421). Joe Mills, the accordion player with the Aughrim Slopes Trio and later Aughrim Slopes Céilí Band, brought the matter of expenses and low fees to the attention of Radio Éireann in January 1941:

The broadcast is usually arranged for a Sunday night between 10pm and 12pm. This means that if we travel by rail we have to go on Saturday and return on Monday. This costs at the very least £2. 10.0 per man. Now to travel by car it will cost £7. 10.0 for the car and about £1. 5.0 for refreshments. Then there is the danger of failure at the last moment to get a car owing to petrol shortage. You will see from above how far £6 will go to defray expenses. City bands can easily play for £6 and still make money. I respectfully suggest you increase the £6 to a sum that will leave it a bit easier on our pockets. (Mills in Pine 2005: 321)

The matter was also being debated in the Dáil by 1949 with a number of TDs being approached about the matter and Roderick Connolly arguing that “favouring Dublin based groups was affecting the livelihood of others” (Pine 2005: 321). A similar situation prevailed in other traditions. Doherty (1996: 149) suggests that in Cape Breton “playing on these various radio shows was not a directly lucrative venture. In most cases opportunities for such performances were gladly accepted and regarded as promotional tools for other events which the fiddler might be involved in”. She also points out that this was “typical of the wider North American society of the time” where bands were not paid for broadcasting but were glad of the regional exposure which helped them to get jobs at music events in their own localities.

The establishment of Mobile Recording Units in 1947 and the appointment of Outside Broadcast Officers and script writers changed the face of traditional music broadcasting in Ireland from the 1950s on. The introduction of a system which allowed for the recording of material from all over Ireland, which could then be assembled into a programme, resulted in a substantial increase in the amount of traditional music being heard on the radio. Piper, Séamus Ennis, who had spent five years as a collector for the Folklore Commission (uí Ógáin 2007)
was the first Outside Broadcast Officer and worked with the unit until 1951. He was joined by Seán MacRéamoinn and one of their earliest recording sessions featured Blasket Island writer and storyteller, Peig Sayers (Pine 2005, Ó Conluain 1999). In 1954 Ciarán MacMathúna joined Radio Éireann as a producer with responsibility for recording traditional musicians and singers for broadcast in his radio programmes. During the 1950s and 1960s, he travelled extensively throughout Ireland with the Mobile Recording Unit, recording traditional musicians in their own environments and broadcasting their music on programmes such as *Ceolta Tíre*, *A Job of Journeywork* and *Pléarácha na hAoíne*. He also travelled to Britain and America, recording the music of Irish emigrants. His programmes were recognisably different to the Céilí Band broadcasts of the early years of the station becoming “the voice of traditional music revival, the link between all parts of the country and with emigrants, a source of comparison and inspiration” (Vallely 1999: 221):

The regular programmes based on material collected by the Mobile Recording Unit of Radio Éireann, when introduced… comprised music wholly traditional in content and style. Songs and dance music were genuine folk music, and were rendered *ar an sean-nós*, in the traditional manner. These programmes initiated a veritable new era of discovery and were avidly looked forward to by traditional musicians. Players previously unknown outside their own locality attracted listeners throughout the country… Here indeed was a revival, or at least a reversal of the decline which had set in more than four score years previously. (Breathnach 1971: 130)

As with the phonograph and the gramophone, radio allowed people access to music and musicians from many parts of Ireland and beyond. Musicians became ‘famous’ through their broadcasts on Radio Éireann and older musicians and those not so old often mention the radio and its importance in the history of traditional music. Jackie Daly remembers the radio being a central part of his upbringing in Kanturk, Co. Cork:

> My father, when I was young, would always turn on Ciarán Mac Mathúna… I remember Joe Cooley when he started coming on it and Joe Burke of course. And the American music at the time, fiddle players that Ciarán collected at the time – some lovely recordings from the fifties and sixties. (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar, 1997)

Another advantage of the radio was the opportunity it afforded traditional musicians to hear repertoire and styles from other parts of the country, as “tunes
scarcely known outside a parish achieved a national currency” (Breathnach 1971: 130). Kevin Doyle, in his recollections of musicians who broadcast on Radio Éireann, remembered the impact of hearing new players and tunes:

Well Sean McGuire for instance but then... I was in Dublin then with Joe Cooley and Sean broadcast and Sean came out to the house, he was brought out to the house to Joe Cooley after the broadcast. Aggie White broadcast and Aggie said to Joe Cooley... “I've got a new tune tonight” and she wouldn’t tell him what it was and anyhow she played and ‘twas The Dawn so The Dawn was a new tune then. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug, 2007)

The arrival of “other media such as the reel-to-reel recorder and, later the cassette recorder” further extended the “constancy of the radio” (Doherty 1996: 147). Musicians began recording programmes and thus were in a position to play back and listen as often as they wanted, ensuring the rapid dispersal of new repertoire and technique heard on the radio. The difficulties associated with capturing new tunes heard on the radio, particularly at the time of live broadcasts, were alluded to by Kevin Doyle (personal communication, 9 Aug, 2007). However, before the arrival of tape recorders, many musicians had already developed their own methods of learning the tunes they heard on the radio. Melodeon and fiddle player Maureen Cronin recalled how her mother became the talk of the neighbourhood for her particular method:

Some people would have the concertinas up on a shelf. Like Paddy Murphy had... Our concertina would be up there in a box. Now when Mom would hear a nice tune on the radio, in the morning after the breakfast, by the time she’d be up on a chair and up to the concertina the tune would be gone. So she decided she would leave it on the end of the table. And I was used to seeing the concertina the same as a jug. To me it was a part of the table. There was an old pair beyond us in the field. Herself or her husband would walk down in the morning past our house, down to the creamery for her gallon of milk. She came in one morning to our house and the ware was still on the table. My mother was playing the concertina! She told all over the country. “Do you know”, she said “Liz Tarrant – she was playing the concertina inside as if it was an evening and the ware wasn’t washed yet”! That was an awful crime. But the tune would have gone if Mom didn’t play it. We’d come home from school and she’d have the tune for us. (M. Cronin, personal communication, 20 May 1996)

In many areas, one or two musicians in the locality who could read music would have managed to acquire a copy of Francis O’Neill’s Dance Music of Ireland. O’Neill’s, which was often known as ‘The Bible’, along with broadcasts from the radio, allowed many musicians to extend their repertoire. Accordion player, Joe
McNamara, learned much of his repertoire from Tom Power, whom he described as “a marvellous fiddle player”:

I used to go and visit my aunt, on a Sunday night and Tom Power would come with the fiddle… We got the lend of a book from a fella, he is living in Crusheen now called Brianeen Connors. He had this famous O’Neill’s book. Power got the lend of it. He used to be learning the tunes out of the book. At that time the radio was started and there was a famous fiddle player that used to have a programme regular, Frank O’Higgins if you ever heard of him. Power would come to my aunt’s house and I’d be there and he’d get the names of the tunes Frank O’Higgins would play and he’d pick the ones he’d know and he’d be learning the tunes note by note from the book. I had this old melodeon and I’d be sitting down being shown it with the fiddle and it would finish up that I had a good ear for music. I’d have the tune off in my head quicker than Power would be able to play it out of the book. That’s how I got the world of music off him, nearly the whole book. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

Throughout the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s, traditional music programmes on Radio Éireann continued to influence musicians, who waited eagerly each week for the possibility of new tunes and music from areas outside their own locality:

Well the big influence at the time, as far back as I can remember… There was two things that happened regular every Saturday night. I remember my father… I will always remember he would go out and have a shave on Saturday night, getting ready for Sunday morning. He would then come in and sit down by the fire and there would be a session of storytelling first and then the storytelling would finish when ‘Céilí House’ would come on. So ‘Céilí House’ was regular. It was as regular as going to Mass on Sunday morning and a story telling session before it. (P. J. Hernon, personal communication, 11 Jul 1997)

For communities in the Irish Diaspora, the radio was also a popular medium for Irish music with “the tradition of Irish radio shows in the United States” dating “back to the early days of radio in the 1920s” (Moloney 1992: 546). Among the groups to broadcast regularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s were Philadelphia based John McGettigan and his Irish Minstrels, and Dan Sullivan’s Shamrock Band from Boston (Moloney 1992). The Four Provinces Orchestra, also based in Philadelphia, “broadcast regularly on local radio, reputedly making the world’s first broadcast of Irish music on St. Patrick’s Day, 1924” (Hall 2000: 11). From the 1930s, James Hayden became the voice of Irish music in New York, broadcasting a radio show which was on air for over thirty years while, in Philadelphia, Pat Staunton broadcast the “longest running radio show in the history of Irish-American broadcasting” (Moloney 1992: 546). The radio played an important part
in Boston accordion player, Joe Derrane’s choice of instrument, as it was on Terry O’Toole’s weekly radio show (Varlet 1995), broadcast in Boston, that he first heard accordion player Jerry O’Brien, who was to be such an influence on the young Derrane:

Every Sunday there was a radio programme that came on and on that radio programme there was a wonderful accordion player that was on almost every Sunday, the great Jerry O’Brien, who was originally from Kinsale down in Cork and he used to play every Sunday, He'd play solos and they tell me that no matter where I was in the house that as soon as that accordion started I'd come running from whatever mischief I was into and just stood in front of the radio and stared at it and jumped up and down and as soon as the accordion music stopped that was it I was back off doing whatever it was I was at, and that, I guess continued and continued until about age nine, I was just totally fascinated with this, I couldn't get enough of it, so they tracked Jerry O’Brien down through the radio station and they arranged to have Jerry come to the house to give me some lessons. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug, 1995)

But of course the radio didn’t just broadcast traditional music, and Irish traditional musicians, along with the general public, were exposed to lots of other music including the jazz that so many of the clergy were against. The headline “Jazz Condemned” in the Limerick Leader of January 11th 1926, announced that “Very Rev. M. Cullen, P.P., V.F., preaching in Bagnelstown on Sunday, strongly condemned jazz dances, which, he said, were much responsible for undermining the morals of their young people” (Limerick Leader, 11 Jan, 1926). The Gaelic League lent their weight to the argument against jazz on the radio, and the matter was hotly debated in Dáil Éireann where one minister, Gerard Boland, declared “I do not like jazz and I would like to see it eliminated altogether, but I am afraid we will not be able to do that” (Pine 2005: 293). Traditional musicians however, were fully aware of the influence of jazz and modern music, with Kevin Doyle observing that “if there was a ceili on in Gort it would be, you know, not well attended. If there was a modern band, Leo Gannon’s band from Loughrea or wherever he was from, there’d be a big crowd and every Tom, Dick and Harry could get up and dance there” (K. Doyle, Personal Communication 2007). Joe McNamara also remarked on the new dances coming in:

There was a change in the music and foreign started coming in – “one steps” and all. There was one “one step” called ‘Mary Browne’, that was the name of the tune, I had it in my head and I used to play it above for Jane, but Jane had the first part of it but she couldn’t turn it and I’d be goin’ off up to the village of Crusheen doing messages and Jane would bring me in to play a few tunes. She was still stuck on the turn of the tune, “Will you come in and turn Mary Browne for me”
says she. I don’t think she ever got it, she’d always be asking me to come in and turn it for her. (J. McNamara personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

While the gramophone, radio and other modern advances played a major part in the advancement of the accordion in Irish music, it was the contexts in which the instrument functioned, and the musical pathways chosen by its practitioners, that were to have the most profound effects on its development and acceptance as a member of the group of instruments on which traditional music was played. Chapter 8 will now focus on those contexts.
Chapter 8
Perfecting the Accent – Pathways to Acceptance

8.1 Picking up the Local Accent – Learning to Play in an Irish Way

It might be said that any kind of music can be played on any kind of instrument and to a large extent, therefore, it is the type of music played and the way in which it is played in the world of Irish traditional music that occasions the use of the word ‘Irish’ in association with these instruments. (uí Ógáin 2002: 128)

The accordion, in its journey into tradition, needed to take on the accent of Irish traditional music in order for the word ‘Irish’ to be associated with it, and indeed for it to sound Irish. As Irish traditional music involves a large store of dance music, with the dialect of the dance married to and inextricably linked with the music, and since the accordion, from its earliest days, seemed particularly suited to playing for such dancing, the instrument took on an Irish accent with remarkable speed. According to Andy McGann, speaking of the early twentieth century, “the accordion was very popular… it was probably the most popular… Irish instrument. In fact, they used to call it the Irish accordion… the button accordion… they used to refer to it as the Irish accordion” (A. McGann, personal communication, 9 Nov 1996). The development of an identifiable Irish style of accordion playing was dependent on a number of factors which are of importance to the definition of style, irrespective of the particular instrument. Doherty (1996: 265) suggests that “style, in many music traditions, is defined according to the elements recognised by the practitioners or ‘cultural actors’ of that tradition as being crucial to the creation and identification of the musical sound”. McCullough (1977: 85) has described style as “the composite form of the distinctive features that identify an individual’s musical performance” while Dromey (1999: 387) likens styles “to dialects of a single language”. The accordion itself, as a new voice in the tradition, can be viewed as a new dialect within the language of traditional music. The same dance tunes which were played on fiddles and pipes were played on the accordion, and while the tunes were essentially the same, their sound as played on the accordion was in a different dialect. Ó Súilleabháin (1990: 120) suggests that four musical dimensions are at work in the creative process in
Irish traditional dance music – “those of phrasing, rhythm, pitch and structure”. These “serve as an essential basis for a creative and individual selection of musical options whereby the player manifests firstly his musical idiolect, secondly his musical dialect and finally the musical language itself which we identify as Irish traditional dance music” (Ó Súilleabháin 1990: 130). It might be said that the very construction of the accordion suited these elements particularly well – especially the rhythmic element:

The rhythmic diversity of a player’s style will be closely allied to the particular instrument he is playing. The basic press-and-draw of the ten-key melodeon, for example, leaves its rhythmic mark through the interaction of the bellows with the musical flow. A long note may be desirable just as much for the reason of inflating the bellows as for any purely musical one. This particular instrument-based rhythmic characteristic has found its way into some two-row button accordion styles and in this way has contributed towards shaping an identifiable Irish style of ‘box’ playing. (Ó Súilleabháin 1990: 122)

It may be argued that the word ‘sound’ could be substituted for the word ‘style’ and so whatever style of playing was adopted or however the accordion player interacted with his or her instrument, the key result required was that the accordion should sound Irish. Cranitch (1999: 124) states that “repertoire can also be considered to be an element of style” and it is perhaps this element along with the rhythmic element that may have been most important in the early days of developing an Irish style of accordion playing in traditional music.

While there is no way to be sure who the first musician to play Irish traditional music on the accordion was, the question arises: how did the first traditional players know how to play the instrument in an Irish way? An initial problem more than likely faced by early accordion players was how to work out the mechanics of playing the instrument, especially when a teacher was unavailable to demonstrate. Players of other instruments, in addition to listening to and absorbing music, also watched how musicians in their immediate environment played. Fiddle player Junior Crehan began his musical life on the tin whistle and concertina. His mother played both instruments and he learned them ‘at her knee’ when he was “about six years” (Crehan 1989: 2). When he began playing on the fiddle it was to other fiddle players that he looked:
Music was my hobby, I loved it and learned it at my mother’s knee when I was about six years. The concertina and whistle were my first instruments, both of which my mother played. Later on I learned on the fiddle. I watched the older fiddle players and learned their bowhand and styles. (Crehan 1989: 2)

For a musician attempting to play the accordion in the initial days of its use in traditional music, it would have been difficult to ‘watch’ another accordion player, as the musician was more than likely among the first generation of musicians to play traditional music on the instrument and there may not have been too many others in the immediate locality. However, it would be fair to assume that traditional musicians who worked in the big houses of the gentry for instance, could have come into contact with the accordion in that context, and may have picked up the rudiments of playing the basic notes on the instrument through observation. Others may have figured it out through a process of trial and error, and once a system of playing had been decided, may well have transferred tunes, already in memory, to the accordion. Nettl (1965: 51) has noted how “random improvisation and toying with the instrument may have a considerable effect on developing the styles of instrumental folk music”.

Evidence in Chapter 3 shows that from the very early days of the accordion’s existence, tutors for the instrument were available with many of these having staff notation as well as a coded system, which included numbers representing the keys or buttons to be pressed and symbols indicating whether to press in or draw out the bellows (Cruickshank 1852; Howe 1843). It is certainly possible that tutors of this type were available to and used by traditional musicians when they first encountered the instrument. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that Irish traditional music was first and foremost an oral music and even with the publication of O’Neill’s *Dance Music of Ireland*, the music continued to be primarily absorbed by ear. According to O’Neill (1913: 410) “music schools for the teaching of Irish music on the Union pipes, fiddle and flute were unknown” and he suggested that “pupils picked up the peculiarities of their teachers as naturally as they picked up the local accent and idiom”. Many older musicians speak about knowing the tunes in their head before they ever acquired an instrument. Fiddle player, Paddy Ryan, remembered picking up tunes at the age of five from local musicians sitting in a corner at a country house dance in his
grandmother’s kitchen, “I never left the corner. And when I came home, I
managed to have the tunes in my head – although I had no instrument” (Ryan
in Jennings 1986: 31). Before he began playing the melodeon, Kevin Doyle was
absorbing the music around him: “I learned tunes, I could whistle and hum, lilt
tunes you know” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 2007).

The prevalence of “portaireacht bhéil, or lilting” which frequently functioned “as an
instrument in its own right used to accompany dancers” or “combs – sometimes
covered with tissue paper” which were used to play tunes (uí Ógáin 2001: 128) are
additional examples of evidence which points to a picture of a society where the
absence of ‘real’ or commercial musical instruments was never a deterrent to the
performance of the music so central to everyday life. It also further strengthens the
case for assuming that the first players to play Irish traditional music on the accordion
were people from such a society – people who came to the instrument with a ready
store of music picked up by osmosis from their musical environments. Through their
absorption of the music heard all around them, these people would already have
acquired, albeit unconsciously, the elements of an Irish style, which McCullough
(1977: 85) described as having “four main variables: ornamentation, variation in
melodic and rhythmic patterns, phrasing, and articulation”. According to
McCullough, the occurrence of these variables in any performance is what constitutes
a recognisable Irish style or sound. Therefore it is likely that the earliest players, once
they had worked out a system of playing the accordion, simply transferred the music
they were so familiar with onto this new instrument. Other early performers on the
accordion may also have played another instrument prior to taking up the accordion
as in the case of Co. Wexford musician, Andrew McCann, who played tin whistle and
flute before taking up the melodeon, only to abandon its use at the time of the Irish
revival (O’Neill 1913: 415).

This process of transferring music, either known in their heads or played on another
instrument, continued into the 1950s and 1960s and indeed until formal classes in
traditional music became established. When Jackie Daly, for instance, began playing
the accordion during the mid 1950s, he found it to be “very similar to the harmonica”
which he had been playing already. “Any tune I had on the harmonica I immediately
transferred it” (J. Daly, personal communication, 1997). Through his contact with
fiddle player Jim Keeffe, Daly also learned to read the system of notation used by Padraig O’Keeffe when teaching fiddle players, and Jackie then transferred these tunes to the accordion. Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé from the West Kerry Gaeltacht always had a love for the accordion above any other instrument:

Bhi dúil níos mó agam sa bhosca ceoil ná mar a bhí in aon uirlis cheoil eile. Bhuel thaitin gach uirlis liom ach bhí mo chroí istigh sa mhileoidean. (Ó Sé 1995: 34)

He had listened to the accordion music of neighbour, Seán Ó Domhnaill who, according to Ó Sé, had a magical style of playing and such a large collection of tunes that he did not know how anyone could keep them in their head:

Bhí droicheart éigin ag baint leis an stil cheoil a bhí aige agus bailiúchán mór port aige gur dóigh leat ná beadh ar chumas aon duine iad a choimeád ina cheann. (Ó Sé 1995: 34)

Unlike Jackie Daly, who played the harmoncia before acquiring an accordion, Maidhc Dainín had no idea how to play the instrument, and after an evening spent trying to make sense of the accordion, he finally managed to play the first few notes of Ar maidin moch using a process of trial and error, but by that time, he was sweating from the exertion of pulling and drawing. From then on, every night, after he had taken a quick look at his school lessons, he and his brother Páid would practice. Within a fortnight they had learned a few tunes:

Tar éis tae thugas m’aghaidh ar an seomra agus seo liom ag plé leis an ngléas arís féachaint an bhfheidhfaoinn aon mheabhair a bhaint de… Tar éis tamaill fuairbeas an chéad dá nota de ‘Ar maidin moch’ ach faoin dtirth seo bhí súp allais orm ó bheith ag sá agus ag tarrac… Gach oíche tar éis sracfhéachaint a bheith tugtha ar na ceachtanna scoile thugadh beirt again – mé féin agus Páidí – faoin seomra sios. Faoi cheann coicise bhí cúpla port éigin foughlantha againn, nó tuigeadh dúinn go raibh. (Ó Sé 1995: 37)

The accordion has undergone significant change since its first arrival among the traditional music community in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Offaly accordion player Paddy O’Brien suggests that “up until the 1940s many musicians were playing ten key accordions and many of them also were contented with 2 row melodeons or single row melodeons” (Paddy O’Brien (Offaly), personal communication, 1998). Throughout the twentieth century the instrument has
witnessed various changes in shape, size and timbre, many of which have been
effected in response to the demands of a changing social environment. These
changes, along with changing performance contexts and changing audiences,
have contributed to the development of an Irish way of playing the accordion
and have played a part in facilitating the adoption and adaptation of this new
modern instrument into an already existing tradition.

Finnegan (1989), in her search for a term to encapsulate all the aspects of music-
making she encountered in the town of Milton Keynes, and having discounted
labels such as ‘world’, ‘community’, and ‘group’, as being too confined, finally
settled on the idea of a musical pathway as “one possible metaphor for
illuminating certain features of local music and its implications for urban life”
(Finnegan 1989: 305). The social environment of the button accordion player, and
the many varying performance contexts within which the accordion functioned,
are central to the pathways travelled by it on the journey into tradition. The next
section, therefore, will focus on that environment, and on the contexts which
shaped the direction of the instrument as it continued on its journey into tradition.

8.2 Early Days – The Family Context

Traditional music and song is rarely learned from a book. It passes from father
to son, mother to daughter; from one generation to another; in an unbroken line
which stretches back several centuries. (Curtis 1994: 9)

It is universally accepted that the family unit has always played a significant role
in the development and preservation of traditional music in Ireland, both in terms
of transmission and support (Veblen 1991). This is not unique to Ireland as in
many other traditions the family is central to an early introduction to traditional
music. Doherty (1996: 89) acknowledges that the family or the “home environment”,
as she describes it, “is recognised as being the undisputed axis of society”. According
to her, the home environment is vital to the existence of the Cape Breton fiddle
tradition, and she refers to the “active home environment” where music is
encouraged and actively participated in and the “passive home environment”
where, although exposure to music through the media perhaps may be in existence, there is no active contribution to the music. She notes that rarely have musicians of any calibre come from the passive home environment. Doherty sees the home as having a central role “in the cultivation of the tradition” in addition to “its position as a stabilizing and conservative agent within that tradition” (Doherty 1996: 90). Quigley (1995) also acknowledges the importance of the role of the family in musical life noting that, when seeking other musicians on the island of Newfoundland during the course of his field work there in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he was “consistently referred to families rather than individuals” (Quigley 1995: 6). He suggests that “musical networks are primarily family based, and by extension, because most families reside in the same place, community based as well” (Quigley 1995: 6). The family was also seen as an important element in the transmission of traditional music and particularly accordion music in the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* tradition where, from the end of the nineteenth century, the accordion had become extremely popular:

This historical development of *conjunto* in its changing environment is crystallized in the Jiménez family of musicians. The family spans four generations of accordion players and group leaders, and represents a unique embodiment of *conjunto*’s history and its interface with non-Hispanic Angola America. (Scruggs 2001: 216)

Finnegan (1989: 309), observing the varied strands of musical life in the town of Milton Keynes, puts forward the notion that “growing up in a musical family… helped to set an individual’s interests and skills in certain channels for the future”. These channels or “accepted pathways” were more likely to be followed by those from musical backgrounds. Finnegan also noted that “the hereditary emphasis in music” was further strengthened by the leisure patterns of families in Milton Keynes:

Parents were sometimes themselves active musicians in instrumental ensembles or choral groups, which often contained more than one generation, with parents gradually being joined by their children. Most audiences for local musical performances included a proportion of the performers’ children, along with their other friends and relatives. (Finnegan 1989: 309)

Musical families have always been a mainstay of Irish traditional music and all of the early accordion players, who featured in the ‘Golden Era’ of recording in 1920s America, came from homes where their parents and siblings also played
music. P.J. Conlon was one of the first Irish-born musicians to be recorded in America, playing Irish dance music on the accordion. He grew up in a musical family where many of his brothers and sisters also played. His sister, Mary Ellen Conlon, also played the single row accordion and recorded on 78rpm in New York during the 1920s. Another sister, Rose Murphy, lived in England, where an L.P. of her melodeon playing was recorded in her later years. Joe Flanagan was a member of the famous Flanagan Brothers, who were one of the most successful dance-hall acts in America during the 1920s:

Music was an everyday part of life in the Flanagan household. Arthur played the single row accordion or melodeon, while his wife Ellen was a singer with a large repertoire of Irish songs which she taught to her children. Mike recalled that his first introduction to playing music was in Waterford when, at the age of ten, he picked out a tune on a charred mandolin he had recovered from a fire. Later in Albany, he joined family music sessions with his father and brother Joe, who was learning to play the accordion. (Bradshaw 1996c: 2)

The Flanagan Brothers, Joe, Mike and Louis, continued to play music as a family and went on to record “168 sides for numerous recording labels” during the 1920s and 1930s (Bradshaw 1996c: 2). Their contribution, and particularly that of accordion player, Joe, will be discussed in a later chapter. Boston accordion player, Joe Derrane, also grew up in a musical household. His brother, George, played Irish music, as did both of his parents, although Joe did not realise his father did:

My Father played a bit but I never really heard him much… the fact of the matter is I never knew that he played until one day he came home from work early or whatever, I can’t remember the circumstances but I had come home from school and here he was sitting at the kitchen table with my… accordion playing some of the tunes that Jerry had written out for me and apparently he had to brush up on a few of these tunes and he was doing alright, I gotta say, because obviously there was no real practice or anything. Now my mother on the other hand was a fiddle player I think I may have told you that before and around the age two I guess it was her custom to play… for me because it seems, once she sat to play the fiddle for me, slow airs or whatever… that was it, it was like a sedative. Some night, for whatever reason, she doesn’t remember herself, she left the fiddle in the crib and I woke up at some point and saw it and said Oh! a new toy and just wrapped it around the edge of the crib, I destroyed the fiddle but she never bothered with it after that so I’ve never heard her play. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

Family continues to play an important part in the support system for traditional music in Ireland. Many of the accordion players I interviewed for this study confirmed that, for most of them, their first experience of music was hearing it in
the family home, either played by parents or siblings. Joe McNamara’s father played concertina, and he also heard music played by his neighbour, Jane Tierney:

My father – God rest him – used to play the concertina. Well, you’ve heard tell of Jack Mulcaire, he won first prize in the All-Ireland of 1954 for singing, his wife’s aunt lived where Dessie Mulcaire lives now; her name was Jane Tierney and she played the melodeon and there was always a few sets at home with my father playing concertina. Concertina players at that time were fairly plentiful around here. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

Accordion player Jack Doyle, who emigrated to America in 1947, also grew up in a musical family which had a long lineage of playing music. “Everyone in the house played, my father and mother and they step danced and all… the concertina, the flute and the fiddle and there could be ten here by night… ‘twas from way back see” (J. Doyle, personal communication, 7 May 1995). Similarly, P.J. Hernon heard his first music in the family home, growing up in an area which became very much associated with the accordion and, more specifically, the single-row melodeon. He started playing when he was five years old:

…naturally enough it would have been the accordion, because in the area I come from, which is Connemara and especially the Carna area it was mainly button accordion, or melodeon single-row that was played. And my father played single-row as well. So I picked it up from him… So it was the sort of, best loved and the most common instrument in that part of Connemara; the melodeon. (P.J. Hernon personal communication, 11 Jul 1997)

P.J. learned to play the accordion from his father but not in any formal manner. No lessons were given and P.J. remembers that he “just learned by looking at him… there was no formal thing anyway. It was purely by ear and by looking” (P. J. Hernon, personal communication, 11 Jul 1997). The musical family context was also important in terms of the exposure young children got, not only to live music as played by their parents and siblings, but also to the music of other instruments and regions heard on the gramophone and, later, L.P.s:

The main influences on me at that time wouldn’t have been accordions. To this day I can remember the old ‘Tulla’ and the ‘Kilfenora’… They really stand out in my mind to this day and Paddy Canny, P.J Hayes, you know that L.P. that came out that time… you see up to that we had the gramophone and the 78’s. And every Sunday after the dinner, the plates would be put away and the table cloth and the gramophone would be taken down. And at that time I would be in under the table and they would give me a “dropeen of porter” and I would be singing away to the music. The 78’s we had, we had some Joe Derrane. And then we had some of
Paddy O’Brien’s 78’s, Michael Grogan, and then there was a whole lot of singing, it was mainly singing. They were the first things I heard. And then my mother came home from Galway… I’ll never forget her bringing this parcel with her from Galway. It was our first record player… she had two records with her. She had the ‘Tulla’ and the ‘Kilfenora’. She was a sean nós dancer and she would have gone for something with good rhythm in it. So it was through her, the kind of a thing she would go for, they were the first things we heard on record anyway. Then shortly after that, that ‘Canny, Hayes and O’Loughlin L.P. came along and Seamus Tansy and Bobby Gardiner and all that kind of stuff. I would have to say that she would have been into what ever had great rhythm in it. (P.J. Hernon, personal communication, 11 Jul 1997)

Growing up in a musical family, particularly when siblings also play music, offers stimulation and encouragement to younger members of the family. Sharon Shannon grew up in Ruane in Co. Clare with “loads of music in the family”:

We all played tin whistles and Gary the oldest decided, when he was about twelve or thirteen, to start playing the concert flute and so of course we all wanted to get concert flutes once Gary got the concert flute… and Gary had this bright idea that we would all play different instruments so that eventually we might have a family band. He was probably about sixteen, I was about… eleven and Majella my older sister was about thirteen so the family band never happened [laughs] but thanks to Gary the rest of us didn’t take up concert flutes. (S. Shannon, personal communication, 13 Feb 1998)

As well as her older brother’s encouragement to try different instruments, extended family also played a role in introducing Sharon to the idea of playing the accordion:

…he just named out all these different instruments. Well there was the banjo, the fiddle, there was this and that and the other thing and I just liked the idea of the accordion… I’d hardly even heard the sound of the accordion. My mother’s sister’s husband, Eamonn, who lives in Liscarrow in Clare, he had an accordion and I used be fascinated by the accordion and that was the only time I really ever heard of an accordion. (S. Shannon, personal communication, 13 Feb 1998)

Extended family also played a part in Máirtín O’Connor’s first experience with the accordion. As a young boy he was a regular visitor to his grandparents who lived in Knocknacarra, in Galway. They both played the instrument:

We visited them one Sunday, I remember myself and my father went back to visit them. They were playing away at the time, sitting in the kitchen. And I remember there was a big old grandfather clock. There are certain things I remember about the house, first is the kind of general scent of the place, the tobacco, because he smoked a pipe. On the particular day I visited, the two of them were passing the instrument back and forwards between the two of them. And asking each other, “you play this one and what is that tune, The Blackbird?” And so forth… They
had lovely old versions of tunes… And then I remember they left the accordion back in one of the bedrooms. And I remember going back and messing with it. I remember I started making out a tune, it might have been a song or something. And then they saw my interest in it and they suggested I take it away for a while. (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)

It wasn’t just in Ireland that the family was an important element in the passing on of Irish traditional music. As well as introducing the young person to music, families were, and still are, a constant source of support and encouragement among musicians in the Irish Diaspora. John Whelan grew up in Luton, England during the 1960s. His father, Denis, was originally from Co. Wexford and played the accordion, “a few waltzes and a couple of jigs” (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995). John remembers that as a child, even before he started to play the accordion, his father was always the designated driver as he was a non-drinker. Every Friday night he would drive his friends into London to play music and this resulted in many late-night sessions at John’s home in Luton, when his father and friends would return and the music would start again:

They would come home at two o’clock in the morning or what have you and all the instruments would come out…but they actually weren’t traditional they were you know, we had a drummer and a sax player or a trumpet player and… the guys would sing some of the old songs from the forties, the old Irish songs from the forties and fifties. We used have great hooleys and my mother would get up and make sandwiches and that kind of stuff. (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995)

Although John attended formal classes in London with music teacher, Brendan Mulkerne, he credits his family and particularly his father, Denis Whelan, with being highly influential as he learned to play:

My father kind of really helped me out, helped study with me, taught me about… phrasing you know, control of the instrument and stuff like that. Even though he was never considered an accomplished musician he certainly, you know, had the knowledge and the verbal skills to explain to me what I should be doing… Well, I was very fortunate in some ways because my father was absolutely dedicated to the music and… we used to go to London right from the start. I mean, I think I only knew one tune and we were at a session in London and he brought me to the Comhaltas session in Fulham and Camden Town and you know I remember sitting in the session in… the King’s Head in Fulham with Paddy Taylor and Johnny Hynes who was one of the founding members of Comhaltas in Britain. (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995)
8.2.1 Neighbours and Visitors

Fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, handed on music and song from generation to generation with occasional varied inputs from outsiders who passed through the community, or from returning migrants. (Dromey 1999: 389)

The family environment was often further enhanced by musical visitors to the home. Accordion player Patricia Kennelly grew up in San Francisco, which was not considered a hotbed for traditional music at the time. Nevertheless, because of her parent’s interest in Irish music and dancing, she was exposed to traditional music from an early age:

I heard music all the time growing up. My parents were both mad about traditional music and my mom had started collecting 78 records when she was very young so she had a great collection of records. We heard all kinds of music from various people growing up and then sometimes we’d be fortunate enough to have someone come to town which in those days was very rare ‘cause it was so far off the beaten track you know, 3000 miles from New York, it was not very often that people came out our way, so when they did it was great, we appreciated it. (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997)

Musical visitors to the family home often provided the stimulus for an interest in playing traditional music. The Cape Breton fiddle tradition is a case in point. There, as in Ireland, the house was generally the venue for musical gatherings, and children of the house were exposed to music, songs and stories of visitors. There are many examples of musical visitors who, because of weather extremes or simply because they wanted to swap tunes, often spent prolonged stays with the host family. Dan R. Mac Donald, the renowned fiddler and composer was one such musician who was a regular visitor to many homes around the island of Cape Breton:

There’s a type that runs through our fiddling tradition that probably goes back a long time – of the bachelor violin player. There’s a lot of that. Ned MacKinnon was one of those, Dan R. MacDonald, Angus Chisolm – I can name all kinds… because they were so interested in tunes that they’d seek out another fiddler in other parts of the island and stay there for days, maybe weeks, swapping tunes with them – it wasn’t very conducive to raising families or having wives. The term was used often – “They were married to their violin”. (MacGillivray in Caplan 1981: 40)
Another Cape Breton fiddle player, Jerry Holland, was influenced by the fiddle playing of his father as well as the many fiddle players who visited his home in Boston, including Winston Scotty Fitzgerald:

I remember once when Winston (Fitzgerald) was at my parents’ house in Halifax, Massachusetts. I was about four at the time and it was before I took up the fiddle. I fell asleep sitting at Winston’s feet, staring at him and listening to every note. (Holland in MacGillivray 1981: 106)

Ireland has a long tradition of musical visitors arriving into the family home or the local community. The dancing masters, who often brought a fiddle player or piper with them, established a pattern, during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, of visiting communities where, as well as teaching the dances of the day, they also provided music for recreational dancing. In addition, many of them were involved in the transmission process through teaching music to local children as well as introducing new repertoire to local players. Travelling musicians were another group who visited what were often regular circuits and, as in the case of the McConnells and Dohertys of Donegal, “served to distribute elements of musical styles as well as repertoire between what were otherwise remote communities” (MacAoidh 1994: 222). During the late nineteenth century, Paddy Mack (McNamara), a blind fiddle player from Cooleen Bridge in East Clare, spent every winter with the Canny family in Glandree where he taught classes each night. He is considered “the greatest single influence on the playing of traditional music in the area” (Sheedy 1990: 416) and his pupils included renowned musicians Michael Tuohy, Johnny Allen – from whom Captain Francis O’Neill collected tunes – and Pat Canny, father of legendary fiddle player Paddy Canny:

I suppose he had a love for the music or whatever and… they used to get Paddy MacNamara, a blind fiddler from below in Cooleen Bridge halfway between Feakle and Scariff and they’d collect him and bring him up to our house at home and there was Tommy McNamara, there was Mick Donohue, there was Patrick Moloney in Feakle, there was… Paddy Hayes, P.Joe’s uncle and my father… they’d all gather there, I don’t know I suppose every night and then keep him there for two or three months and then in the month of February they’d make a little collection between them and give it to him and land him home… he would stay there for the duration while the winter was there and while nothing else much could be done and that’s how they learned their music… I suppose the fact of the matter that when he was blind he couldn’t do anything else. He was very respected. (Canny 2008)
Paddy Canny himself became interested in playing the fiddle as a boy when his father was teaching a local woman who visited the Canny house for lessons:

> Simply by watching her he discovered that he could soon play the tune better himself. At first he played the tin whistle but soon graduated to the violin and found another eager pupil in P.J. Hayes a young boy who lived nearby. (Sheedy 1990: 417)

Visitors to the family home, as well as providing the stimulus for beginning to play music, often had an influence on the instrument chosen by the aspiring musician. Joe Cooley was a frequent visitor to the home of Tony MacMahon and the young Tony was enormously influenced by his music. His first accordion, a piano model, was given to him by Cooley. However he quickly switched to a button accordion provided for him by another visitor to his home – Seán Reid (Vallely 1999). Joe Cooley was a regular visitor to the home of Patricia Kennelly in San Francisco and was the main influence in her decision to begin playing the accordion:

> Well the first notable person that came out was Kevin Keegan and I was very small when he came out I think and then Joe Cooley followed not long after, and I heard Joe play and I often tell people the first time I heard Joe Cooley play I thought there was nothing like it. I thought he was the greatest thing I'd ever heard, he had such a strong passionate way of playing, I thought it was just the best and my mom… he was playing late in our house, we often had musicians come in and there would be late nights in the kitchen and that and my mom kept shooing me off to bed you know, she'd find me behind the kitchen door and I had school the next day and she'd say “get into bed, get into bed” and finally after about the third or fourth time Joe said “it's no harm if she likes the music, let her come in, let her hear it, that's not a bad thing”, so I was told to stay very quiet that I could come in and I sat in the chair in the corner and I listened all night and I thought there was just nothing like it, the feeling that it gave me. Joe himself was such a character such a wonderful person he was always so kind and gentle, he had just a great way about him so that's when I first got interested in playing… I was probably, when I first heard him, about ten or eleven and then I asked him would he teach me and he said he hadn't taught anyone ever before but that he'd give it a go. So I went down, my first lessons were on a Tuesday night every Tuesday I'd go down and then… I would be going Tuesday and Thursday and then Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997)

Another accordion player who came under the influence of Joe Cooley was Galway native, Raymond Roland. Growing up in a house where both parents played fiddle, his interest in the accordion stemmed from hearing Cooley play during his frequent visits to the Roland home in Ballyshea. These visits “aroused in him an intense interest in the accordion”. Joe responded to this zeal by regularly
leaving his accordion with him so that he could learn to play (F. M. 1986: 23). Joe McNamara’s first glimpse of a melodeon was when “The Star Kierse” visited his aunt’s house:

A fellow up in Corofin used to play, by the name of John Kierse. He used to go by the name ‘The Star Kierse’. He had a sister married in Crusheen. He was courting my aunt at the time and he brought the melodeon with him and that would be the first time I ever saw one. He was supposed to be a marvellous player… I remember in 1925 or 26 my aunt who lived in the house Kevin O’Brien is in now… in 1926 or so, of a November night and there was a big flood, and Conheady’s had a dance at Kevin O’Brien’s house… I remember I was only ten or eleven years of age, going into my aunt’s house and I thought I never heard music until that night. Tom Conheady, he was in the brass band in Tulla and was well into music. He could read it well, he played jigs, reels, hornpipes, himself, his sister and this Miko Jack playing the concertina as well. The same night Jack Griffey who was married to my aunt, he arrived in and he had ‘The Star Kierse’ with him and he played the melodeon. It was the best night’s music ever heard. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

8.3 Playing the Accordion – Early Performance Contexts

While it was within the family context that initial contact was often made with an instrument such as the accordion it was the wider community, in which the family functioned, that provided many of the contexts for the development of the instrument. Blacking (1973: 46), when writing about music among the Venda people of the Northern Transvaal, observes that “the Venda may suggest that exceptional musical ability is biologically inherited, but in practice they recognize that social factors play the most important part in realizing it or suppressing it”. The wider community played a part in the musical pathways followed by Jackie Daly from his earliest days playing the accordion. His father, also Jackie Daly, “played a bit, but in the beginning he didn’t have a melodeon for years. He played the harmonica, but very rarely” (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997). Jackie also played the harmonica and as soon as he got an accordion he managed to acquire “what tunes were around at the time”. However, it was when he started going “to the hall every Wednesday night” (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997) that he began to expand his repertoire:

Mick Williams used to play there every Wednesday night. I didn’t dance, I just sat in the corner. He eventually asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was interested in the accordion. In them days there was no recorders, if you liked something you would have to diddle-dyddle it on the way home. (J. Daly, Personal communication, 1997)
During his formative years learning to play the accordion, Jackie also made his way
to a popular venue for dancing known locally as the stage. Situated in Knocknacollen,
about a mile outside Kanturk “it was open-air for the dances” and “there was a shed
for the musicians” (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997). According to
Jackie, dancing took place “twice a week, often of a Wednesday night and a Sunday
afternoon”. The dancers danced on a stage “about a foot off the ground” while the
musicians were in “a shed alongside it”. One of the musicians who played regularly
at the stage was fiddle player Jim Keeffe, who was a former pupil of Sliabh Luachra
fiddle master, Pádraig O’Keeffe. Jackie acknowledges Jim’s playing as being most
influential and the two became firm friends:

I just walked up there myself. Then Jim Keeffe discovered I was there and he
asked me to play a tune. He said “why don’t you join in with us”. I would bring
my accordion in a message bag and Jim would meet me on the road a lot and put
me on the back of his motorbike. (J. Daly personal communication, 26 Mar 1997)

By the early decades of the twentieth century accordions appear to have been
readily available and in plentiful supply in traditional communities, as already
observed in Chapter 7. Daily newspapers carried advertisements for accordions
and melodeons while in rural areas accordions could be bought in hardware shops
and even in a jeweler’s shop (Worrell 2007). An accordion could also be ordered
by mail order:

My grandfather Harry was the youngest of thirteen children and played the
accordion at country dances. The story that I remember is that he sent away to
England, it sticks in my mind that he had coupons that you collected, coupons of
some kind and you sent them in with some pennies and an accordion was sent to
him by mail. He remembered being very excited waiting for this, and learned to
play it himself or with some help… went on to play dances. He brought it with
him, he went to New York, I would think 1914 or 1915. The legend is that he was
booked on the Titanic and missed it but I can’t believe that. (D. Elliot, personal
communication, 13 Nov 1995)

This practice of being able to acquire an accordion through the post continued into
the 1950s. Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé from the West Kerry Gaeltacht got his first
accordion by post from Cox’s, a shop which sold musical instruments in Kilcock,
Co. Kildare. Maidhc had heard a Hohner double-row accordion being advertised
on the radio for £12.10.6 but the accordion could be paid for by instalments of 12
shillings and 6 pence once a deposit of £2 was put down. He ordered an accordion
and in a short while a letter arrived letting him know that the accordion would be sent to the local post office in Baile na nGall. Maidhc himself collected it and took it straight home where everyone was waiting to feast their eyes on this strange machine, the music from which, according to Maidhc, brought joy to his heart:

Ar shroisint an tí dom bhí an chuid eile den gclann ag feithéamh chun go bhfuighidh sí lán a súl den meaisin aisteach seo… Ní rabhas i bhfad do baint na gcordaí agus an pháipéar de. Á a bhuachail, é sínte ansiúd sa bhosca! An gléas go gcuireann an ceol a thagann as gliondar ar mo chroi. (Ó Sé 1995: 36)

Many accordions came to Ireland from England, Scotland and America, when a returning family member often provided the instrument. Denis O’Keeffe, from Rathmore, played an old three-stop melodeon until he got a Globe Gold-Medal accordion from New York in 1932. “The brothers were over in New York at the time and they bought it over and they brought it home” (D. O’Keeffe, personal communication, 3 Nov 1994). The arrival of one of these ornate accordions into a small rural community in South Kerry must have created quite a stir as they were so different to melodeons in use in Ireland at the time. Joe Derrane in Boston began his musical career on a Globe accordion:

Now the globe made several versions of their ten-key accordions. They had the globe with the four stoppers, and they had the other very polished gold coloured box, oh yeah, it wasn’t wooden at all like the older style, the black ones with all the rhinestones, it didn’t have the rhinestone but had the kind of plastic finish on it and it was a gold colour and ivory coloured keys and all you had was a little bar behind the keyboard and that would take the place of the stops but you only had the one stop so you either had all four voices going or you maybe had the two middle voices going. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

On the Blasket Islands melodeons were played alongside fiddles for open air and house dancing. In 1932, the same year as Denis O’Keeffe acquired his Globe Gold-Medal accordion from New York, a “melodian” was sent to the islanders by American, John Cullen who had previously visited the Blaskets. “Christmas time last year he sent us a melodian. Always every year some nice visitors come and think of some Islander after going away” (Ní Shuíleabháin 1978: 49). In some families, accordions and concertinas were part of the Christmas shopping. Accordion and fiddle player Maureen Cronin remembers her grandmother telling her how, as part of life in rural North Cork, special items were always bought at Christmas time, “buying the Christmas it was called” (M. Cronin, personal
communication, 20 May 1996). She spoke of how instruments were included in the list of essential items:

Long ago when they used to go to town for Christmas they bought things that are bare essentials now but they were luxurious then. Each time they went at Christmas they bought a concertina for the oldest girl… The following Christmas she got another new concertina, the eldest girl, and the second concertina was passed on to the third girl. There was seven girls in my mother’s family and you could picture the music that was there. (M. Cronin personal communication, 20 May 1996)

When accordion player Jack Doyle arrived in America in 1947, he spent many years playing with a number of dance bands. However it was some time before he began to play in public because he didn’t have an accordion good enough “I was going around there for a while, I didn’t have the accordion, the accordion I had was dilapidated” (J. Doyle, personal communication, 7 May 1995). Jack then bought a Baldoni accordion which was one of the most popular types of accordion available in America at the time. There were many other factors among the wider community which helped the accordion to become assimilated into the family of instruments used in Irish music. One could say that there were a number of pathways by which the instrument gained both entry to the tradition and acceptance as an instrument on which Irish traditional music could be played. As outlined in Chapter 7, the early days of the recording industry in Ireland, along with the advent of radio, were important contexts for the advancement of the accordion in Irish traditional music. Another significant context with regard to the development of the accordion was the dancing environment. As discussed earlier, the accordion appears to have been particularly embraced by dancers from its earliest days, and its volume and dynamic capabilities significantly aided that process. In more recent times, Cork musician William Hammond, who played banjo and “had played a lot for dances” decided to take up the accordion as he felt it suited dancing more than the banjo did. “Well you might get people to dance to a single banjo but it looks a bit odd” (W. Hammond, personal communication, 5 Jul 1995). Referring back to Jackie Daly who learnt much of his early music through playing for dancing, and Kevin Doyle and Joe McNamara who, as we shall see, played so much music at the country house dances in their localities, it becomes clear that one of the most important functions of traditional music during the early days of the accordion’s entrance into the Irish tradition was music for the dance and that, through that music, a style of playing the accordion in an Irish way was
developed. In Jackie Daly’s case the dancing involved was mainly polkas and slides for the set most commonly danced in the area. This, of course, would have major impact on the spread of this repertoire during the 1970s after the release of the album *Jackie Daly and Seamus Creagh*, as well as Jackie’s high profile involvement with the group *De Danann*, to which he introduced the music of the Sliabh Luachra region. The dancing environment thus played a major role in the development of the accordion and in the early decades of the century the main place where dancing flourished was in the country houses of rural Ireland.

### 8.4 Taking the Floor – The Accordion and Dancing

If you’ve got good music you’ll dance in spite of yourself. (M. Cronin, personal communication, 20 May 1996)

The country house dance which incorporated the family setting and the wider community was the mainstay of traditional music for the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Ó Catháin (1979: 25), describing Lixnaw, a small village in North Kerry noted that “at this time dances were an every night event, either at the crossroads or in the houses. There were Wren Nights, Biddy Nights, Raffles and Threshings, Wedding Nights and Nights of the Gander”. These venues proved important for the development of an Irish style of playing the accordion, as playing for dancing provided accordion players with many new and different contexts within their communities and they were welcomed at these gatherings:

I used to go to the dances, I wasn’t old enough. Sometimes the man of the house would say “the house is too crowded” and he’d throw out the boys. He would look at me and “I can use you. Stay here!” I was highly honoured – I was an accordion player. (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996)

Joe McNamara attended what were known in his area of East Clare as “kitchen dances”. The music was usually provided by local fiddle, flute and concertina players, but as mentioned earlier, it was at one of these dances that Joe first came into contact with a melodeon when the “Star Kierse” visited a dance being held in
his aunt’s house. These dances really sparked Joe’s interest in playing the accordion and he believed that playing at the kitchen dances was a great encouragement to him:

There used to be kitchen dances then and everyone that was able to play would be made play. There would be a few sets above in our house, my father would be playing the concertina and if I got stick enough I’d have to play a tune or two. I might only have one or two tunes I was able to play but that’s how I got into playing. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

Music was so in demand for the house dances that even when musicians had only a few tunes they were still pressed into service. Kevin Doyle and his brother Johnny began learning to play the accordion on a ‘box’ left in their house by Mick Cooley, elder brother of Joe Cooley:

…and that box anyhow, we were learning tunes on it and I had half a dozen tunes and I remember one night, you know, up in Ballinruane, at Lowreys, Johnny and myself, they had a party there and the two of us were playing for sets. We’d about five tunes each and we repeated these tunes all night long till about three o’clock in the morning and they said “aw ‘twas a great night, great music” (laughs). God help us if they were listening to it today. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

Hall (2001: 10) suggests that “the classic period of Irish country-house dancing was probably from about 1870 until 1940”. According to him, there were many factors which contributed to the growth in such community gatherings, among them improved “social and economic conditions” as well as improvements in housing and “the availability of cheap factory-made fiddles” along with mass produced instruments such as accordions and concertinas. Dances and parties in people’s houses thus became commonplace events all over Ireland in the days before radio and other forms of entertainment. Jimmy Ward of the Kilfenora Céili Band remembered playing for country dances; “the country dance was great, come outside there and you'd hear the music inside, I don't know the people looked so happy. They were dancing there to their heart’s content” (Ward in Doorty 1993: 81). A certain house in a rural district would become known as a great venue for dancing, such as the house accordion player Kevin Doyle grew up in during the late 1920s and 30s, which, according to Kevin, was considered “the most famous in the south of Galway. There was people there, people danced in that house and I never knew them at all you know, people home from America and
that, they’d come you know” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007). Kevin’s parents had both come from musical families. Several members of his mother’s family played the accordion while Kevin’s father came from a house in Faha near Killanena in East Clare, which was a noted venue for music-making:

I was speaking to a fellow living in Faha, an American. I took my wife and daughter in to see the old home where my dad was born. It was a lovely thatched cottage at the bottom of the mountain, beautiful spot… two waterfalls down beside it and I had to open a gate where there was never a gate… I asked the guy next door if it was okay to go in and he said “no trouble… a great home for parties” he said “there’d be someone coming home from America there’d be a party” so it started off there where my father was born, they were used to that type of thing. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

Both of Kevin’s parents emigrated to America where his mother “worked for people who were on the Titanic”. They met and married in Philadelphia where they remained for a number of years, before returning to Ireland just before the outbreak of World War I. Settling in the townland of Bunahow “between Lough Cutra and Crusheen” their house became one of the most noted houses for music and dancing in the south Galway and North Clare region from the late 1920s to the late 1940s, when the whole family emigrated to Australia. “It went on even after I leaving – we were all left and they were still coming dancing there” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007). For over twenty years dances took place at the Doyle home every Sunday night:

Every Sunday night… you see Dad and Mam being in America, Mam was used to life and used to people coming in and out and all this type of thing. She was a great woman for making cups of tea for people… They’d be dancing sets, well my first introduction to listening to music and the dancing was, I was a little lad, John Joe Quinlan he was living in Tubber… and there was one fiddle between three of them, nobody had money to buy fiddles and there was one fiddle between three of them… John Joe Quinlan was a better fiddler and then Denis Quinlan was fair but not as good as John Joe and Paddy Larkin had a few tunes… One would play for a set, another would play for the set, they took it in turn the three of them and they’d keep set dancing till maybe twelve o’clock or whatever time and they’d walk maybe, the Mullins’ would come from Crusheen and places, they’d walk two and three miles on a regular basis on Sunday nights, t’was sure that there’d be dancing every Sunday night. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

The return of emigrants for a visit was a cause for great celebration and dances, known as sprees or convoys, would be arranged in the home place and in neighbouring houses for the duration of the visitor’s stay (Brennan 1999). Parties
were also organised in the Doyle house if there were people home from the States or England. Young Kevin would be sent off by his mother to invite the neighbours:

…and if there were visitors coming she’d… have an apple pie made and if somebody came home from America or somebody came home from England or wherever “oh go down the road and tell Mary Rose Nellie and tell the Fitzpatricks and tell the Carrolls and tell the girls and the lads that we’re having a dance tonight” and I’d be sent along to invite the neighbours and they’d come along and there was no drink of course because… people were poor but Mam’d be making cups of tea. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

The dances which took place in the Doyle house did not involve any admission charge and musicians were unpaid other than when “Mam used to give a few cigarettes… maybe a packet of five cigarettes or something” to some of the musicians for playing for the dancing (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007). Similarly Joe McNamara described the weekly dances which took place around his home place:

We played around here, there used to be kitchen house dances, as I said before, the weekly sets. There might be a crowd of card players above at my own house, up where my brother lived, up at the bridge… ‘twas my father I went with …and he’d be playing at the dance in his turn. It was a place that was noted. The musicians were great. There was no such thing as tape recorders and they were all playing for the pleasure of it. (J. McNamara personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

Most house dances comprised of “evening house-visiting among relatives and neighbours within small, rural communities” (Hall 2001: 10). However, frequently, on special occasions, a dance would be organised which could involve many more people and where money would be collected in advance or charged at the door. These occasions were often known as sprees and took place a number of times a year:

There was a man lived next door to me, God rest him, John McNamara and a crowd would come at Christmas time and they’d ask Mickey Littleton, the boss or Annie, the wife of the house to hold a “spree”. Admission would be about two shillings a head for the men, the women were free .And they’d go to the house and collect all the money, they might take in about four pounds and they’d give it to Mrs Littleton about a week beforehand and the following Sunday night the dance would be there. They’d give her the money and Mrs Littleton would be off to town the next day and the young ones would have new frocks and all that and they’d go up to Crusheen the night of the dance and the men would go Sunday evening and they might get about five or six gallons of Guinness, a couple of bottles of raspberry wine and I don’t know how many loaves of bread and jam. The lads that were drinkers had to pay something extra. If you didn’t drink it was cheaper. One shilling to get into the dance, if you drank it might be two shillings or one and six. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)
Joe McNamara described how his neighbours who would play at these sprees would “go into the house at 8 o’clock until clear daylight in the morning” (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996):

The Littletons themselves would be there, there was Delia, Winnie, Mary, Petey played flute and their first cousin Johnny Costello he was supposed to be a famous fiddle player and he’d play and get plenty of liquor and his brother Jamesie Costello… There was concertina, tin whistle, Patsy Kinley played the timber flute and the fiddle. They might play singly or in a group if enough of them got together and those kind of dances were held three or four times a year… It was there that the set was kept alive, the jigs and reels were kept alive. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

House dances which took place regularly near Inagh and Ennistymon in Co. Clare were often known as ‘soirees’ and were essentially the same as the ‘sprees’ of East Clare. One of the occasions when they might take place would be in the aftermath of ‘hunting the wren’ on St Stephen’s day. Fiddle player Joe Ryan explained that the soirees were like a club which you joined up and paid a certain amount of money:

…the soirees well you joined, well, the twelve lads who hunted the wren they were naturally free but then the rest of them then, there’d be so much for to join… the drinkers and so much for the temperate, musicians free… they’d collect so much you see and then they’d see what they’d be able to buy… well of course a barrel, a half barrel of Guinness we’ll say, if the money now would allow it you see, and then there would be temperate drinking, I wasn’t drinking now at the time. There’d be wine for the ladies and all that and there’d be sweet cake… and jam and nice bread. A couple, two or three of the local women, well they’d be doing the cooking. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

Joe Ryan (personal communication, 13 Jul 2007) indicated that many of the soirees were often “lavish altogether, they’d have a better collection you see and they would be going around with the glasses of porter there, all the lads would get two glasses I think at a time and you just drank it down nice and fast”. Jimmy Ward recalled that certain houses were noted for welcoming soirees and “some few young men would ask this man or wife would they have any objection to having what they'd call a soiree such a night and they'd arrange the night” (Ward in Doorty 1993: 81). According to Ward, money would be collected from a group of “twenty-five or thirty fellows”:

If they were drinking fellows, they’d collect, we’d say, five shillings apiece from them. They'd have stout, maybe a half barrel… or maybe two half barrels. Then
the temperate fellows they’d collect less from them, they wouldn't be drinking. “A terrible rarity”, as we called it that time, was what they called, "grinder and red jam". That would be bakers bread and – not blackcurrant no blackcurrant would be expensive – but the other red jams that wouldn't be so expensive. They really went to town on that. Everyone would get the tea in that case. (Ward in Doorty 1993: 81)

Dances known as scrap dances were often held after a big soiree or spree when “if there was something left over they would have what was known as a scrap dance a week after you know, there’d be a few musicians and not as big a crowd at the scrap dance” (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007). Kevin Doyle recalled scrap dances happening the night after a big dance in his home district. “We used to have a scrap night in Crusheen... the GAA, the Crusheen GAA, they would have a dance night and then the Monday night they’d have what they called a Scrap night” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007).

The standard of dancing at these country house dances was very high. “You had to be good. Well anybody could get up for a set but the bad dancer wouldn’t hardly, they might dance a set or two but they were conscious of it too because there were very few bad dancers” (Ward in Doorty 1993: 81). Joe Ryan described how dancers might have tips on their shoes which they loosened to make them rattle and sound out the steps on the flag floors. These, according to Joe, were the “star dancers” who “would take the floor and boys, watch them in action”. Others wore heavy boots with nails called “Jim Barrys, because Jim Barry was the shoemaker, he was a great shoemaker. I’ll tell you, to dance with those, man, if there was four of those with four Jim Barrys on ‘twould be frightening” (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007). Some house dances attracted dancers from four or five miles away:

…of course then sometimes there might a strange crew come d’you see... maybe four miles or five away classed as strangers and they’d have a great set and they’d take the floor d’you see and d’you know, they’d claim that they were the best d’you see and then the local set would take the floor and there was great opposition and great cracks “Ah I think so and so is better. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

Christmas was another opportunity for organising a dance. Joe McNamara recalled how “there’d be dances at those houses around Christmas time, visitors might come into the crowd, people home from England or Yanks and there would be a dance
given and the musicians would be asked” (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996). Other holiday periods were also an excuse for dancing, particularly summer time when longer evenings encouraged outdoor dancing. Junior Crehan observed that “there would be dancing at Markham’s Cross every Sunday in summer time. They’d dance there on Sunday evenings and holidays when they’d have their new clothes on and have the evening off” (Crehan in Munnelly 1998: 99). In North Kerry, dancing at the crossroads in summer time was a regular activity as recalled by Father Pat Ahern who grew up on a small farm there during the 1940s. Although he didn’t attend the dances because he was too young, he heard the music and formed a picture in his head of what they were like:

I can remember as a child growing up, in the evenings and listening from a distance, hearing the music coming across the fields – from this crossroads dance… The picture of a lone musician, an accordionist usually, because the accordions were loud enough to carry over the noise, sitting on a fence, under a bush maybe. On a summer evening after all the work was done and people just relaxed for an evening. It was a unique, unusual kind of experience. And the boys would meet the girls, and they would accompany each other home. It was very, very popular. It was probably the only cases when men and women, boys and girls, would meet socially in the week. The other time they would come together would be Sunday when they went to mass. (Ahern in Wulff 2007: 10)

Opportunities for dancing were inspired by events such as Bonfire Night on St. John’s Eve where “they’d be dancing sets all night and for a week they used keep the bonfire going” at the crossroads at Mount Cross near Junior Crehan’s home place (Crehan in Munnelly 1998: 99). Shrove Tuesday, on the eve of Lent, was another occasion for a dance. “On Shrove Tuesday night Mick Cooley and a Nilan fella and Josie Cooney, four or five of them would come from Peterswell and Ardrahan and accordions and fiddles and play on Shrove Tuesday night, every Shrove Tuesday night they’d have a big party” because Lent was starting on the following day and until Easter there would be “no marriages and ‘twas their last chance of talking” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007). Other excuses to hold a dance included American wakes where, on the night before they left, “the whole community got together to wish some young emigrant God speed and a safe return” (Hall 2001:10). Many house dances incorporated a raffle or card playing with the music and dancing. In many areas of the west of Ireland such a dance was known as a “joined dance” or a “prinkum” where “the poorer people joined forces and subscribed towards the cost of the food and drink”
Very often “a raffle was held in connection with this dance with a clock, a watch, or a goat as the prize” (Discin in Brennan 1999: 108). Joe Ryan recalled how “they used to have dance and gambles, you see there’d be what was known as card playing, they’d be maybe a pig would be the prize or… or six turkeys, great prizes d’you know” (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007). Another name for a house dance which combined card playing and dancing was a tournament. They often took place during the winter especially coming up to Christmas:

Geese, turkeys and homemade knitwear and basketwork were played for, and those who were not interested in cards came to dance. The card-playing was held in one room of the house, the dancing in another. Local musicians provided the music. If the house was very crowded, the musician’s chair was put up on the table so that he could play without fearing for his instrument. (Brennan 1999: 107)

Junior Crehan believed that tournaments started around 1932 because of the Economic War during which “the people had fowl and they had pigs and banbhs and they could not sell them” (Crehan in Munnelly 1998: 100):

So they started to play cards to raise a bit of money. Maybe three turkeys would go as prizes on one night. It would be a shilling in for the boys and sixpence for the girls. And there’d be a man inside the door and he’d have his table and a candle for fear he’d get a bad coin. (Crehan in Munnelly 1998: 100)

Joe Ryan observed that the practice of giving a “bad coin” was “an old one” and was often done at house dances where there was an admission charge. He recalled a night when a “bad coin” was given at the door of one such dance:

Anyway these two lads arrived d’you see and I mean the light now was very low. There was no electricity d’you see and there was two lads just inside the door and you paid, it was a half crown in d’you see for the dance and gamble so ’twas an old one… one of them, I don’t know did he have the money but he had a penny and he put silver paper nicely around it, very well done. Oh I saw it done… just went in and left it down d’you see. Away he goes then into the house, they had this kind of stand and he was standing like at a corner and he threw his eye like and he noticed the two men watching closely so – this is a true story – so he thought that he was for it. Finally anyway they advanced towards him and they said that he was from a family of good musicians, I won’t mention any names we’ll say now, we’ll take Ryan, me own name and one of them said to him “aren’t you one of the Ryans, them musicians?” “I am” he said. “There you are” says he and so he gave him a half crown back, a genuine half crown back, that’s a true story now… in actual fact now this member of the family now he didn’t play but they thought that he did, the light was very low and they wouldn’t have found it till the morning. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)
Hall (1996: 79) believes that the period of the country house dancing was the time of “the great flowering of traditional music-making”:

This was when fiddle and flute playing became a popular movement and the number of musicians, the frequency with which they played, and the repertoire of tunes they played erupted in a geometric progression. This was when the tune repertoire of the former artisan musicians was given a good shaking, and old-fashioned tunes like the hop-jigs were dropped and reels and hornpipes became the staple fare. (Hall 1996: 79 -80)

The country house dance as well as being a great venue for dancing and socialising was also a place to hear inspiring and exciting music, “that time the music, I don’t know they were so lively, they had a great heart and they put all they knew into it” (Ward in Doorty 1993: 81). In addition, the house dances were a repository for hearing new and sometimes unusual tunes. Joe Ryan attests to the high standard of music heard at these dances. “Sometimes now there’d be a great selection of musicians, there would be really great players you know, so three they might go up and play for two sets and then three more would take the stand”. Because they had no tape recorders if a new tune was heard or “if there was a strange reel played then it created a great bit of anxiety you see, that’s a lovely tune and maybe some lad might bring half of it you see” (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007). Many older musicians were slow to share a new tune and often pretended to have forgotten the whole tune or part of it:

…there was a story told about two musicians, good ones too, they met shall we say just in a house and they were having a few tunes but one of them anyway he played this reel, lovely reel d’you see and the other man commented and said that’s a lovely reel so anyway they played away then and the other man asked him again “would you ever play the reel you played ere?” so he started off anyway and he played the first part of it and he had forgotten the turn of it. He didn’t want to give it to him d’you see. That went on. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

Many musicians continued this practice of guarding tunes when they found themselves in new performance locations after emigrating to America. There, dance halls, kitchen racketts and music clubs were the environments in which traditional music thrived in the Boston of the 1930s. Gedutis (2004: 36) suggests that the music clubs in particular “more closely approximated the neighborly, informal gatherings and céilí visits that had characterized traditional village life in Ireland”.

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The All-Ireland Music Club was one of the first of Boston’s music clubs having been set up in the mid 1930s by the three Martin brothers, John, Pat and Tom. The format was very much based on the subscription style house dances in Ireland and accordion player Jack Martin, son of John, maintained that “within a very short time the place was packed every Sunday from two to six. They used to serve Irish bread and tea – and they used to serve beer. It was all free. They paid a little pittance to come in the door, to pay for the hall, the beer and the Irish bread and all that” (Martin in Gedutis 2004: 36). Jack Martin noted that many older musicians were unwilling to “share their tunes” suggesting that “back in the old days, when you had a tune, you kept it to yourself” (Martin in Gedutis 2004: 37). The practice of keeping tunes to oneself was also commented on by Boston accordion player Joe Derrane:

One thing that drove me crazy at the clubs was that some of the old-timers guarded their tunes jealously. It was what they had; they were considered theirs. They didn’t share tunes like they do today. When you asked them what tune that was, often they would say they couldn’t remember the name of it. Or, if you said, “Play us that tune you played last week,” they’d say, “Oh I played that last week; I’ll play it later” or “I forget which one you mean”. (Derrane in Gedutis 2004: 37)

It was the custom for many dances to go on till the early hours of the morning and often later than that. Denis O’Keeffe from Rathmore recalled playing the accordion at all night dances in Ballyvourney during 1930:

We’ll go back as far as 1930 we played at Ballyvourney for all night dances at the time… really and truly the long dance we used to start at about nine or half past nine and play until six in the morning… twenty five shillings a man we used get… I was the only young fella around that had five shillings in my pocket always on account of them things. (D. O’Keeffe, personal communication, 3 Nov 1994)

When Joe Ryan moved to Ennis for work he “got to know the scene and there were some nice players in Ennis. There was Tom Power – he was a Galway man, he was a mechanic there in one of the garages. John Joe Cullinan, a fine fiddle player, Tony Mahoney, great dancers too” (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007). Joe regularly attended dances that went through the night often finishing at six or even eight o’clock in the morning:

Kilnamona was five or six miles from Ennis and there used to be great dances there and I used to be invited out there and I used to hit off on the bicycle, I had a bicycle that time and oh some great nights and I’d have a lamp stuck on the bike and maybe a bulb might be gone in it. I can recall coming into Ennis you know on
several occasions and it six in the morning and the next thing I’d be stopped by this guard and he’d get to know me and “oh you again” he’d say. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

On another occasion Joe recalled travelling to a dance in Cooraclare with concertina player, Tommy McCarthy:

Tommy McCarthy, he was serving his time as a mechanic and we seemed to meet so he said to me would I come to a dance out in a place called Cooraclare that there was a lorry going out there so I said I would and we left at a certain time and we went to this house. The girls were home from Dublin… lovely looking girls they were too, but we had a great night dancing and in the morning I suppose surely ’twas day break and we went out and filled the lorry with turf with the man, sat into the lorry and into Ennis and away up to work. No bed. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

8.4.1 ‘Off the Pulpit’ – The Clergy and Dancing

Mary Stack, a melodeon player from the townland of Fortwilliam near Abbeydorney in Co. Kerry remembered how “in her youth, all house dances and many of the commercial halls were frowned upon by the priests of the day, and many a house owner approached the church on a Sunday morning in fear and trepidation, lest his name would be called from the pulpit” (Ó Catháin 1981: 2). Kevin Doyle spoke angrily about the clergy and how they preached incessantly from the pulpit about the immorality involved in dancing:

…he’d be carryin on about them you know “disgraceful… the boys and the girls lying in the ditches… lying in the ditches at two o’clock in the morning, it’s a disgrace having all this going on”… oh yes, the priests off the pulpit, yes off the pulpit. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

Joe McNamara, like Kevin Doyle, recalled a very strict parish priest in his area who called people’s names from the pulpit at Sunday mass:

We had a very strict parish priest at the time and let me say the next Sunday night there’d be a few sets from 8pm to 10 or 11pm in Kenleys and the next night after, it would be here but the parish priest we had in Crusheen was dead down on those, due to all the young ladies and fellas were there and of course they were accused of company keeping and bad conduct etc. He spoke of it off the pulpit about those two houses, two jig houses he called them, due to the music. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)
This opposition to all forms of dance on the part of the clergy was not just an early twentieth century phenomenon. Brennan (1999: 121) notes that “throughout history, many – if not most – of the Irish clergy were implacably opposed to dancing” while W.P. Ryan writing in 1912 observed that in the nineteenth century, “in his day of dominance”, the priest “did much to make the Irish local life a dreary desert” (Ryan 1912: 78):

He waged war on the favourite cross-roads dances – with exceptions here and there – and on gatherings where young men and women congregated, even in the company of their older relations and friends. Indeed there were cases where the priest, whip in hand, entered private houses and dispersed social parties. The resulting dullness and deadliness of life in rural parishes drove not a few of the young folk to America or Australia. (Ryan 1912: 78)

By the early 1930s tensions between the Catholic Church and the music and dancing fraternity were coming to a head, following a sustained campaign throughout the 1920s on the part of the clergy, against dancing of any kind, be it Irish or the newly arrived jazz and modern dancing. All night dancing was condemned by the clergy as were privately run dance halls, and in a statement on the evils of dancing “they advocated the strict supervision of dancing and warned of the occasions of sin involved in night dances” (Brennan 1999: 125). In 1935 religious and political forces combined and the “punitive Public Dance Halls Act was introduced” (Curtis 1994: 13). This was “an act to make provision for the licensing, control, and supervision of places used for public dancing, and to make provision for other matters connected with the matters aforesaid” (Public Dance Halls Act 1935). The fact that the church was very heavily involved in the initiation of the act was not lost on musicians and dancers alike:

…and then they got the law in that you couldn’t have parties in your own house and you couldn’t have any more than twenty five people and in my books like, De Valera’s government were only bloody fools for the clergy you know, that was my books, nowadays that’s my thoughts on it you see and anyhow they brought in this law that you could not have any more than twenty five people in a house and they had to be invited for a party… well they ran the country anyhow, the clergy ran the country, they ruined Ireland. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007).

Although the Public Dance Halls Act made no specific mention of house dances or crossroads, “clergy in collusion with local gardaí used it to intimidate the people who practiced this old and harmless pastime and drive it into virtual
extinction” (Munnelly 1999a: 143). Fiddle player, Father Pat Ahern acknowledged that the clergy were against dancing:

The church frowned upon them, the crossroads dancing. They used to preach about them, against them. It was usually individual clergymen who would think like that. There were occasions where young people would misbehave. That’s only in passing. They were quite innocent evenings of enjoyment. (Ahern in Wulff 2007: 10)

Throughout 1935 and 1936 court cases connected with prosecutions under the Public Dance Halls Act were common (Brennan 1999: 126-27). Dances held in private homes were raided regularly by police, whether there was an admission charge or not, with offenders being fined anything up to £3 or more:

I was in, I don’t know if you know Fallon the jockey, top jockey in England, well Fallon comes from Doon, next door to Joe Browne, and his grandfather, they were playing for three turkeys or something they used to play for turkeys, they used to play for them in our house, two or three geese, cards, two threes mostly… In Fallon’s, Fergus Fallon’s, this night, I was there as a young lad and the police came and they fined him three pound or three pound ten or something for having a party in the house with more than whatever. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

Nonetheless “the long-established practice of running informal house dances was not easily relinquished and the interference of the state in domestic merry-making continued to be challenged” (Brennan 1999: 129). Many continued as before, particularly farmers who organised dances in their houses or barns for those that helped them with farming work. Depending on the parish priest, others simply confronted the local priest and asked for permission. Joe Ryan’s brother, Tom, often ran house dances in his locality in West Clare:

I remember now, again going back to my late brother Tom, he was the oldest of us… they had to go to the parish priest to get permission you see so they arrived at the parish priest’s you see and he invited them into his living room and they presented their credentials anyway and they stated their case. There was a man… he was known as Mr McGoff, he was… a great contractor, one of the highest men in Inagh, but the way the parish priest asked them “Have ye a light in the yard?” “I have me light inside and a little light in the yard, a single burning oil lamp”, but he allowed them anyway to have it. A great night was had, ah yes. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

Dancers on the Blasket Islands off the west coast of Kerry also felt the brunt of the priests’ interference. Writing in July 1936, Eibhlís Ní Shúilleabháin described how
“great change have come on the island lately”. A mission was held on the island, preached by two Redemptorist Fathers who had stayed for a week. According to Ní Shúilleabháin (1978: 44) “they blessed everyone and every place, and they left written hard rules for the visitors that come here”. The rules stipulated that there was to be no mixed bathing allowed and the White Strand was designated as a ‘women only’ beach while the gravel strand nearby was to be for men. Notices about the rules were also posted at various locations on the island and included strict instructions about dancing:

No dance in any house, day or night, no one out later than 10.30 and all visitors and all members of the family in at that time for the Holy Rosary. Of course we are keeping the rules as the parish priest wishes us to do so… they would not bless the boats nor sea unless they were promised to do so… No boy or girl here is allowed to walk at night with any of the visitors nor either in the day time. (Ní Shúilleabháin 1978: 44)

Munnelly (1999a: 143) suggests that “it is actually amazing that any form of social dancing survived such relentless onslaughts and petty abuse of power by the Catholic clergy particularly in rural areas”. Nevertheless, while the general perception is that house dances were almost completely wiped out by the rigours of both the clergy and the Public Dance Halls Act, many people persevered and continued hosting music and dancing in their houses well into the late 1940s. Joe Ryan, although acknowledging the negative effects of the act and the clergy’s opposition to dancing and music, recalled that dances still “carried on”:

But the dances still carried on though, this’d be, the year I’d be talking about would be 1946 and ‘47 and up along you see. Right, they consisted of some places a hundred girls, packed out… 70 or 50, course you’d throw your eye on a girl you know, say you’d see her home and that went on and all that. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

The weekly Sunday night dances in Kevin Doyle’s home place also continued unabated and Kevin believed that the reason the act didn’t “kill off” the event was “because it was only just the few neighbours, they’d only be twenty there or whatever, you know, so they didn’t kill that off and the police – they were never raided because there was no money charged or nothing, you see”. However, Kevin was strongly of the opinion that overall the priests “killed the home atmosphere” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007).
8.4.2 From House to Hall – The Accordion to the Fore

After the passing of the 1935 Public Dance Halls Act “all over Ireland the clergy organised the construction of parochial halls” (Brennan 1999: 126) and conspired with the help of the gardai and the courts to eliminate any dancing which took place outside of these halls. It is ironic that “having almost annihilated Irish music and dance the clergy then did an about turn and saw it as a bastion against the evils of foreign music” (Munnelly 1996: 143). According to Joe McNamara, the same young people who, twenty years earlier had been called from the pulpit for “going to jig houses, often played for dances for the priests and the schools” (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996). Kevin Doyle believes that, rather than being constructed for the purpose of safeguarding the morals of the youth, the parochial halls built by the clergy were actually commercial ventures which garnered large amounts of money for church related activities, such as the hall built by a Father Considine in Labane, Co. Galway:

Then the priests set up halls, dance halls. Labane here, was it Father Considine, that was a millionaire thing that Labane, the money he made there, unbelievable, dances every Sunday night there in Labane and other halls around… then of course it didn’t matter then whether you slept in the ditches or what you did going home, you could do it as long as you supported the priest, you could do as you liked afterwards you see. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

Junior Crehan also drew attention to the monetary side of the new halls noting that “the clergy started to build the parochial halls to which all were expected to go and the government collected 25% of the ticket-tax” (Crehan 1977: 75). While priests were willing to charge admission into the dances they organised, Joe McNamara remembers how musicians were often “expected to do it for nothing” by a particular parish priest in his area:

Expected to do it for nothing! I remember a time we had a parish priest, he is dead now. He was a curate and was transferred to a different parish. I’ll mention no names now. But he asked us to play at a local school; Tom Power was one, Mick Malone, Willy Halloran and Dinny Curnane. The priest thought we’d play for nothing for the dance you see. Tom Power was a mechanic… and before we started, we weren’t playing long and something arose about money and Power says to the priest “you’ll have to pay us.” He had his boss’s car and he brought us to the dance. Now the priest went around to us individually to know did we want to get paid for the night. Now I had the sum total of two shillings in my pocket, I got in for nothing and I’d be playing from 9 o’clock in the evening until 3 o’clock in the morning. Power said he had to get paid and he was rightly so. Well the priest went up on his high horse, he nearly lit the place. I remember the fellas that
were over the dance, it happened up in Ruane School; they nearly went mad over us asking the priest for money, that’s a sure thing and all we had to get was five or ten shillings. They didn’t want to pay it. That’s a sure thing… I agreed to get the money, I wanted it, Power wanted it, I don’t suppose he paid thirty shillings for us to play there all night, he’d only two or three. He was like a briar over it; it was an insult to ask him for money. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)

It was not only in Ireland that the arrival of dance halls into a tradition signalled great change for both dancers and musicians. Writing about the Shetland Islands, where the fiddle reigned supreme as the main instrument used for the accompaniment of the dance in the years before the war, Cooke (1986: 13) noted how “the building of such halls in many rural areas had a profound effect on the dancing habits of Shetlanders and on the role of fiddlers”:

For one thing, wedding celebrations could move from the croft to the halls, which latter could accommodate far more guests for both feasting and dancing. Village ‘rants’ and concerts and foys were also now possible in the halls and under these conditions the single, unaccompanied fiddler could not produce enough sound for the dancers. Pianos came to be used to provide a rhythmic vamp and other available instruments were pressed into service – melodeons and (later) accordions being found much more suitable for the volume of sound needed. (Cooke 1986: 13)

In many parts of Ireland the transition from the country house dance to the larger parochial hall meant that the performance of music and dance was moved to a formal public space within the community rather than the informal private space of the traditional house dance. These halls could provide for a greater number of dancers and dances than was possible in the smaller location of the country house, just as in Shetland where “the larger floor space not only permitted more than one three couple set to take the floor for Shetland reels, but also provided room for longways dances, round-the-room waltzes and square set quadrilles, which would have been impossible to perform properly in the confines of the croft houses” (Cooke 1986: 13). Another effect of the move to the halls was the need for extended repertoire as musicians sought to incorporate elements of modern music into their store of tunes in an attempt to cater for the tastes of the modern as well as the traditional dancers who frequented the parochial halls. The extra number of dancers in Irish halls required a greater volume of music which could no longer be provided by solo or duet fiddle and flute players. In this environment, the two-row accordion really came into its own as it could provide the volume needed in pre-
amplification days. Indeed there were incidences of musicians learning to play the accordion in addition to the instrument they already played just so they could play at the dances in the halls (N. Connors, personal communication, 18 May 1995).

The button accordion, therefore, survived the changes in the transition from the house dances to the parish halls better than most other instruments, as it had by that time become a loud instrument suitable for use in front of large audiences. This had been achieved by the use of steel instead of brass reeds and the addition of extra basses and voices, which ensured that the simple ten key melodeon had been transformed from, “a domestic instrument of somewhat wavering pitch into an instrument with a powerful tone suitable for performances in public” (Breathnach 1971: 87). Vallely (1999: 103) notes that with the arrival of the halls the “accordion became important, for volume, this diminishing the status of the subtlety inherent in, say, expert fiddle playing” while Ó hAllmhúráin (2005: 17) describes the halls as a “new psychological arena” and suggests that “appreciation for the skill of the music maker, and the informal chat between tunes ceded their place to rasping accordions, drum-kit antics, and greater separation between musicians and dancers”. West Kerry accordion player, Séamus Begley, recalling his youth playing for dancers in the local halls, including his father’s in Muiríoch, describes how he “used to sit halfway down the hall, tearing the arse out of a tiny little button accordion to have any hope of being heard with all the laughing and screaming, and the fella calling the dance ‘isteach agus amach’”. According to Begley “that was the style the old fellas had as well. There was no emphasis on grace notes – in my case, it’s more like disgrace notes. Volume was the main thing. If you hadn’t volume, you weren’t worth listening to” (Begley in Moroney 1998: 5).

8.4.3 ‘Belting Away Without Stopping’ – Céilí Bands and the Accordion

Perhaps the most significant result of the quest for the volume required in larger venues was the development of group-playing, which eventually led to the formation of céilí bands. During the 1962 Raidió Éireann series, Our Musical Heritage, Ó Riada asserted that “in 1926, Seamus Clandillon, the first Director of Irish Broadcasting, conceived the idea of the céilí band” (Ó Riada 1982: 73), a
concept to which Ó Riada was implacably opposed. Pine (2005: 319) disagrees with O’Riada’s assessment of the origins of the céilí band, stating that “the common belief, fostered or at least repeated by authorities such as Seán Ó Riada himself, that Séamus Clandillon ‘invented’ the céilí band, is completely erroneous, since the céilí band had existed long before the advent of 2RN”. The term ‘céilí band’ was first coined in 1918 in Notting Hill in London (Vallely 1999: 60). Prior to this, Conradh na Gaeilge had organised their first ceilidh in that city on the 30th of October 1897 in Bloomsbury Hall near the British Museum. This sparked off a series of similar events which were staged regularly by the community of Irish exiles. The Sarsfield Club, which had permanent headquarters in Notting Hill, became a regular venue for ceilidh dancing and in 1918, pianist Frank Lee, who was born in London of Irish parents, was approached and asked to assemble a group of musicians for the annual St. Patrick’s Day festivities. “The band was organised, rehearsed and launched as The Tara Ceilidh Band, the first group we know to bear the title ceilidh band” (Taylor 1984: 69).

Throughout the following decades numerous céilí bands were formed, although many of them were not initially called céilí bands. Musicians began coming together to play in trios like the Aughrim Slopes Trio or the Fingal Trio and quartets such as the Lough Gill Quartet. Other groups were brought together by the local priest with the express purpose of providing music for the local parish halls, as was the case when “Father Tom Larkin created the Ballinakill Traditional Dance Players for local public ceili dances” (Hall 1995a: 21). Many of these ensembles eventually evolved into céilí bands, a phenomenon which became widespread throughout the country in a very short time. As mentioned earlier, Séamus Clandillon, the first director of 2RN, regularly featured céilí bands on the national radio and Pine (2005: 319) acknowledges that “with Clandillon’s encouragement by way of providing access to the airways, the concept of the céilí band gained common acceptance and credence and its future as a medium of transmitting a form of Irish musical culture became assured”. From their earliest incarnations céilí bands, in addition to playing for dancers in the new environment of the halls, became involved in almost all areas of traditional music activity, including radio and early disc recordings, as well as later taking part in the céilí band competitions at Fleadhanna Cheoil, organised by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann from the 1950s onwards.
Ó Riada’s opposition to the céilí bands, as expressed in the 1962 radio series *Our Musical Heritage*, may have stemmed from his belief that Irish traditional music "is essentially a solo effort, a matter of the individual player or singer giving free rein, within the limits of the art, to his own musical personality" (Ó Riada 1982: 73). He remained unimpressed by the music produced by these formations:

One might expect that, after a certain time, the céilí bands would have managed to work out some kind of compromise between the solo traditional idea and group activity. But instead of developing this kind of compromise, the céilí band leaders took the easy and wrong way out, tending more and more to imitate swing or jazz bands which play an entirely different type of music and are organized on a different principle… The most important principles of traditional music – the whole idea of variation, the whole idea of the personal utterance – are abandoned. Instead, everyone takes hold of a tune and belts away at it without stopping. The result is a rhythmic but meaningless noise with as much relation to music as the buzzing of a bluebottle in an upturned jam jar. (Ó Riada 1982: 73-4)

Ó Riada (1982: 79) also believed that the céilí band was “badly on the wrong track” and if something was not done about it that “great harm” would be caused “to Irish music generally”. Taylor (1984: 74), in defence of the céilí band, writes that Ó Riada “had failed to understand the fundamental role of the music and, therefore, of its practitioners” and he suggests that “any questions of personal utterances and variation are entirely secondary to the musician’s main role: that is, to provide a solid rhythmic base for the dancers”. Taylor’s assertion that the main role of a traditional musician is to provide music for dancing needs to be considered perhaps, in the context in which céilí bands operated in their earliest days. Without doubt the formation of these bands was a direct response to a need in the community, which arose during the period when social dancing had moved to the larger and more spacious parochial halls. It must also be acknowledged that, at the time, social dancing was one of the most popular pastimes among rural people. Undoubtedly, an important function of traditional music was the provision of music for this dancing. According to Jimmy Ward of the Kilfenora Céilí Band, “you were strictly judged by the way in which you played for the set. Nothing else mattered… in Kilfenora you didn’t play to be listened to, you played to be danced to” (Ward in Taylor 1984: 74). However, as a practising musician, I have great difficulty in agreeing that playing for dancing is the main role of a traditional musician and it appears that it certainly wasn’t thought of as their main role by such accordion players as Paddy O’Brien and Joe Cooley, as described by Jack
Coen (Moloney 1992: 237) when discussing how a Comhaltas session in New York “was taken over by a group of non-musicians… who thought that they should be allowed to dance”:

They thought that this whole club was about dancing. Of course Paddy O’Brien, Cooley and a lot of the fiddle players, they had other ideas. They thought it was a place for the musicians to enjoy themselves and where they could exchange some credentials, learn tunes from one another and maybe help out a young musician on the way. But it went to a vote and they were beaten anyway… So they lost interest after that. (Coen in Moloney 1992: 238)

The two-row accordion found a ready-made home in the newly established céilí bands, and because of its dynamic range, two accordions were often employed. In the Tulla Céilí Band for instance, Joe McNamara played an accordion pitched in G/G# alongside his brother Paddy who was playing an accordion pitched in D/D#. According to Joe “G/G# and D/D# were a great blend” because “the D/D# was very sharp and dominating and the G/G# was a softer tone altogether” (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996). In 1951 Joe Cooley and Paddy O’Brien played together in the Tulla Céilí Band, and this according to Taylor (1988: 55) was “a fascinating combination with their differing styles”. Many other céilí bands were to feature accordion players in their line ups, including The Kincora Céilí Band with Tom Liddy on accordion, The Aughrim Slopes with Joe Mills and the Kilfenora with Gerry Lynch. From the 1950s on, accordions became synonymous with the term céilí band, and it was unusual to find a céilí band without at least one if not two accordions. Speaking in 1982, P.J. Hayes of the Tulla Céilí Band stated:

…fiddles and flutes, I maintain, are the backbone of the céilí band but you do need the accordion now – some kind of instrument you can hear, and the accordion is great for that. Not that I approve of too much accordion by any means but it puts a bit of body into it” (Hayes in Taylor 1988: 62).

8.4.4 Dance Halls and Tap Rooms – The Immigrant Experience

In England and America, the Irish dance hall was an important social meeting place for the many young immigrants from all over Ireland. Delaney (2007: 170) suggests that the dancehalls which sprang up in areas of large Irish population such as London and Birmingham “catered for the migrant Irish in an environment
in which they could socialise and mix” and were an important “focal point for communal entertainment”:

They served a crucial function in aiding adjustment to life in Britain, often being the place to meet potential Irish spouses, catch up on the news from home, chat with friends, or simply have some fun in the reassuring company of fellow migrants. (Delaney 2007: 171)

The accordion flourished in the dance hall environment not least because of its dynamic range. Hall (1995b: 13), discussing dancing among the Irish immigrant community in post-war London, observes that the introduction of the chromatic button accordion into the dance bands was a “most significant innovation” as the accordion was “ideally suited for large, public space because of its volume and the body of sound it produced”. Prior to this, much of the music for dancing was provided by hybrid style bands made up of “reading musicians” from Dublin or English and Scottish dance band musicians “for whom Irish dance-hall work was just another job” (Hall 1995b: 12). According to Hall, in the 1940s, immigrant musicians from the “country-house dance tradition” mixed with “London-Irish musicians from the pre-war East End ceili scene” (Hall 1995b: 13) to form céilí bands, many of which became resident in the numerous Irish dance halls dotted around London. The resident band in Camden Town’s Galway Club for many years was Tom O’Shea’s Céili Band, and at various times included Irish born accordion players such as Mick Mallory as well as Tom Fitzpatrick and Mick Delaney, who were both from Tipperary. In fact the Galway Club was prominent in bringing bands, featuring accordion players from Tipperary, to the attention of the dancing public in Camden Town. Tipperary was seen as “one of the rural areas where style and technique for this new instrument had been developed” (Hall 1995b: 13). Céili Bands from Ireland also performed in dance halls in London. Many of these – such as the Tulla and the McCusker Brothers – had already performed in America. The Tulla Céili Band had also won the 1957 All-Ireland Céili Band competition and had released an LP. Other bands which were booked by dancehall owners in London included the Ballinakill Céili Band from East Galway, the Kilfenora from Clare, the Mayglass Céili Band featuring the accordion playing of George Ross from Wexford, and northern bands such as Fermanagh’s Pride of Erin Céili Band and Donegal’s Bundoran Céili Band. These bands not only attracted enormous
crowds of enthusiastic dancers to the dance-halls, but also stimulated “the formation of similar bands among rural immigrants in London” (Hall 1995b: 15). The arrival of the strong and powerful Italian Paolo Soprani accordions resulted in a change in dance-hall music practice. Solo accordion players using amplification and backed by a rhythm section consisting of piano, drums and bass were capable of playing for hundreds of dancers in enormous halls. Among the best known of these accordion players in the London of the 1950s and 1960s were Eddie Bolger from Wexford, Jimmy Hogan from Tipperary, Paddy Malynn of Longford, Kit O’Connor from Meath, Galway man Paddy Coyne and Christie Ryan from Limerick (Hall 1995b: 13).

As in England, “the Irish Dance Hall has always functioned as a crucial social institution for the Irish in America” (Moloney 1992: 240):

At times of steady emigration in the past, it was the place where newcomers or “Greenhorns” were introduced to the community on their arrival in the new world. It was a place of community recreation where people got together to socialize. It was a place for courtship where immigrants met their future spouses. (Moloney 1992: 240)

Shortly after he arrived in Philadelphia, accordion player, Dan Smith, met his future wife Molly “in the dancehalls, in the middle of the Walls of Limerick” (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996). Irish dance halls serving the vast number of immigrants who had settled in the major American cities, were plentiful in places like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston where “certain groups went to certain halls… the Donegal ball was always held in a certain part of Philadelphia and all the Donegal people went there because they were from Donegal” (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996). Many of the halls had names linked to different Irish counties or to their associated associations. According to Gene Kelly, an accordion player who had emigrated to America from Co. Kilkenny in 1922 (Moloney 1992: 241- 42), the halls in New York included the Mayo Hall, The Kerry Ballroom, The Longford Ballroom, The Harp and the Shamrock of Ireland as well as the Roscommon Ballroom and the Galway Hall. Gene Kelly also remembered playing for groups such as the Kilkenny Men’s Association and the Mayo Men’s Association, while the month of March was a particularly busy time: “There’d be a dance every night for the whole
thirty–one days of March” (Kelly in Moloney 1992: 241). American-born accordion player, Mickey Carton, recalled the early 1930s in New York and linked the large crowds attending dance halls to Prohibition and the Depression:

In those days there were at least damn near fifty dance halls, all Irish dance halls, and they were packed. This was during the depression so there were no bars to go to in them days. They went to the dance halls. And when prohibition was over it was a different story. Bars opened up with music. (Carton in Moloney 1992: 244)

Like New York, Boston of the mid 1920s witnessed the arrival of vast numbers of Irish immigrants and, unlike their predecessors who had faced poverty and anti-Irish feelings, they settled into their new surroundings at a time of relative prosperity. Although work was hard, there was plenty of it along with a thriving social life, based for the most part around the city’s Irish dance halls, which “catered to the large population of first- and second-generation Irish-Americans, as well as the growing numbers of newly arrived Irish-born people, eager for entertainment and community that celebrated this new land but also reminded them of home” (Gedutis 2004: 19). In pre-1950s England, Irish social dancing was dominated by the ideals of the Gaelic League who sought to promote all things Irish. This resulted in a rejection of the sets which were prevalent in the country house dances in Ireland and which the Gaelic League viewed as alien and foreign. Hall (2001: 15) suggests that “the situation in America was quite different, as Irish immigrants, even those ardently committed to the cause of Irish independence, had no specific antagonism towards the culture of their American hosts; in fact the move was towards integration”. Consequently many dance halls of the period had two venues for dancing, one for Irish dancing and the other for modern dancing. As a result, it was not unusual to find many dance bands incorporating instruments more associated with American modern music such as trombone, trumpet and saxophone, alongside the accordion, fiddle, flute and banjo – instruments on which Irish dance music was played.

One such band was O’Leary’s Irish Minstrels which featured Kinsale native, Jerry O’Brien on accordion, along with a full brass section which contributed to the band’s “unusual and instantly recognisable sound” by “the addition of vamping bass brass instruments to the traditional line-up of fiddles, accordion and banjo” (Varlet1995: 6). Dan Sullivan’s Shamrock Band was another ensemble operating
in the Boston of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Led by piano player Dan Sullivan, whose father, a fiddle and flute player, had emigrated from Kerry via London in the late 1800s (O’Neill 1913), Sullivan’s distinctive style of piano playing, which included playing the melody with the right hand while using sophisticated chord progressions with the left, added greatly to the unique sound of the band. Much in demand in the dance halls of Boston, they were one of the few bands to play “almost exclusively Irish selections during that era” (Gedutis 2004: 21). Accordion players Connie Hanafin and the influential Tom Senier played with the band, although Tom Senier later formed his own band called the Emerald Isle Orchestra.

The onset of World War II and the resultant ending of transatlantic travel and emigration from Ireland had a profound effect on the numbers attending dance halls in American cities during the war years, but with the end of the war in 1945 a new wave of young unmarried immigrants arrived, setting in motion all the conditions needed for a renewal of the great days of the 1920s. One of the most popular venues for meeting people from home was the dance hall, and there was no shortage of dance halls in America. In Boston, in particular, the period from the mid 1940s to the late 1950s was considered a heyday of dancing:

At around that same period, ‘47, ‘48, we had a very unique set of circumstances in Boston and what we had was on one street, on one street now, in maybe a two block radius, a very short distance, we had five ballrooms on the one street and… some of them were huge, you had the Intercolonial Ballroom which would hold about twelve hundred people, that was jammed every Thursday and Saturday night, Thursday nights because most of the Irish girls that came out then were doing domestic work and Thursday was maid’s night out so they went to the dances, well, where the girls went the guys were sure to go, so that was the policy there. Then you had the Hibernian which was good for about a thousand people every Saturday night, then you had Winslow Hall, now they became very regional, in Winslow Hall you had a lot of the people from the west coast… from Connemara, Carna, all the way down through Galway and especially the Aran crowd, they all went to the Winslow, the Kerry crowd all went to the Dudley Street Opera House, then you had the Rosecroy Hall which was Scottish, Canadian and Irish, it was a mixture, all on one street. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995)

And it appears to have been much the same in all the other large cities where the Irish congregated. As a result, Irish music was thriving, and musicians were in demand as they never had been before, in this new modern urban setting. Moloney (1992: 240)
observes that the proliferation of dance halls meant that “hundreds of musicians
found ready part-time and full-time employment there”. Joe Derrane concurs:

Now this was a gold mine for the musicians, this became a very, very big part of
my income because if you stop and think, now you had all the young Irish people
coming out, they were all emigrating, they were all lonesome, they were home
sick, a good many of them, so they’d come for miles and miles, around a hundred
miles every week to drive down to these ballrooms and of course they met each
other. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995)

The accordion really came into its own in this environment where “the emphasis
was on instruments that could carry effectively in the unamplified and extremely
noisy dance halls” (Moloney 1998: 129). Its ability to cut through loud crowd
noise ensured that accordion players were especially valued and musicians were
kept busy, often playing seven nights a week in the many dancehalls dotted around
the major cities from New York to Boston to Chicago to Philadelphia. Felix Dolan
(personal communication, 9 Nov 1996) explained that “thirty or forty years ago
not every place had amplification so if you brought in a fiddle or two fiddles
without amplification you’d be in real trouble”. According to Dolan, “you could
bring in one accordion without amplification and they could carry the day…and
if you had an accordion you might ask yourself, why should I pay for two or three
fiddles”. Fiddler Andy McGann (personal communication, 9 Nov 1996) recalled
how, in New York they “used to have music sessions in houses and homes. We
didn’t play much in the dance halls at the time. It was mostly all accordions and
a drummer, maybe a saxophone, I can remember saxophones”. Many musicians
played in bands when possible as according to Dan Smith, “you got more money
playing with the bands” (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996). Tap
rooms were also popular venues where Irish music was played, and accordions
were much in demand in these locations:

They’d be pubs called tap rooms there, there’d usually be two partners there,
two people would join up and would buy a tap room or rent a tap room and
have music once a week or twice a week or Friday nights, they might have
three musicians, a violin player, an accordion player and maybe a banjo player
and there’d be an American musician and he’d play the American music for those
who wanted American music. (D. Smith, personal communication, 2 May 1996)

The demands of the dancing audience and the larger and more crowded dance hall
situations, so different to what dancers and musicians would have left behind them
in Ireland, quickly led to changes in the accordion’s construction – changes which
were suited to what was needed at the time. Accordions were made for what the
dancers wanted, which was a heavy driving beat. They were also built for power and
strength to allow them to stand up to the pressures of playing seven nights a week in
crowded dance halls, with some single row instruments having up to eight sets of
reeds. Baldoni-Bartoli and F. H. Walters were two of the popular manufacturers of
accordions in New York at this time. Jack Doyle, an accordion player from Camp,
a few miles outside Tralee, in Co. Kerry, emigrated to America in 1947 and spent
sixteen years playing with various dance bands, six nights a week, in dance halls
in New York and later Chicago. Before he left home he played a Hohner two-row
accordion, but on arrival in the States, quickly changed to playing the ‘outside in’
system on a Baldoni made accordion for, as he said himself, “the reeds”:

For reeds, reeds, the sound, the sound, see, all these were made by hand, handmade,
for the sound, them old lads knew their job see, the halls and bad, bad sound systems
and all that… they were strong, they were not going to break. He sent to Sweden for
the blue tempered Swedish steel reeds, Sweden! Any reed wouldn’t be put in…
Baldoni… twenty years, he used to tell me… I can guarantee that accordion twenty
years. (J. Doyle, personal communication, 7 May 1995)

Boston accordion player Joe Derrane was one of the best known performers on a
Baldoni accordion. It was through another well-known accordion player from
Boston that he was introduced to the firm of Baldoni Bartoli:

Tom Senier, a great accordion player from Boston had gone to New York for a
weekend playing at some kind of a feis or whatever it was and he went into this
accordion manufacturer’s showroom in New York, a place called Baldoni’s,
Baldoni Bartoli. He came back and he got a hold of Jerry O’Brien the next day…
“I saw the most magnificent two-row box I’ve ever seen, it’s this Baldoni thing”
he said. “Nineteen keys” he said “It’d be perfect for Joe Derrane. (J. Derrane,
personal communication, 19 Aug 1995)

Jerry O’Brien contacted the Derrane family and they “took the train down to New
York”. Joe described how:

…there were about… twenty two accordions in there, I played every one of them
but I kept coming back to this one box, God it was gorgeous. That was it, nothing
would do but that I would get that box and then… that box was close to like four
hundred dollars, an awful lot of money in those days but we scraped the money
up anyway and I was off and running with my first two-row box. (J. Derrane,
personal communication, 19 Aug 1995)
The Baldoni instrument was the accordion that Joe Derrane used when making his first discs – recordings which had such an impact on the world of accordion music. The history of the accordion in Irish music owes much to individuals like Derrane, who were pivotal in directing the course of the journey into tradition, and who led the way in establishing an Irish way of playing the instrument. Chapters 9 and 10 will focus on the individuals who, through their musical actions and choices, advanced the accordion to another stage in that journey.
Chapter 9
Leading the Way – The Main Movers

In the preceding chapters it has been established that the accordion arrived in Ireland as early as 1831, just two years after its maker, Cyrill Demian applied for a patent for the instrument in Vienna in 1829. Evidence has been presented to show that the accordion permeated numerous cultures worldwide and rapidly became a recognisable and identifiable element of those traditions. It has been determined that by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the accordion was adopted into Irish traditional music, where it quickly took on the local accent and a style of playing the accordion in an Irish way was developed. However, despite its popularity among musicians and dancers, there was opposition to the spread of the accordion. This chapter will outline some of the criticisms the instrument faced in its ongoing journey into tradition. It will also discuss the importance of the individual in directing musical change, and will introduce the reader to accordion players who were key figures in various stages of the development of an identifiable Irish style of playing the accordion in the first half of the twentieth century.

9.1 Obstacles on the Journey – Attitudes to the Accordion

From its earliest days, the accordion was subjected to criticism from many different quarters all over the world. Wagner (1995: 6) suggests that “the reason for so much disapproval was simple: the newcomer was extremely successful and its triumphal march began to frighten the musical establishment”. In the Dominican Republic where the “desire to view themselves as purely Spanish remains a pervasive theme of Dominican culture” (Snyder 2001: 231), the arrival of the accordion during the mid 1870s and its speedy acceptance by musicians and dancers was frowned on by the elite of the time who “saw the demise of the cuatro as a rejection of Spanish heritage and publicly attacked the use of the accordion soon after its first appearance in the region” (Snyder 2001: 233). The cuatro, “an eight stringed fretted instrument adapted from Spanish origins” (Snyder 2001: 232) was seen as a much more sophisticated instrument than the accordion with its limited diatonic scale. One lawyer of the period advised that “ accordions are not necessary
articles, and only serve to bring vagabonds together” (Austerlitz in Snyder 2001: 233) while protests against the accordion reached their climax with the suggestion in 1887 that a national tariff be imposed on accordions to discourage their importation (Snyder 2001). The accordion was also seen as a threat to the traditional instruments and music of Brittany when it first arrived there during the mid nineteenth century. According to Perroches (2001: 131-132), many Breton nationalists viewed the accordion as “a symbol of Parisian cultural imperialism” while others saw it as a threat to the “ancient scales and modes of the traditional biniou and bombarde players and singers”. The Church in Brittany was also to the fore in the opposition to the accordion and the dances which came with it:

The accordion was always denigrated in Brittany despite, but also because of, its immense popularity. From its very first appearance, it was rejected by the church (which already condemned performers of traditional music) and by well-meaning thinkers who gave it the nickname “devil’s box” (boestan diaoul, la boite du diable). It was the accordion which, in effect, introduced into Brittany… couple-dancing (e.g. waltzes, polkas) to the detriment of traditional line dances, which were less highly charged with sensuality. (Perroches 2001:131)

In addition to being seen as introducing new couple dances to an area, the accordion was also perceived to have effected changes on the music itself. De Witt (2001: 187) acknowledges that there is a perception that the accordion, when introduced into Cajun music, for instance, restricted the existing music somewhat and that fiddle players changed and adapted existing repertoire to accommodate the new instrument. However, he cautions against the idea proposed in 1984 by Ancelet and Morgan (De Witt 2001: 187) that the accordion “simplifies Cajun melody”, suggesting that “simplicity in one dimension such as pitch selection can be compensated for with complexity in others, such as ornamentation, improvisation, demands on memory, and so on” (De Witt 2001: 187).

Nearer to home, the accordion has also been the subject of attack from many different areas. In a BBC programme titled The Accordion Strikes Back (1985), Paul Griffiths, then chief music critic for The Times, described his feelings about the accordion saying “I do, I'm afraid, rather loath the accordion. There are instruments which are real instruments and there are instruments which are on the fringes of music” (Griffiths 1985). He described the accordion as “an impossible musical situation” and quoted from a 1904 edition of Groves Dictionary of Music
where Ebenezer Prout ended his short note on the accordion with the statement “It can only be played in one key and even in that one imperfectly. It is in fact little more than a toy” (Griffiths 1985). Eydmann (1999, 2001) notes that despite the instant popularity of the accordion in Scotland, “the instrument has received little attention from scholars of Scottish music and it has long been dismissed as a poor, or even foreign, relation” (Eydmann 1999: 595). According to Eydmann, many “purists” among the traditional music community there viewed the accordion as a cause rather than a consequence of musical change during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and this resulted in the accordion being “implicated in the impoverishment of Scottish traditions”. He suggests that since the accordion is “a modern instrument of foreign invention and manufacture it can never compete with those instruments that enjoy traditions going back several centuries and serve as elements of Scottish culture” (Eydmann 2001: 110).

In Ireland, although the accordion appeared to be accepted by the traditional music community as soon as it arrived, not everyone was happy with this brash new modern instrument. Its presence in traditional music attracted criticism from various written sources, a criticism which lasted to recent times and which appeared to run counter to the apparent popularity, among dancers and musicians, of the newly arrived instrument. Some of the earliest references to the accordion in Irish traditional music can be found in O'Neill's *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, first published in 1913. Captain Francis O'Neill appears to have ignored accordion players almost completely and when he does mention the instrument it is in disparaging tones as already indicated in Chapter 7. An anonymous correspondent in a 1936 Irish language paper noted that there was no music which interested country people more than accordion music. He, however, deplores this, stating that accordions were not the same as the whistle, fiddle or uilleann pipes, and it was not possible to play music correctly on the cheap accordions which were available everywhere:

>Nílaoncheol… is mó a chuirfeadh muintir na tuaithe suim ann ná i gceol an cháirdín… Na cáirdíní saora tíl atá le fagháil chuile áit… ní féidir ceol ceart a bhaint asta – ní hionann iad agus fideóg nó bheidhlin nó piob uilinn. (Anon 1936: 7)

However, the harshest criticisms of the accordion and its place in Irish traditional music came in the 1960s, during a period when the instrument had reached new
heights of popularity, mainly through the arrival of the Italian Paolo Soprani models and the playing and recordings of Paddy O’Brien and Joe Burke. Well-known and influential commentator, Seán Ó Riada, and the renowned collector of sean nós songs, Liam De Noradh, were both very forceful in their condemnation of the use of the accordion and melodeon in Irish traditional music, and both expressed strong opinions on the detrimental effects they felt the accordion was having on Irish music. In his 1962 Radio Éireann series *Our Musical Heritage*, Ó Riada noted that an accordion player has to use notes that “are already there, ready to sound at the pressing of a button, produced in an almost entirely mechanical fashion… the tone and even the intonation of the ensuing note… already… decided for him by the maker” (Ó Riada 1982: 69) thus limiting, as Ó Riada saw it, any possibility of individual musical expression. One of the implications of Ó Riada's discussion of the drawbacks of accordion playing would appear to be that there are notes in traditional music other than the regular notes and that the accordion, because it is such a mechanical device, cannot possibly make these notes. This was an issue which also formed part of the resistance to the accordion in Breton music as mentioned above.

Liam De Noradh (1965) had difficulty with this same concept. Like Ó Riada, he was concerned about the notes which he felt could not be made on an accordion, notes which to him were essential to the very core of traditional music. De Noradh had intense experience of collecting vocal traditional music and any instrument which could not bend notes in the same manner as the human voice would be unacceptable. In *Ceol ón Mumhan*, published in 1965, he made his feelings about what he termed “the pollution of Irish traditional music” known in no uncertain manner. He bemoaned the fact that there were not many pipers or fiddlers left in the Gaeltacht and he was sorry to note that the melodeon seemed to be taking over. He also believed that there was no limit to the damage done to Irish music by the accordion. De Noradh was of the opinion that it was impossible to play Irish music on melodeons or accordions, but pointed out that those who play these instruments are unaware of this:

Agus nil aon teora lena bhfuil de dhioibháil deanta ar an gceol dúchais ag an ngléas sin… Ní féidir ceol Gaelach a dhéanamh ar melodeons ná ar accordions ach ní eol do lucht a seinnte é sin. (De Noradh 1965: 10)
In the radio series, *Our Musical Heritage*, Ó Riada suggested that the use of the accordion as a solo instrument in Irish traditional music was to be deplored. In the book of the series, published in 1982, the accordion is described as “an instrument designed by foreigners for the use of peasants with neither the time, inclination nor application for a worthier instrument” (Ó Riada 1982: 69). Ó Riada also suggested that one of the reasons why the accordion was gaining such popularity was “the laziness which afflicts us as a nation at the moment”. According to Ó Riada (1982: 69-70) “we would all like to be musicians – but we don’t want to take the trouble. It is easier to play notes ready-made for us than to make our own, so we turn to accordions – bigger and better accordions”. In a review of the publication *Our Musical Heritage*, Breandán Breathnach, although himself no major fan of the accordion in Irish music, was scathing in his response to Ó Riada’s criticisms of the instrument:

One squirms at the aside about the accordion – “an instrument designed by foreigners for the use of peasants with neither the time, inclination or application for a worthier instrument”. What really do we think we are? The chief fault with box playing was not mentioned by Ó Riada and that which he did mention, the use of chromaticisms, and all the other strictures made against the accordion apply with equal validity to harpsichord and piano. When it comes to the playing, there is no doubt that dance music is better played on the accordion than on either harpsichord or piano and for that we have the evidence of our own ears. (Breathnach 1982: 89)

Accordion player Sonny Brogan, who played alongside Ó Riada in *Ceoltóirí Chualann*, also commented on the adverse comments the accordion received during this time, referring directly to Ó Riada’s comment about laziness:

It has been said recently that the accordion has become popular with the youth because they are too lazy to learn the pipes or fiddle, the accordion being much easier to play. I do not agree at all. Young people are attracted to this instrument simply because they like its bright musical tone. (Brogan 1963: 11)

Brogan also refuted the suggestion that the accordion was an easy instrument to play. While acknowledging that “it may be more difficult to make a start with the pipes or fiddle” since “producing the note properly on the fiddle or working the bellows on the pipes may present difficulties to the learner”, Brogan felt that once these obstacles were overcome, the piper or fiddle player had an advantage over the accordion player:
…the piper can cover his “keyboard” with the fingers of both hands and the fiddle player with one. They do not have to shift their position during a performance, whereas the accordion player has to cover his entire keyboard of longer range with the four fingers of his right hand. Not so easy after all. (Brogan 1963: 12)

Carson (1986: 31) suggested that “the word accordion covers a multitude of sins and some virtues” and he proposed that “perhaps the real objection to the accordion is that many instruments are badly tuned and that it is relatively easy to produce a slabby pastiche of traditional music” (Carson 1986: 32).

It is evident that many of the references to Irish accordion playing were not favourably disposed to the use of the instrument within the Irish music tradition, although it is very important to remember that most of these scathing comments were written previous to the final two decades of the twentieth century, during which time unprecedented changes took place in both the instrument and the manner in which it was played. These changes helped to mould the accordion into an acceptable addition to a tradition of music which was centuries old. From a situation where, in 1904, the instrument was described as a toy, and in 1913 it was equated with monotony, the accordion did indeed strike back, and despite the earlier antagonism, continued on its journey into Irish traditional music. By the closing decade of the twentieth century, writers were commenting favourably on the presence of the instrument in the tradition. Curtis (1994: 172) suggests that “when it comes to nominating the most popular instrument among musicians in Irish traditional music down the years, at least in terms of numbers of practitioners, the accordion would probably win hands down”. Small (1996: 3), in his sleeve notes to Joe Burke’s 1996 Green Linnet recording, details the ‘extraordinary’ changes that have taken place with regard to the status of the accordion:

Joe Burke in his career has seen extraordinary changes in the fortunes of the instrument he plays (the two-row button accordion tuned in B and C). He has seen it progress from an instrument regarded with extreme suspicion to its position today – the principal carrier of traditional music. (Small: 1996: 3)

While it would be difficult to agree with the suggestion that the accordion is today ‘the principal carrier of the tradition’, it is very clear from the above statements
that both of these writers believed at the time of writing that the accordion had reached an important stage in its quest for acceptance. This is in stark contrast to, and fundamentally at odds with, the viewpoints expressed in earlier written sources, and although one must acknowledge that the musical climate was very different for both groups of writers referred to above, the observations of the latter group indicate that by the late 1990s, a major shift in perception with regard to the status of the instrument within Irish traditional music was clearly manifest.

What had occurred to allow the accordion advance on its journey into tradition, a journey which has seen it move through unease to real acceptance? How has it come from outside the tradition to inside the tradition? What has happened along the journey to permit the instrument to put down stylistic roots and to achieve musical depths that have become increasingly acceptable to the community of traditional musicians within which it must exist? The complexity of an instrument’s journey into any tradition is multi-faceted. There are historical levels on which it can be viewed both in terms of timing and speed of involvement of the instrument in the tradition in question. There are levels of social attitudes to the instrument as well as levels of change, such as altered environments, changing performance locations and new technology which, as we have seen in many examples in the previous chapters, all affected the accordion’s journey. There is also the psychological aspect to be recognised – the attitude of any musician to his or her instrument and how that can play a major part in the acceleration or otherwise of the journey. A striking example of this came to the fore in an interview with accordion player Máirtín O’Connor when he spoke from his own personal perspective about his earliest encounters with the accordion which he saw as a ‘magic box’:

But there was no shoulder strap on it. And there was no thumb strap on it... So basically I had to wrap myself around the instrument to control it. So from that I developed bad postural habits, I’m sure, playing it. But at the same time it gave me a special kind of a contact with the thing, funny enough. For a long time I played it by resting my head on top of the right hand side of the instrument, which meant that my ear was in direct contact with the music coming out of it. And being kind of lost in the music or whatever took me away from being conscious of any kind of mechanical contact with the instrument. And I remember being fascinated that there was music coming out of what seemed like a magic box, to me at the time. And then many years later being disappointed on eventually looking inside the thing, and I suppose it took away some of the magic. I felt better not knowing how it worked, you know, mechanically like the airflow through the reeds and all that kind of stuff. It held more of a fascination for me and maybe it allowed my head to go inside the music more. (M O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)
It is at the level of this kind of engagement between an instrument and the young mind of an emerging traditional musician – a musician recognised as one of the most creative in twentieth century Irish music – that we begin to understand the importance of the role of the individual musician in shaping and directing an instrument’s journey into tradition.

9.2 The Role of the Individual

One should recognize not only that the melodeon has been played in widely contrasting musical styles, such as Nigerian *juju*, but also that the choices the musicians themselves make in fashioning their music have great significance. (De Witt 2001: 187)

While exploring the evolution of button accordion playing styles it became very evident that the journey of the accordion into Irish traditional music has been inextricably linked with the history and the personal journeys of individual players. In the following pages, the main accordion styles will be identified and in the process of so doing the reader will be introduced to some of the main activists in the world of the accordion in Irish traditional music during the first half of the twentieth century. Their musical actions will give an insight into the creative process involved in moulding and shaping a product of the industrial revolution into an instrument to which traditional music, as embodied by the individual, could be transferred. Who then were the main movers along that journey into tradition, the key individuals who by their musical actions, transformed this instrument “designed by foreigners for the use of peasants” (Ó Riada 1982: 69) into an acceptable instrument on which Irish traditional music is played today? What caused them to become the pivotal characters that propelled the accordion along the way, facilitating its adoption, adaptation and assimilation into the community of traditional Irish musicians?

Before answering these questions it is perhaps necessary to further explore the role of the individual musician. Musicians themselves are not always aware of the influence they may have on directions taken by the instrument they are playing. Because of this the whole issue of the importance of the role of the individual musician is very often ignored when considering change. Myers (1993: 240)
suggests that “we sometimes fall into the habit of describing musical change as something that happens to people as opposed to something people cause to happen”. This idea that the production of musical sound depends on the physical actions and behaviour of people and their interaction with an instrument has been current for some time. As early as 1964, Merriam observed that:

Music cannot exist on a level outside the control and behaviour of people, and several kinds of behaviour are involved. One of these is physical behaviour represented by bodily attitudes and postures as well as the use of specific muscles in placing the fingers on the keyboard of an instrument or tensing the vocal chords and the muscles of the diaphragm in singing. Conceptual behaviour, ideation, or cultural behaviour involves the concepts about music, which must be translated into physical behaviour in order to produce sound. (Merriam 1964: 14)

Other writers have noted the lack of acknowledgement of the contributions made by the individual musician to the development of musical sound within the framework of traditional or folk music. Quigley (1995: xi) remarks that “in ethnomusicology emphasis on the individual is a recent and as yet relatively weak area of development” and suggests that “study of selected individuals in this manner can support generalizations about creative and expressive processes in particular”. Nettl (1983: 278) meanwhile, acknowledges that “a curious disparity exists”:

While ethnomusicologists experience a great deal of face-to-face contact with individual informants or teachers in the field and specialise in concentration on a particular person, the literature of the field provides surprisingly little information about the individual in music. (Nettl 1983: 278)

Bohlman (1988: 69) agrees with the above when discussing the ‘folk musician’ suggesting that “until recently, many scholars believed that folk music was voiceless. It was to be devoid of individual personality. It should lack the marks of distinction that revealed the shaping influences of creative talent”. Nonetheless, ethnomusicological study had begun to accept the importance of the role of the individual musician in shaping developments within a tradition which are often the result of the musical behaviour of certain key musicians within that tradition (Bohlman 1988).

When contemplating the role of the musician in the evolution of a musical style, it would seem that a number of areas need to be focused upon, one of the most crucial
being the individual’s importance as a director of musical development and as an
instigator of musical change. Blacking (1995: 151) suggests that “the processes of
music-making and their musical products are consequences of individual decision
making about how, when and where to act, and what cultural knowledge to incorporate
in the sequences of action”. While Blacking sees the actions and decisions of the
individual musician as of paramount importance, he stresses nonetheless, that
individuals do not work in a vacuum and that any decisions made by individuals
about music-making and music are made “on the basis of their experiences of music
and attitudes to it in different social contexts” (Blacking 1995: 160). In a discussion of
313) directs us to Barnett’s contention that “while all innovations are initiated by
individuals, all individuals must of necessity work out of a cultural background which
provides them with certain potentials for innovation and certain conditions within
which they must operate”. Slobin (1993) revisits a theory first put forward in 1922 in
the writings of Georg Simmel. This involved the belief that individuals have multiple
identities and exist in a “web of group-affiliations”. Slobin suggests that Simmel:

…was probably reacting against a sociological tendency to view the hectic search
for meaning in urban environments as wholly negative, choosing instead to see
the relationship between individuals and their choice of affiliations as constructive
and positive. (Slobin 1993: 36-7)

It would seem, from Slobin’s discussion of Simmel’s ideas, that ‘no man is an
island’ and that the individual, rather than having his/her style cramped by
association with different groups, benefits greatly from such affiliations, with
many opportunities arising for socialisation, competition and other forms of
contact. It also appears that the individual can have many different roles
depending on the group he is involved with:

To take a European example, in an area of Sweden (Dalarna) considered the musical
/folkloristic heartland of the country, the teenagers cruise the streets in 1950s
American style, complete with old cars and rock’n’roll personae, then shoulder
fiddles on Sundays to play in family and local “folk” events. (Slobin 1993: 39)

Nettl (1983) introduces another element into the story and appears to disagree
slightly with the above argument, suggesting that it is the truly talented musician
who manages to step outside the perceived limits of his environment:
The individual is part of his culture but, as recognised by anthropologists since the 1930s in their studies of “culture and personality,” is also its prisoner, as illustrated by Jules Henry in *Culture against Man* (1963). The exceptional person in music frequently tries to escape and the history of music probably owes much to the conflict. (Nettl 1983: 240)

From the above, four points emerge which are of importance to the role of the individual musician. While the individual is seen as the main agent of change, it is also acknowledged that no individual can work alone – the social context in which they exist provides the stimulus for change and also sets the boundaries and limitations within which these changes may take place. In addition, while it has been argued that the individual musician may be restricted by these perceived limitations, it has also been pointed out that the exceptional musician invariably throws off the shackles, managing to circumvent these confines and in so doing, advances the instrument they are playing to another stage in its journey into tradition. It is within the context and framework of the above theories, and in particular the last one relating to the exceptional people in music, that we direct our attention to the pathways followed by the accordion on its journey into Irish traditional music – a journey which owes much to the personal journeys of musicians who are, indeed, regarded as exceptional by their peers.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the complexity of the engagement of any instrument with any tradition must be multi-faceted, and so it can be argued that there are many factors which will affect the individual’s progress, or lack of it, on its musical pathway. One of the most significant factors with regard to the accordion in Irish music would appear to be the individual’s positioning, through a mixture of choice and historical accident, at particular points in his or her life which connect the musician’s creativity to a number of other influential happenings occurring at the same time. For example, in an RTÉ radio programme called *Is Nostalgia a Thing of the Future* (1982) accordion player Paul Brock described the conditions which facilitated a change in accordion style in Ireland during the early 1950s:

There are two distinct periods in accordion playing. First, the period starting with John Kimmel, that carried on through the twenties and thirties and was ultimately developed by Joe Derrane who played and recorded in early to mid fifties. But at that time there was a drastic change in the style of box playing as we know it. The arrival of CCÉ on the scene in Ireland, the start of the *Fleadh Cheoil*, a totally new technique in box playing as originated by Paddy O’Brien and developed by
Circumstances such as those mentioned by Brock are typical of the type of situations that inspire and facilitate change. This confluence of energies permits the accordion to progress and continue to another stage on its journey into tradition. One of the most important milestones in that journey was reached when the accordion was initially recorded in the early years of the twentieth century, giving us the first concrete evidence of the sound of the instrument.

### 9.2.1 A Confluence of Energies – The Wyper Brothers

Cylinder and disc recordings had begun to be made in the closing years of the nineteenth century, and in Ireland a number of musicians were recorded at the Feis Cheoil in Dublin during the late 1890s. Accordion players, however, did not feature among these early recordings, suggesting that the instrument still had a long way to go to be accepted into all aspects of the Irish tradition. While many believe that the 1904 recordings of John J. Kimmel provide the first sample of the sound of a melodeon, Chandler (1996) suggests that “any quest for the first melodeon player to record needs to take account of the possibility of an entrepreneur who possessed the technology required for recording cylinders in a down-home fashion” and so it was in fact the Scottish Wyper brothers, Peter and Daniel, who appear to have taken the lead with regard to the earliest recorded sound of the ten-key accordion, since they were active in the field of home produced cylinder recordings from around 1901 (K. Chandler, Personal Communication, 2 Sept 1999).

Peter Wyper was born in Dalzeil, Lanarkshire in 1861 and was the third child of Peter and Charlotte Wyper. His younger brother Daniel was born in October 1872. By 1881 the family were based in Hamilton, near Glasgow and twenty year old Peter worked with his father in coal mining, the main occupation in Lanarkshire during much of the nineteenth century. Daniel also worked for a time in the coal mines (Chandler 1996). It is not known at what point the brothers became
melodeon players, or whether their father or mother played, but the family are remembered as being very musical, with Peter and Daniel being known to be “able to play a tune after only one hearing” (Engle and Russell 1978) and both later became Scottish melodeon champions. The Wyper brothers used their musical and entrepreneurial skills to leave the harsh conditions of the coal mines. Peter left the mines first and worked as a sewing machine salesman, before setting up what was to become a highly successful music retailing business. By 1902 he had opened a music shop, selling musical instruments and sheet music, in Cadzow Street in Hamilton. By 1909, Wyper’s Music Warehouse was offering a very large selection of musical items including the “largest and best selection of talking machines and records” as well as a large variety of instruments from “Wyper’s International Melodeons” to violins, concertinas and mandolins. The “latest songs, books and music” were also sold (Chandler 1996).

Daniel Wyper also left the coal mines and began working in his brother’s music shop, where he repaired gramophones and melodeons. The music shop gave the brothers access to equipment suitable for recording cylinders, and by the turn of the century, like Irish piper and recording artist Patsy Tuohy in America, Peter Wyper had begun producing cylinders of melodeon playing for commercial distribution. These were sold through the shop on Cadzow Street and in other musical establishments in the locality. Chandler (1996; 1999), in his extensive research on the Wyper Brothers and other early melodeon players, provides compelling evidence to indicate that the cylinder recordings made by Peter Wyper were indeed the first recordings of the sound of the melodeon. One such piece of evidence is the fact that as well as being sold in Peter Wyper’s own music shop in Cadzow Street, the cylinders were also sold in Jupp’s Music Warehouse at 88 Great Junction Street in Leith. According to Chandler (personal communication, 2 Sept 1999), the proprietor, “Amelia Jupp was trading at this address only between 1900 and 1902, which gives us further evidence of early activity by the Wypers”.

The *Talking News* of August 1903 provides even further confirmation of the earliest melodeon recording. The editor, commenting on a cylinder recording he received from Peter Wyper, noted that the recording not only showed that Wyper was “an expert record maker” but also proved him “to be quite a master of this
instrument” (Chandler 1996). In a letter written by Wyper, which accompanied the recording, an insight is gained into how the Wypers made their earliest recordings:

I have sold a considerable number of these records locally, but as I have to play and make each record separately, I should take it as a favour if you could enlighten me as to how to take one record from another. It is so monotonous playing the same tune time after time. (Wyper in Chandler 1996: 3)

Wyper’s method of reproduction then clearly involved playing into the recording horn of a cylinder cutting machine and repeating the process over and over again. As was customary at the time in other commercial recordings, each recording began with “an announcement of tune title, and name of both performer and manufacturer. Lady Mary Ramsey, for instance was ‘Wyper’s “Empress” Records’ release number 12. It began with a voice – undoubtedly Wyper’s – intoning “Lady Mary Ramsey. Played by Peter Wyper. Empress Records” (Chandler 1996).

Daniel Wyper also recorded numerous cylinders in this fashion. Their quest for a better method of reproduction was solved not by copying the original recording but by using “a battery of four or more cylinder recorders all going at once” (Engle and Russell 1978). According to family members, the brothers made a great deal of money from these cylinders, which they recorded “on the first floor of a warehouse located opposite the music shop in Cadzow Street” while a daughter of Daniel’s recalled how her father recorded “at least some of these cylinders at home, his wife brushing away the shavings form the newly-cut groove during reproduction” (Chandler 1996). By 1907 Peter and Daniel had come to the attention of the Columbia Recording Company, and they travelled to London for the first of many commercial recording sessions, several of which featured their duet playing. These recordings proved highly successful for the Wyper Brothers and gained them international fame when their music was released on “Columbia’s domestic American series” (Chandler 1996). In a Columbia catalogue of the late 1910s, they were announced along with Guido and Pietro Diero and John Kimmel as “the five greatest accordion players in the world” (Chandler 1996).
9.2.2 John J. Kimmel

John J. Kimmel however, was the first musician to record Irish dance music commercially, on the one-row accordion, and it is from his earliest recordings – 1904-5 (Spottswood 1990: 2794) – that we get our first sample of the sound of Irish dance music being played on the instrument. Kimmel was a classic example of how an individual, constantly pushing at the boundaries of the capabilities of his instrument, can raise that instrument to a new level of awareness, capturing the imagination and admiration not only of his peers, but also of musicians for many generations to come:

Apparently he was German, he wasn’t even Irish. He had a very big influence, made a lot of 78s, great music and he influenced other musicians apart from accordion players. He was very punchy, great attack. Single-row melodeon, bronze reeds, great attack, which musicians at the time didn’t have. (Daly 1982)

Jackie Daly, one of Kimmel’s most ardent admirers, was attracted to Kimmel’s music initially because the system used by Kimmel was the same as that being played by Daly: “well the ‘Press and Draw’ would have been the fact, seeing as I played it as well. But the tunes as well” (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997).

Known as the ‘Irish Dutchman’, Kimmel was born in “the old Dutch town of Brooklyn”, New York on December 13th, 1886 (Hall 1977: 2). His parents, Margaretha Schmidt and John Kimmel, were both German immigrants but, apart from that, very little is known about his early life or where he first learned to play Irish music. Hall (1977: 2), notes that “his authenticity cannot be measured against any known regional style largely because we know so little about Irish country melodeon playing of this period” but he believes that “Kimmel must have learnt his Irish music in Irish company” although he also accepts that, while Kimmel’s music on the whole “followed the conventions found in Irish traditional music”, his recordings may have “introduced some Kimmellisms into the Irish repertoire” (Hall 1977: 2). It is possible that Irish born accordion players such as Conlon, Scanlon and Flanagan, who arrived in America in the early years of recording and who recorded over a decade after Kimmel’s earliest disc, were influenced to a great extent by Kimmel’s style (Chandler 1997; Smith 1992). However it could be argued that accordion players from Ireland were in America
for many years before recording began, and that Kimmel may indeed have been influenced by these early players.

Kimmel’s earliest discs demonstrate the virtuosity of his playing, while his execution of amazingly intricate grace notes and triplets still astounds musicians playing the instrument today. Máirtín O’Connor believes that Kimmel “developed a whole style for the melodeon… using ornamentation in tunes in a very special way.” According to O’Connor “he was fantastically accurate as a player and had just great musical imagination” (O’Connor 2002). Kimmel’s command of the one-row accordion and his total disregard for the limitations of it meant that he stretched the instrument to its very limits, exploring all avenues to produce his highly distinctive, flamboyant and complex sound. The instrument he played was a single-row, ten-key accordion, described by Jackie Daly as having “three voices, one treble octave, one bass octave and one high octave. Very full rich reedy sound”. Daly suggested that the high octave was what gave the accordion the rich sound and noted that “having three distinct octaves going at the same time” was “a big feature of that sound” (Daly 1982).

Kimmel was a perfect example of an individual musician existing in a “web of group-affiliations” (Simmel in Slobin 1993: 36). He was associated with many different types of musical work, including recording, performing in vaudeville and “playing the accordion as background music for silent films” (Labbe and Carlin 1980: 1). Kimmel was also involved in running a number of saloon bars, one of which was aptly named ‘The Accordion’. He opened his first bar in Brooklyn in 1906 and “built a stage where he performed with his vaudeville band – short skits and popular musical numbers” (Labbe and Carlin 1980: 1). According to Patrick F. Stedman, a contemporary of the accordion player, Kimmel’s vaudeville group “used to rehearse four or five nights a week in an undertaking establishment on Court Street” (Stedman in Labbe and Carlin 1980: 1). All of these affiliations gave him access to a wide variety of music and this was reflected in his extremely diverse repertoire. The music he played was “not pure Irish traditional music but, with the influence it had on the Irish musicians, it’s definitely part of the Irish music scene and it has its place” (Daly 1982).
Joe Derrane, the legendary accordion player from Boston, recalled how he first heard Kimmel:

Then enter John J Kimmel into my life, I’m guessing now in the mid forties the first time I heard old records of his and they were quite old at the time because this man recorded in the twenties... but what struck me was the very, very precise way he had of playing, the very energetic way he had of playing and the tricks he used in order to accomplish ornamentation that nobody else was really using at that time because he was playing the ten-key accordion, melodeon, for want of a better word at the time, so there were no C naturals, there were no F naturals or G sharps or what have you, it was tuned in D and that was pretty much it. So he devised some of these ornaments if you will, that were very, very unique especially at that time. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

Derrane believes that “some of the changes that he was introducing and that he was doing” were “extraordinary at the time, given the fact of the limitations” and “that he had a ten-key diatonic and that’s all he ever played” (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998). As well as Irish music, John J. Kimmel also played German and popular music and contemporary songs, and along with the influence he appeared to have on Irish musicians, was extremely influential in Quebecois music where the accordion had also become a main feature of that tradition. According to Derrane (personal communication, 2 Jul 1998), “John J. Kimmel is absolutely worshipped up in Canada”. French Canadian accordion player, Philippe Bruneau (in Labbe and Carlin 1980: 2) observes that Kimmel’s playing “is very difficult to imitate” and he suggests that “anyone who would want to play like Kimmel would have to devote himself to 20 or 30 years of practice. This person would also have to have a natural musical capability, otherwise he might as well give up at the start”. During his recording career, which spanned twenty-three years, John J. Kimmel recorded over 150 sides for various recording companies in America, many of which were subsequently re-recorded by other artists from the Flanagan Brothers to De Danann. Perhaps one of the most important consequences of Kimmel’s popularity and extensive output of recordings was that sales of his records demonstrated the existence of a large market for Irish traditional music among the immigrant population, and the accordion flourished in this climate.
9.2.3 O’Byrne DeWitt and Herborn and Wheeler

It was in this environment that the O’Byrne DeWitt Company was set up in 1916. Bradshaw (1991: 47) notes that “the early recording companies – Victor, Edison and Columbia – had, from their beginnings, issued material aimed at the Irish emigrant market, but this was usually performed by Irish imitators of the stage-Irish variety”. Ellen O’Byrne, herself an Irish immigrant, managed the O’Byrne DeWitt Irish Grafonola and Victor shop on New York’s Third Avenue with her husband, and she recognised the potential selling power of records of Irish music and song made by traditional Irish performers. The O’Byrne DeWitt Company was set up and remained an important force in the world of Irish traditional music recording in America for many years. Eydmann (2001: 108) has noted that “the melodeon was quickly recognized as highly suited to the acoustical requirements of early, non electronic, cylinder and disc recording” and the accordion featured strongly in the early recordings made by the newly formed O’Byrne DeWitt Company. As well as its suitability for the recording process, this could also be an indicator of the popularity of the ten-key instrument among the Irish immigrant community in the America of the early 1900s. The O’Byrne DeWitt’s first disc of instrumental music introduced accordion player Eddie Herborn playing in duet with banjo player James Wheeler. Herborn was born in Boston, but as a young child, was sent to Ireland and reared by his mother’s family in Co Mayo. It is believed that this was where he learned to play the one-row accordion (O’Keeffe 1991). As a teenager, he returned to New York where Ellen O’Byrne DeWitt’s son, Justus, who was actively looking for Irish musicians to record, heard him play at the Gaelic Park in the Bronx (Moloney 1982). He recorded the historic Mouse in the Cupboard with James Wheeler in September, 1916. The five hundred copies of the record made sold out in no time and Ellen O’Byrne DeWitt was, of course, proved correct in the prediction she made in 1916. The records made at her prompting were an immediate success. Other record companies quickly realised the potential of the venture and within a few years the Irish music recording industry was well under way. By 1921 the recording of Irish music was undertaken by American labels, Columbia, Victor and Edison, as well as by “a number of small independent labels such as The M and C New Republic Record Company, Keltic Records and The Gaelic Phonograph Record Company” (Bradshaw 1996a: 19).
9.2.4 In the Right Place – Peter James Conlon

The journey of any instrument into a tradition is dependent on a number of factors, one of which is the path taken by important individuals on that journey and their positioning, whether by chance or otherwise, in certain locations, or at certain events in time. It is widely agreed that many of the Irish musicians who made their mark in the early days of the recording industry in America were in the right place at the right time. And so it was with Peter James Conlon, who was one of the first Irish born accordion players to record commercially. He arrived in America four years before the O’Byrne DeWitt Company recorded the first discs of Irish traditional music.

He was from a place called Bellmount, near Milltown, Co. Galway, from a very musical family, so I believe. His sisters all played, Mary Ellen recorded one record, I’m not sure of the date, I think it was the twenties and there was Rose and there was Delia and they were all great musicians. (Harris 2002)

Born in North Co. Galway in 1894, Peter James Conlon grew up in very musical surroundings with Hall (2000: 13) noting that the Conlon house was “full of music – mostly fiddle, flutes and melodeons, singing and step-dancing”. According to Ryan (1977) John James Conlon and his wife Maria Dwyer came from Co. Mayo and both of them played melodeon. John James also played the fiddle, flute and warpipes and his wife was a great step dancer. Several of Peter’s siblings played fiddle and melodeon and one brother, Tommy, played flute, tin whistle and warpipes (Furey 1975: 11). His sister Rose Murphy, when interviewed in her later years, described how “our house, no matter where we lived, our house was the house for music” (Murphy 1976). Peter was the third of the Conlon children, and like many of his brothers and sisters, also played the one-row accordion. According to Rose, his youngest sister, Peteen, as she called him, played the melodeon roughly. “He was too fierce and forever breaking the bellows” (Murphy 1976). Talking about her brother on Radio Sheffield in 1976, her portrayal of his mischievous personality may account somewhat for the heart, life and energy in the music heard on his recordings in later years. Rose described her brother as “a tomboy” who was “full of devilment” and always playing tricks on her:

He put me on a swing one day, great big swing you know, big tree outside our house, great big cart rope, you know the cart rope, as thick as me wrist nearly and he was swinging me up and me skirts got caught in the branches and there I was, nearly the
height of the house, sitting on the branches and he breaking his heart laughing at me. Ah yes, He was the third oldest of our family. There was twelve of us, seven living when my mother died and I’m the last of the Mohicans. (Murphy 1976)

Peter Conlon, or Conland, as his name appears on the first part of the ship’s manifest (Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. 1982), arrived in New York on May 12th 1912 on the liner, The Carmania, which had sailed from Liverpool. His previous place of residence was given as Hindley, England, where his brother Thomas lived in Manchester. His sister Mary Ellen, also an accordion player, was living in Brooklyn, New York at the time and she paid for his passage to America. According to the ship’s manifest, when he arrived on the 12th of May 1912, Peter Conlon was eighteen years old, had $25 dollars in his pocket and his occupation was listed as a railway hand (Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. 1982). His arrival coincided with the growing demand for Irish traditional music in dance halls and various other musical venues. America’s large cities in the early years of the twentieth century were a hotbed for traditional Irish music, particularly New York:

The continuous flow of immigrants into New York had established the Irish as the city’s dominant ethnic group by the opening decades of the twentieth century, when over half a million citizens had Irish connections. Countless bars, dance halls and social clubs prospered in Irish neighbourhoods: these venues provided music, especially for dancing, the most popular form of entertainment for exiles. (Bradshaw 1996: 3)

Accordion players were in demand in this environment as their instrument was well capable of cutting through the loud noise of crowded dance halls in pre-amplification days. Many accordion players found work in the tap rooms and dance halls, very often playing up to seven nights a week. It was known that Peter Conlon was a very capable musician in his teenage years and the evidence from his prolific output of recordings between 1917 and 1930, certainly suggests that he was an exceptional performer on the ten-key accordion, and a musician of phenomenal skill, even before he left his homeland. He quickly became known in America where he “mixed in fast company on the New York Irish music scene and played in dance halls and clubs with the best West of Ireland fiddle and flute talent available at the time” (Hall 2000: 13). Dan Smith, who was born in Glenamaddy, in North Co. Galway, lived in Philadelphia for most of his life where he was a popular one-row accordion player. He heard of Conlon during his time there and was aware of his prowess on the ten-key accordion:
I heard talk about him but I hadn’t the pleasure of meeting him, but he was just a… he just played a plain old ten-key accordion because he couldn’t play the others they were more modern but he got more out of that ten-key accordion than the others could out of two-rows. I asked about him, I asked different people and they said oh he was great he killed himself playing, playing an accordion that he shouldn’t be able to play ‘cause he had only ten-keys, but he was a genius. (Dan Smith personal communication, 2 May 1996)

Conlon’s recording career spanned some thirteen years and for the latter part of this he played an eight voice Baldoni accordion. He is described as having been completely immersed in his music:

Jack Doyle who knew him used to say that he used to lean over the accordion, the eyes closed and he’d rock, you know, with the music and that was it, he was totally in his own world, his whole body used to move with the music, so I think he was very focused and I think that says it all really. (Harris 2002)

He was particularly admired for his strongly rhythmic and driving style of playing and is still admired for this quality by many of today’s traditional musicians:

I think the first time I heard P.J Conlon, or recordings of P.J Conlon, was in Cathal McConnell’s house. And I remember being very taken with his playing at the time. The energy in it, and the drive and the life in it, you know, the attack, everything. At the time I remember I was playing very fast, you know, really fast with lots of energy. Something about Conlon’s playing really appealed to me or struck a chord with me. (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)

Some people feel however, that Conlon’s playing was incredibly fast and maintain that, in comparison to the accordion playing of his sister Rose, his was so fast that a change in the speed of his playing must have occurred in America. Máirtín O’Connor puts the speed down to the fact that it was the ‘jazz age’ in America, while Charlie Harris believes that all musicians at that time were playing fast:

It was fast but they were living in the fast lane there, I think, in New York at the time… I mean Coleman’s playing was very fast, Morrison’s playing was fast, following the Sligo speed. (Harris 2002)

Evidence from an interview recorded with Conlon’s sister Rose (Murphy 1976) indicates that Peter Conlon, in his younger days, was often criticised for playing fast or ‘ragging the accordion’ as his sister Rose said (P. Ryan, personal
communication, 17 Aug 2007). The playing of brother and sister are often compared when discussing the speed of P. J. Conlon’s playing on his recordings. This may, however, be an unfair comparison as he was recorded in the full bloom of youth, during his twenties and thirties, while Rose was recorded in the latter years of her life, in her eighties. Conlon’s sister, Mary Ellen, was recorded at a young age on the Gennet label in 1923. Her melodeon playing then was lively and fast. In comparison, Rose Conlon Murphy was recorded when she was a much older lady and her playing may have slowed substantially due to her years, although the heart and the lift in the music that seems to have been such a Conlon trademark can still be heard.

Like Kimmel before him, Peter Conlon is recognised for having pushed the boundaries and limitations imposed on him by a ten-key diatonic accordion. Even today, nearly ninety years on, many single-row players with an instrument pitched in D will want to steer away from the key of G or C citing the absence of such notes as C natural, F natural and others as the reason. Not so for Peter Conlon playing and recording in the first two decades of the twentieth century. He played tunes with abandonment and had an almost cheeky way of deftly skirting around the notes that were required in the tune but that he did not have on his instrument. Joe Derrane has noted that:

…in a sense a ten-key one-row diatonic gives you an enormous amount of freedom, I think that, from the perspective that there are notes that you cannot play, they’re physically not on the accordion so don’t worry about it, so it gives you a lot of freedom in that sense and this is when the creativity now comes to the fore. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

Single-row players had two choices open to them when it came to playing tunes in keys other than D or A. They could limit their repertoire to tunes in the key of D or A, or they could experiment and find creative ways around the absence of those notes which would have allowed them to play in other keys. Peter Conlon’s sister, Mary Ellen, recorded one side for Gennett in 1923. The tune was the jig “Rory O’Moore” which can be found in O’Neill’s The Dance Music of Ireland No. 116 in the key of G (Figure 9.1).
Mary Ellen Conlon played the jig in the key of D, simply changing the key to suit her ten-key accordion, but with a number of subtle variations also (Figure 9.2).

“The College Grove” is a four-part reel, a version of which can be found in O’Neill’s *Dance Music of Ireland*, No 485 (Figure 9.3). As written in O’Neill’s
Dance Music of Ireland, the tune looks perfect for any single-row accordion player as all the C notes appear to be sharp. However, practising traditional musicians will know that, although written in the key of D, the tune requires a number of C naturals especially in the first three parts.

Figure 9.3: “The College Grove” O’Neill’s Dance Music of Ireland No 485

A number of two part versions of the tune can also be found in the Dance Music of Ireland, No 484 “The New Demense” (Figure 9.4) and No 714 “The Green Jacket” (Figure 9.5).
The first part of “The Green Jacket” is close to the first part played by Peter Conlon in his version of “The College Grove” (Figure 9.6).
“The Flogging Reel” is in O’Neill’s *Dance Music of Ireland* No 482 (Figure 9.7). It can also be found in *The Dance Music of Willie Clancy* No 118. Originally a Scottish tune, it appears as “The Flaggon” in *The Gow Collection of Scottish Dance Music* No. 254. This is the name used on the 78rpm disc when Conlon recorded “The College Grove” and “The Flaggon Reel” together for the Columbia Company in September 1928 (T. McGraw, personal communication, 19 Jul 2010).
“The Flogging Reel” is printed in the key of G in a number of sources and as Conlon played a single-row melodeon pitched in the key of D, he was without C or F naturals, both of which are used in the common version of the tune which one might hear at traditional music sessions. The tune has three parts and use of the C and F natural would be important, especially in the first and third parts. Peter Conlon could simply have moved the pitch of the tune to the key of D, which would have made it much easier, however, he would not have been playing in the same pitch as other musicians and so he chose to get around the difficulty in a very creative manner (Figure 9.8).
The importance of Peter Conlon to the journey of the button accordion into Irish traditional music cannot be overstated. While many believe that Conlon could not but have come under the spell and the influence of recordings of John J Kimmel during his initial years in New York (Chandler 1994), others believe that Conlon’s style was quite different from Kimmel’s:

He was a tremendous musician and a tremendous player and it also seems to me, by the time he got to make his records that he had, of course I’d say, he had heard Kimmel and I’d say that there were little influences of Kimmel in his technique and also you could nearly tell that… his plan or his arrangements weren’t as consciously developed or thought out. (J. Burke, personal communication, 5 Apr 1999)

While he appreciates Kimmel’s virtuosity, Máirtín O’Connor has always been more drawn to Conlon’s music:

I’ve always felt closer to Conlon in heart, the heart in Conlon’s playing… Kimmel, I found mechanically perfect… and real, fantastic innovation in terms of ornaments and technique… wonderful and perfect timing, it’s just, there’s a sheer perfection in itself, everything is wonderfully positioned and everything, but for me, Conlon is the raw guts factor… that’s not to say that he wasn’t a fantastic technical player as well. (O’Connor 2002)
While we can’t be sure that he didn’t come under the influence of the recordings of John J. Kimmel, in the five years between his arrival and when he first recorded in 1917, the possibility remains that Conlon retained his own style, and that style, as heard on his first recording in 1917, is the earliest indication of what the ten-key accordion may have sounded like playing Irish dance music in the rural Ireland of the closing years of the nineteenth century. More importantly, it gives us an indication of the level of development of the accordion at this stage of its journey into tradition and, while we must acknowledge that Peter Conlon was a musician of exceptional talent, the likelihood is that he was not the only one. Bradshaw (1991: 66) argues that Michael Coleman’s fiddle style “may have been fixed before he left Sligo at the age of 23 as musicians at home could immediately recognise a similarity between Michael’s music as they heard it on record and that of his brother Jim”. Like Michael Coleman, who had a brother whom many, including Michael himself, claimed was better than him, there is the possibility that Conlon had neighbours or cousins who also played the accordion with the same level of expertise. We know from the 1923 recording of his sister Mary Ellen that her accordion playing was quite developed. According to Máirtín O’Connor; “She was a great player – so from that point of view there’s no reason why she wouldn’t have recorded more” (O’Connor 2002). Joe Burke believes that Conlon “already, of course, must have been a great musician before he left and the chance to and the opportunity to make recordings there… ensured that he would be known a lot better for his music in America than if he had stayed here. He would probably never have made a record and we never would have heard of the man” (J. Burke, personal communication, 5 Apr 1999).

Conlon’s recordings with many of the revered musicians from the 78rpm era, such as his highly regarded duets with James Morrison and John McKenna, also give testament to the fact that his style was individual and distinctive, and although it may have had some influence from Kimmel, had been developed in Ireland and possibly fixed prior to his departure for America. As well as providing evidence of the level of development of the accordion, it also gives some idea of the ‘tricks’ musicians were employing to circumvent the limitations of the instrument in the early years of the accordion’s participation in Irish traditional music. Máirtín O’Connor, a great fan of Conlon’s music, observes how “he used triplets to great effect… Conlon’s music was beautiful, his distinctive use of triplets here and there
and some of the runs that he uses and the way he expands some of the runs”
(O’Connor 2002):

What I liked about Conlon was that he seemed to tell great stories with his tunes. You
know in... the variations. That is where I saw the strength in his music, apart from
the energy and guts and that sort of thing. He changed things, little things, in the
tune, that appealed to me. (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)

9.2.5 The Flanagan Brothers

P.J. Conlon’s arrival in America early in the 1900s coincided with the early days of
the recording of Irish music. The development of the recording industry coincided
with the mass emigration to America of many different nationalities and the
cylinders and 78rpms are like photographs of traditions in transition as they moved
from a pre- to a post-industrial society. Irish emigrants had been arriving in
increasing numbers since the closing decades of the nineteenth century and settling
in the larger cities of America. They had come from an Ireland weakened by famine
and absentee landlords and they arrived to a new and different life, bringing with
them their music, song and dances. One of the most popular venues for meeting
people from home was the dancehall and, as we have seen in the previous chapter,
there was no shortage of dancehalls in America catering for emigrants from every
county of Ireland. As outlined in Chapter 8, the accordion really came into its own in
the dance hall environment in America. The powerful volume of the accordion was
its main passport to success, mainly because of the large crowds of emigrants
attending these functions, and the absence of amplification prior to the 1930s. The
demands of the dancing audience and the bigger and more crowded dance hall
situations – so different from what dancers and musicians would have left behind
them in Ireland – quickly led to changes in the accordion, changes which were
suited to what was needed at the time. Accordions were made for what the dancers
wanted, which was a heavy, driving beat. Because of their ability to cut through
crowd noise, the pairing of accordion and banjo, in particular, became a must for
dancers in American dancehalls, with one of the best known duets playing these
instruments being the Flanagan Brothers:

The accordion/banjo combination became immortalised by the Flanagan
Brothers, Joe and Mike, who were the most famous Irish musicians in the Irish
dance halls of New York in the 1920s and the 1930s. (Moloney 1992: 75)
Joe Flanagan was born in Philadelphia in 1894, the same year as Peter Conlon. His parents had emigrated to America from Waterford some years previously. Shortly after Joe’s birth, the Flanagan family returned to Waterford where Louis was born in 1896, followed in 1897 by Mike. Their father, Arthur, played the one-row accordion and their mother, Ellen, was a singer. As with Peter Conlon in North Galway, music played a major part in their upbringing in Waterford where they lived until they emigrated to America again in 1911, settling in Albany in New York State (Bradshaw: 1996c).

Joe Flanagan was the eldest son and learned to play the one-row accordion from his father. By 1918 he had moved to New York City, where he worked as a clerk in Manhattan. Joined by his brothers Mike and Louis, the three brothers began playing their distinctive brand of Irish music and song, which was so appealing to the thousands of emigrants who crowded the dancehalls, tap rooms and social clubs of the time. Before long they had become one of the leading Irish dancehall attractions in New York during the 1920s. Danny Smith recalled meeting the Flanagan brothers on a visit to New York from Philadelphia:

I was highly honoured. I went to New York for a visit once and… I heard about the Flanagan brothers, they were great musicians and… a friend of mine introduced me to them and said this is Flanagan and so forth and … the Flanagans, they knew the musicians and they were asking about them and so I came back, told everybody I had met the Flanagan Brothers and I didn’t wash my hand for a couple of months after the hand that shook the hand of Mike Flanagan… I had the pleasure of hearing them play… at the dance that night. They were playing the finest of music. (D. Smith, personal communication 2 May 1996)

The punchy, lively sound of the Flanagan Brothers was captured on numerous recordings and owed much to Joe’s dynamic style of playing, influenced by his father’s accordion playing and the recordings of John J. Kimmel. Chandler (1997) believes that “Kimmel’s influence was almost completely pervasive with practically every recorded Irish emigrant melodeon player who came after, whether first or second generation, consciously… striving to emulate his technique”. That Joe Flanagan was very influenced by the recordings of Kimmel is borne out by his December 1929 recording of “International Echoes” which had originally been arranged for John J. Kimmel by piano player Joe Linder, and was recorded by
Kimmel in 1916. The Flanagan Brothers were at the height of their popularity when another very influential musician made his first recordings on the ten-key accordion.

9.2.6 Jerry O’Brien

Jerry O’Brien arrived in America on board the liner *The Cedric* on May 9th 1921, having departed from Queenstown in Co. Cork. Born in Dunderrow, Kinsale, Co. Cork in 1899, he was one of eight children (Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. 1982). The early years of the twentieth century were turbulent times in Ireland and saw events such as the Easter Rising in 1916 and the War of Independence which followed it. According to his daughter, Mrs Marie McCormack, Jerry O’Brien arrived in America, having been wanted by the notorious auxiliary force known as the Black and Tans and smuggled out of Ireland to escape hanging (Varlet 1995).

It would seem that Jerry O’Brien only began playing the one-row accordion after his arrival in America (Varlet 1995). He had commenced life in America in Boston working as a butler near Gloucester, but within a few short years of beginning to play the accordion, he had become a member of the famed O’Leary’s Irish Minstrels. The earliest recordings of Jerry O’Brien’s music were two sides made during a 1928 recording session of O’Leary’s Irish Minstrels in New York. The virtuoso playing on these two sides, “Little Judy” and “The Rakes of Kildare”, demonstrated how quickly O’Brien had become proficient on the one-row accordion. They also showed his style, which many believe was influenced to some extent by the music of his predecessor, John J Kimmel.

Jerry O’Brien, like Kimmel before him, was involved in music in a number of different ways. As well as his solo career and membership of O’Leary’s Irish Minstrels, he also worked “in the O’Byrne DeWitt music shop in the Dudley Terminal on Warren Street in Roxbury, and later he became a producer with Copley Records” (Hitchner 1994b: 60). O’Brien also worked as a music teacher with Justus DeWitt, son of Ellen O’Byrne DeWitt. His first Accordion Instructor with detailed instructions on how to play Irish music on the Irish style accordion was published in 1949, followed in 1952 by *Irish Folk Dance Music*, a collection of tunes compiled and arranged by O’Brien. Joe Derrane spoke about Jerry
O’Brien’s teaching and playing style, and in particular about the importance of tempo and its continuity to his teacher:

Oh yeah the continuity of it. He was more interested in the continuity, I think, than in all reels must be played no faster than this, no slower than that, no, he left you some manoeuvring room there but… his credo, if you will, was that everything must be very, very clean… He always took the view and I must say that I’ve adopted it myself, a fiddle is a fiddle and an accordion is an accordion and they are two different, totally different instruments and while you can play together the accordion should be played as an accordion and the fiddle should be played as a fiddle in other words you shouldn’t have a fiddle player trying to play… trying to make the fiddle sound like… tonally they wouldn’t sound like… execution wise like the accordion nor should the accordion try to copy the fiddle and I think I agree with that myself to a certain point. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

9.2.7 Ann ‘Ma’ McNulty

Although the single-row accordion or melodeon was frequently associated with women and, in areas where the pipes and fiddle were the most popular instruments, was even referred to disparagingly as “a woman’s instrument” (Breathnach 1971: 86), there was a surprisingly low number of female accordion players recorded in the early years of recording in America. As noted earlier in this chapter, accordion player, Mary Ellen Conlon, a sister of P.J. Conlon, recorded two sides for the Gennet label on the 28th of September, 1923 while Mrs Redie Johnston recorded a set of jigs and a set of reels also for the Gennet label on the 8th October 1923 (Spottswood 1990). Both of these women recorded only once. However, from the 1930s on, the most visible female accordion player, both on stage and on record, was Ann ‘Ma’ McNulty, leader of the famed McNulty family who, according to McGraw (2010: 451) were “the hottest Irish entertainment act on the East Coast, and perhaps in all of North America, from the 1930s through the 1950s”. Moloney (1992: 324) has noted that “the American stage… influenced the emergence in the nineteenth century of a whole genre of stage Irish song much of which established the core of the repertoire of Irish-American singers in the early decades of the twentieth century when the ethnic recording industry was at its peak”. He suggests that “the repertoires and performing styles of the top Irish recording artists of the 1920s and 1930s… was clearly the product of the exposure of these artists to the artistic conventions of vaudeville and music hall”. Ann McNulty readily embraced these conventions and used them to establish a family
act which was “unique among Irish entertainers of their time” (McGraw 2010: 459) and which ensured that the McNulty Family were the leading Irish-American act for nearly forty years.

Born in Cloonmurly, Kilteevan Co. Roscommon on the 2nd of December 1887, Ann Brigid Burke was the youngest of nine children (McGraw 2010). From an early age she was involved in music and acting and had performed on stage in Kilteevan before emigrating to America in 1910 (Langan 2010). Ann settled in Massachusetts where she met John McNulty, a fellow immigrant from Drumkeeran, County Leitrim. They married on the 20th of April, 1914 and their first child, Eileen, was born on the 25th February 1915. The McNultys then moved to Dobbs Ferry, New York where their son Peter was born on the 28th April 1917 (McGraw 2010). From an early age the McNulty children displayed strong performing abilities which were encouraged by both parents. They attended the Courtney School of Dancing run by Kerry immigrant, Ed Courtney. Their father “built a stage in their basement for them to use for practice” (McGraw 2010: 454) while their mother “began training them for the stage” (Langan 2010: 48). According to ‘Ma’ McNulty’s granddaughter, Pat Grogan, (in Langan 2010: 48) “she had them performing in amateur shows as soon as they could walk, really”. In 1928 John McNulty passed away at the early age of thirty-eight. His widow Ann “immediately began to work as the supervisor of the building they were living in” and with her children Eileen and Peter “started performing for money” (Grogan in Langan 2010: 48). According to McGraw (2010: 454), Ann was encouraged by the nuns at the school attended by her children “to take the show on the road to provide a means of support for her family… apparently these nuns were the first to pay Ann for a performance”. Ann’s granddaughter, Pat, recalls a family story which her mother Eileen used to tell. “She said that Naneen tried to join the Musician’s Union after Mr. McNulty died in 1928. She was not permitted to join because the button accordion was not considered a real instrument” (P. Grogan, personal communication, 26 Oct 2010). Pat Grogan believes that this “may have been an excuse to keep a woman out of the union”.

The McNulty Family were an instant hit and *The Irish Showboat* – the name they used for their shows throughout their prolific career – soon became a household name. In their shows, “they did a lot of vaudeville and a lot of traditional stuff – but
always with a kick” (Grogan in Langan 2010: 48). McGraw (2010: 459) suggests that the McNulty Family was “a very tight vaudeville act, modelled after the standard song and dance routines of the day with top hats, tails and canes” and he notes that “their dance routines were a combination of tap and traditional forms” with acting and dancing forming “a vital part of their delivery of a song”. Mick Moloney has been a long time admirer of the McNulty Family. According to him:

…their music has such an exuberant, unique sound. The first time I heard them I knew right away that they were different from any other musicians because of the combination of traditional music and vaudeville… of tap and step dancing. (Moloney in Langan 2010: 50)

‘Ma’ McNulty, as Ann became known, played the one-row accordion in the shows but also “taught the songs and arranged the dances and acting skits for her family” (McGraw 2010: 454). From very early on the McNulty Family established a distinctive style and sound which appealed to a wide audience. Langan (2010: 49) suggests that:

…listening to their music, it’s easy to see why the McNulty Family appealed to such a wide audience. Their songs are rousing and catchy. They tell stories of courtship, of patriotism, of day-to-day life, and – most of all – of a deep nostalgia for Ireland. They extend a hand to listeners, inviting them to come aboard the little “Irish Show Boat” and “cross the briny seas” to an island three thousand miles away: to do in song what a large portion of the immigrant community couldn’t do in reality. (Langan 2010: 49)

Along with their hectic schedule of stage shows, the McNulty Family were also popular radio entertainers from 1925 and hosted two weekly radio shows during the early 1940s. They also “recorded 155 commercially released sides on three record labels, all ten-inch breakable, 78 rpm records” (McGraw 2010: 461). According to Pat Grogan, her grandmother played accordion on at least 135 of the 155 sides recorded (P. Grogan, personal communication, 26 Oct 2010). The McNulty Family also embarked on tours which “took them to Boston, Chicago, and Newfoundland, where they had a lasting influence on local musical traditions” (Langan 2010: 48).

Ann or ‘Naneen’, the name she preferred (P. Grogan, personal communication, 26th Oct 2010) owned five accordions and she “had all five accordions on performances – each tuned to a different key, and would switch accordions for
different numbers” (P. Grogan, personal communication, 26 Oct 2010). Ann’s use of five accordions, tuned in different keys allowed her to circumvent the limitations of the one-row accordion in a novel manner. Unlike John J. Kimmel and P. J. Conlon before her, who experimented and found creative ways to get around the lack of notes which would have allowed them to play in keys other than the key the accordion was pitched in, ‘Ma’ McNulty simply played whichever accordion was “best suited to the song at hand” (McGraw 2010: 457).

9.3 Making an Appearance – Arrival of the Two-Row Accordion

While Irish musicians both at home and abroad were finding creative ways around the limitations of the single-row ten-key accordion, technology was moving fast, and demands from musicians searching for missing sharps and flats were growing. As a result, two-row accordions slowly but surely began to be used in traditional music. Breathnach (1971: 91) states that the two-row accordion “is a development of the melodeon, achieved by the addition of a second row of keys which make the instrument fully chromatic”. While two-row accordions with many different tuning systems are in use around the world, the system adopted by a majority of Irish musicians on both sides of the Atlantic appears to have been the semitone keyboard, where two diatonic rows are tuned a semi-tone apart. This became known as “British Chromatic tuning” (Eydmann 1999: 603) and “provided the missing sharps and flats, making the instrument fully chromatic, while preserving some of the push-pull technique and tonality of the diatonic accordion” (Godfried 1995: 52). As discussed in chapter three, two-row semitone accordions were available as early as 1843 (Howe 1843), however, they did not come into widespread use until the last two decades of the nineteenth century when, according to Chambers (2005), most of them were “in the C/C# tuning brought out by George Jones in the early 1880s”. During the 1920s, Irish traditional musicians began to adopt the two-row accordion which, “in a short period of time almost completely replaced the melodeon. Indeed it seemed for a time as if all other instruments would fall before it” (Breathnach 1971: 91). A number of different tunings were in use with accordions tuned in G/G# and C/C# being among the commonest. As well as allowing the instrument to produce ornamentation associated with the fiddle, flute and pipes, the second row of buttons, which was also diatonic, now made it possible to play
in a number of additional keys (Godfried 1995). Nonetheless, like their counterparts in Scotland, many Irish musicians who acquired the new two-row accordions “maintained their older melodeon style and repertory and took little advantage of the extended range and dynamics available” (Eydmann 2001: 108). Felix Dolan (personal communication, 9 Nov 1996) remembered how New York based accordion player Charlie Mulvihill played a two-row but “more in a melodeon style”:

He didn’t play it the way you’d play a B/C box, he didn’t play that fingering and he didn’t really play the D/D# fingering, he played more like a melodeon with… the odd accidental that he’d put in, you know what I mean. He played it more like a melodeon I’d say. (F. Dolan, personal communication, 9 Nov 1996)

Hall (1995: 11) suggests that most of “the pioneers of the two-row chromatic button-accordeon” who emerged during the 1920s “lived in towns” and thus the development of chromatic playing on a two-row instrument could essentially be seen as an urban development. Smith (1992: 258) however, argues that “the playing styles which developed were, in part, a response to the restrictions and possibilities” of the instruments available. While discussing playing “from the outside in” where the main row is the outside one and “from the inside out” where the inside row is used as the main row, Smith also notes that that “players can use any chromatic accordion in either fashion if absolute pitch is of no importance” (Smith 1992: 259).

In America during the 1940s, the two-row accordion was also coming into use for the performance of Irish traditional dance music. This development was welcomed as musicians now had bigger and stronger accordions for use in the large dance halls. As with Irish accordion players, it was the semitone system which was used. However, a different system to that which was developing in Ireland prevailed in America:

But in America they developed from the single-row to one or two buttons on the inside and then maybe five and then finally they had a full row on the inside, a style was developed from the outside in, a style that wasn’t heard of in Ireland really until these instruments started to make their way back. (Harris 2002)

Developed on accordions tuned in D/C# and known as the ‘American system’ or the ‘outside in system’, it meant that musicians played the main part of the melody on the outside row which was essentially the same as the one-row they had been used to on the ten-key single-row accordion. Since these two-row accordions were now fully
chromatic, it was possible to move into the inside row to play the notes that had been previously inaccessible to them. As accordions in America were generally pitched in D/C#, the pitch problem associated with many of the early two-row accordions in Ireland does not appear to have been an issue. In later years, accordions tuned in C#/D were available in Ireland, and this allowed players to play the press and draw system from the inside out – the opposite to the American system of playing the press and draw style. As discussed in Chapter 8, among the most popular makes of accordions in America were those manufactured by the F.H.Walters and Baldoni and Bartoli companies, and the player who became most associated with the ‘American outside in system’ played on a Baldoni accordion was Boston musician, Joe Derrane.

9.3.1 Joe Derrane

Joe was born in Boston on March 16th, 1930. His father came from Inis Mór on the Aran Islands, and his mother from Four Roads, in Co Roscommon (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995). Joe’s parents both played music; his father, the accordion and his mother, the fiddle. Joe remembers how “every Sunday there was a radio programme that came on and on that radio programme there was a wonderful accordion player that was on almost every Sunday, the great Jerry O’Brien” (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995). Joe’s parents watched their young son’s reaction to the sound of the accordion:

…they tell me that no matter where I was in the house that as soon as that accordion started I’d come running from whatever mischief I was into and just stood in front of the radio and stared at it and jumped up and down and as soon as the accordion music stopped that was it I was back off doing whatever it was I was at, and that, I guess continued and continued until about age nine, I was just totally fascinated with this, I couldn't get enough of it, so they tracked Jerry O'Brien down through the radio station and they arranged to have Jerry come to the house to give me some lessons. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995)

Joe Derrane was ten years old when he began taking lessons from Jerry O’Brien, who taught him to play in the press and draw system, and wrote down the notes of the tunes using the numbers one to ten to represent the buttons and symbols to indicate the bellows direction (Varlet 1993; Hitchner 1994b). Joe recalls that O’Brien, although very patient, was very clear about how he wanted his pupil to play:
Joe’s first instrument was a Globe, ‘Gold Medal Professional’ single-row, ten-key accordion, but he later switched to a two-row accordion made by the New York manufacturer, Baldoni. As a teenager, having become a highly skilled exponent of the accordion, Joe “was getting more and more opportunities to perform in public, at parties, weddings and for dances in Hibernian Hall and other venues on Dudley Street in Roxbury” (Varlet 1993: 7). Jerry O’Brien introduced him to many of these functions such as “the kitchen rackets where you’d get paid $10 or $12 to play” (Derrane in Hitchner 1994b: 61). According to Derrane (in Hitchner 1994b:61), kitchen rackets “were house parties or house wedding receptions. Money was very tight back then, and many people couldn’t afford to rent a hall or a hotel ballroom”. Throughout his teenage years, Derrane was constantly absorbing many new influences in the development of his style, one of which was the music of John J. Kimmel. He often slowed down his recordings on his parents’ Victrola to study Kimmel’s ornamentation more closely (Varlet 1993, Hitchner 1994b). While many commentators suggest that Derrane’s main influence was Kimmel, this is very often based on the fact that Derrane recorded a number of tunes previously recorded by Kimmel, (K. Chandler, personal communication, 7 Nov 1999), Joe himself refutes this:

There is some kind of a myth that I have copied Kimmel, that’s not really true… he was an influence no question about it… but the biggest influence was Jerry O’Brien although there were some tunes that Kimmel did that I did record again but, in any case, when I recorded them I was using the two-row accordion then and I was taking advantage of various accidentals that were available to me that were not available to Jerry or John J. Kimmel. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

This advantage involved experimenting with keys previously unavailable on the ten-key accordion and changing parts of the tune into different keys, as Derrane did with Kimmel’s version of the “Union Reel” and the Flanagan Brother’s version of “Jackson’s Polka”: 223
…and I said, well now, here I am with the two-row and I had all these other accidental sharps, flats whatever available to me so… when I recorded the Union Reel – Kimmel did that I believe in … only two keys, he used A and D and I used A , D and G and so that third part I brought up to G and of course nobody at that time, nobody ever told me well no, you’re not supposed to do that so… the same thing happened with the Jackson’s Polka I recorded and I’m not one hundred percent positive but it seems to me that one of the Flanagan’s recorded that many, many years ago… and all three parts in D and I felt that that third part should have been in G and again they were using ten-key melodeon and this is one of the things that happened to me when I got the two-row. I found this availability is there. I could now play in G because I had access to C natural so I suppose youthful enthusiasm whatever and I just jumped into this hook, line and sinker. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

While still a teenager Joe “began playing for radio programmes in Boston and this led to an invitation from Justus DeWitt, son of Ellen O’Byrne DeWitt, to record for the Copley label” (O’Keeffe 2001: 101). At just seventeen years of age he recorded eight solo records, sixteen sides, over two recording sessions. Joe remembers how he was “still in high school” at the time:

I was still in high school, I remember running home from school trying to get my homework done and then jump on the bus to go into town to do my first record. It was quite an experience, but one thing led to another and I finally did eight of them, sixteen sides in all. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995)

Joe also recorded ten duets with his teacher Jerry O’Brien, as well as six sides with The Irish All Stars, a group which included his brother George along with Jerry O’Brien and piano player John Connors (Varlet 1993). These recordings – in particular the solo recordings – “displayed a virtuosity unheard of in such a young musician and ensured Joe’s legendary status among accordion players on both sides of the Atlantic” (O’Keeffe 2001: 101). As a child, Connemara accordion player P.J. Hernon remembers hearing 78rpm recordings of Joe Derrane being played on the gramophone:

The 78s we had, we had some Joe Derrane… To me he was way, way up in the stratosphere. I used to be looking up into the yoke that you put the needle of the gramophone into. I used to look up in there and I used to visualise what Joe Derrane was like. Even though I couldn’t do anything he was doing… he mesmerised me completely and the sound of that accordion, the sound of it! I thought it was brilliant. (P.J. Hernon, personal communication, 11 Jul 1997)

Paul Brock (1992: 10) describes how he “was a daily visitor to the docks at the
river Shannon in Athlone” close to his home where a friend, Ned Hayden, who was working on a barge, “had an old gramophone and a collection of 78s which included the full set of Joe Derrane’s recordings”. According to Brock, they “spent many evenings by the Shannon on the barge deck listening raptly to Derrane’s music” (Brock 1992: 10). West Kerry accordion player Maidhc Daneen Ó Sé was visiting his brother’s house in Chicago when he first heard the 78rpm recordings of Joe Derrane’s music. Ó Sé (2002) thought that Derrane had méaranta órga (golden fingers) and the best style he had ever heard, although he found it strange also as the style of accordion playing he was used to in Ireland at the time was the old melodeon style:

And it wasn’t just accordion players who were astounded by the virtuosity of Derrane’s playing. Fiddle player Seamus Connolly (in Hitchner 2001) believes that Joe Derrane “set the standard for the D/C# accordion” noting that “his rolls are so detailed, so accurate, yet they’re like lightning, much like the rolls Patsy Tuohy would have put into his piping”. Recalling when he was learning himself as a young musician, Connolly (2002) describes how they “had the wind up gramophone at the time” and he “was trying to find out what Joe was doing” so he “used to turn down the speed”:

… and I could see his name Joe Derrane on the record but I had no idea, particularly those rolls… I couldn’t figure that out on the fiddle at all. I was only learning myself but just totally amazed at what was coming out of that accordion because I had never heard accordion playing like that before in my life. (Connolly 2002)

Likewise, Felix Dolan remembered that when he first heard Joe Derrane play he “couldn’t believe it”:  

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I was playing the two-row, the D/D# at that time and I used to break my heart trying to do the stuff that he could do and I just… worked and I worked and when you heard this record, technically what he was doing it was almost impossible to achieve but I didn’t realise till just Joe the last couple of years told me, the amount of work that he put in and out in order to achieve what he does and it seems obvious that you’d have to, to do the technical things that he does, it’s extraordinary you know what I mean, technically the kind of rolls he puts in and the kinda ornamentation he puts in. (F. Dolan, personal communication, 9 Nov 1996)

During much of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Joe Derrane played regularly in the many dance halls centred on Dudley Street in Roxbury. He played with a number of different combinations which included Johnny Powell’s Irish Dance Band, the Stars of Erin and the Galway Bay Band (Hitchner 1994b: 61). According to Derrane (personal communication, 19 Aug 1995), as a result of meetings at these dances “in due course there was an awful lot of marriages, all the weddings, and so of course the guys who were playing, people like myself, Seanie Powell, Billy Caples and all this crowd, we got all the wedding work so we were very, very, very busy”. The dance hall circuit provided steady work for Derrane and his colleagues for “maybe ten or twelve years”. However “around the middle fifties or so that whole area started to become very run down and… you know the streets were a little dangerous at night, that type of thing and the whole ballroom scene like overnight it seemed, within about a year, year and a half, it just stopped, it just dried up” (J. Derrane, personal communication 19 Aug 1995). American accordion player Billy McComiskey (2002) remembers, when he was growing up, that Joe’s music could be heard everyday “if you were washing the dishes, if you were cleaning the house, if you were doing anything – it was Joe Derrane’s records that were on”. According to him “Joe was it” but he felt that as Joe had recorded towards the end of the 78rpm era, the arrival of 45 and long playing records had a dramatic effect on traditional music – “Joe recorded 78s… and it was right then that the 45’s and 33’s were starting to come in so I guess that might have been about… 1957, 1958, through the sixties and so, all of a sudden, gone” (McComiskey 2002).

With the decline of the ballroom dance scene in the mid to late 1950s (Hitchner 1994b; Varlet 1995) Joe Derrane switched from button accordion to piano accordion to enable him to continue working as a musician. He began studying music and playing from the repertoire of other ethnic traditions as this was where the work was to be found:
I did jazz, I did Jewish, I did Italian, I did show work, I played piano accordion. I have a pretty complete musical background in terms of study. I studied at Berkley with the dean of the school no less, studying arranging and things like that because I’m the kind of a guy that when I get interested in something I totally immerse myself. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 2 Jul 1998)

Joe Derrane sold his button accordion to fund the purchase of a good piano accordion and for some twenty five years did not own a button accordion (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995). Then, in the early 1990s, a series of events unfolded which resulted in Joe Derrane returning to play the two-row button accordion. Jackie Martin, “a lifelong friend from Boston, he had an accordion, his father had one and his father died and of course the accordion went back to… Jackie and… he said well, here’s his friend Joe Derrane who should have a button box and doesn’t and Jackie had two so he came up to the house with one and insisted” that Joe take the accordion (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995). At around the same time, according to Joe, “Paddy Noonan, who owns Regal Records in New York bought the rights to all my 78s” and re-released them in CD format. There was immediate interest again in the music of Joe Derrane. Varlet (1993: 2) maintained that nothing had prepared him for his “first hearing… of Joe Derrane’s music” which according to Varlet “combined sheer power and energy with breathtaking precision, and his settings, often of unusual tunes, were cleverly and carefully crafted”. Mairtín O’Connor believes that:

Joe is kind of a consummate virtuoso. Again his style, it is very personal and fantastically structured in that the tune is stated and sooner or later, especially in his hornpipe playing, which is really exquisite… at some stage he is going to hit variations and it is almost like, we’ll say, a French musette player will structure their playing of the musette, where variations are introduced at a particular point in time in the tune. (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)

After a three hour phone call with Joe Derrane, New York journalist, Earle Hitchner persuaded him to return to playing the two-row accordion. This he did, making a definitive comeback in a performance which evoked a huge emotional response from the audience on the 29th May at the 1994 Irish Folk Festival in Wolf Trap, Virginia:

…I’ve said this before, I’ll always say it I think, outside of the day I got married and outside of the days that my son and my daughter were born it was probably the biggest single day of my life. It was fantastic… I don’t know what happened
but the emotion, there were about twelve hundred people in that tent, huge tent, the emotion was just dripping off everything… it was incredible. (J. Derrane, personal communication, 19 Aug 1995)

Since then Joe Derrane has recorded a number of solo albums “all infused with the same sparkle, irresistible lift and expert musicianship for which he had been renowned in his early years of recording and playing” (O’Keeffe 2001: 101-102). He has also been involved in a number of collaborations with other musicians and has travelled the world playing the two-row button accordion. In 1995 he played publicly for the first time in Ireland, and since then has given us a fresh window on the world of Irish-American accordion music during the 1940s and 1950s.

9.3.2 Michael Grogan

As Breathnach (1971) notes, two-row accordions were available in Ireland from the 1920s on, and one of the earliest and most prominent musicians playing the two-row accordion in Ireland during that period was Michael Grogan who “came from Winetown, The Downs, near Mullingar in Co. Westmeath” (Varlet and Spottswood 1992: 12). Born in the mid 1880s, Grogan had moved to Dublin by the age of fourteen and later worked for Dublin Corporation (Hall 1995a). As a young man he spent some years in Glasgow (Chambers 2005) where, it is believed, he encountered the noted Scottish accordion player, Peter Wyper. Wyper’s recordings, both solo and in duet with his brother Daniel, were well-known in Ireland where Chambers (2005) suspects that they may have “had almost as dramatic an effect on accordion playing as the recordings of Michael Coleman did on fiddle playing”. Hall (1995a: 11) believes that Grogan’s time with Peter Wyper may have been “significant in his musical development” as, on his return to Ireland, Grogan was using a “method of fingering across the rows which he was careful to demonstrate in his posed studio portrait” that appeared in the Irish Radio News in June 1929 (Hall 1995a: 11).

Grogan settled in Dublin where he became “well known in traditional music circles through his broadcasts on 2RN” (Varlet and Spottswood 1992: 12). From 1928, when he broadcast on four occasions “with his trio and once alone on St.
Stephen’s Day” (Hall 2000: 17), Grogan featured often in broadcasts of dance music on the national radio station. In 1931, the Regal Zonophone recording company came to Ireland and Michael Grogan was among the first group of traditional performers recorded. Between 1931 and 1946 he recorded 38 sides, many of these with Skerries fiddle player, John Howard (Varlet and Spottswood 1992: 12). According to accordion player Charlie Harris (personal communication, 11 Jan 2010), Grogan’s early solo recordings were lower than concert pitch and were played on what Harris believes was an accordion in C/C# tuning. However, by the time Grogan began recording with fiddle player John Howard “he had solved his pitch problem” (Hall 1995a: 11). Nonetheless, pitch continued to be an issue into the 1930s as “two-row semitone-tuned instruments with a D row do not seem to have been available before WWII” (Chambers 2005). While fiddle players could tune down or up, depending on the tuning of the accordion, it was much more difficult for flute players and pipers to do so. With the arrival of ensemble playing in response to the move from the house dance to the parish hall, a number of musicians, “motivated by a desire to play at standard concert pitch levels on commercially available instruments” (Smith 1992: 291), began experimenting with an accordion tuned in B and C.

9.4 Enter the B and C

The B and C system may have had its origins in Scotland, where it appears likely that the earliest player of an accordion tuned in B and C was Scottish musician, Peter Wyper who “played a 19-key ‘International Melodeon’, and patented a 21-key version in 1915” (Chambers 2005). These instruments, which were made in Saxony, were tuned in B and C, marked with “P. Wyper’s Patent” and made specially for sale in Wyper’s music shop (S. Chambers, personal communication, 21 Aug 2009). In the early 1930s, also in Scotland, Dundee music shop owner, Charlie Forbes was involved in two developments which would profoundly affect the journey of the button accordion. Forbes is remembered for the fact that after hearing a young Jimmy Shand try out an accordion in his music shop, he encouraged Shand to make recordings – thereby starting off one of the players synonymous with Scottish accordion music. However, Chambers (2005) is also of the opinion that it was at the behest of Forbes “that Hohner started to manufacture
the B/C “Double-Ray Black Dot” accordion”. In the March issue of the 1934 *Music Trades Review*, Hohner advertised the “sensational development of the English Chromatic Accordion” announcing that the first two models of the “new Double-Ray Black Dot accordion’ would be available in April of 1934” ([*Music Trades Review* 1934: 114]). The advertisement also indicated that the new accordion had “been specially produced in conjunction with the New Forbes Tutor” of which they were the sole distributor. In common with the early tutors of the nineteenth century, it was advocated that with “this system – which is the most ingeniously simple yet devised – it is possible to play at sight the very same night”. In addition, it proposed that “the merest novice, without any knowledge of music can become a really proficient player within a few weeks” ([*Music Trades Review* 1934: 114]. Smith (1992: 307), in an extensive analysis of chromatic styles of playing the accordion in Irish music, suggests that two methods of playing chromatically on accordions tuned in B and C developed in Ireland from the early 1930s on. He describes them as “pre-modern chromatic accordion style” and “modern style” respectively, observing that “the players of the 1930s and 1940s differ markedly from those of the 1950s and 1960s” and that the “distinct musical approach” developed by the earlier players ultimately led to “a highly potent stylistic revolution which developed in the 1950s”. This revolution resulted in the emergence of “the modern style” of accordion playing (Smith 1992: 292). One of the foremost of these early chromatic players was Sonny Brogan.

### 9.4.1 Sonny Brogan

Sonny (Patrick) Brogan was the eldest of three children born to Alicia Browne and Andrew Brogan, on the 4th July, 1907, in Prosperous Co. Kildare. He began playing music on a “single-keyed Hohner accordion eventually moving to a two-row B and C Paolo Soprani instrument which he played until he died” in 1965 (B. McGee, personal communication, 16 Apr 2008). According to his daughter, Éilis Brogan, and his grandson, Brian McGee, Brogan was very influenced by the fiddle music of Michael Coleman and had a large collection of his recordings. During the 1930s and 1940s, Sonny, along with Jakes Cawley (flute), Sarah Hobbs (fiddle) and Bill Harte (accordion) played in the Lough Gill Quartet, which was named after Lough Gill in Sligo as a tribute to Michael Coleman (B. McGee,
personal communication, 16 Apr 2008). They recorded a number of 78rpm records on the HMV label and were described by Hall (1995a: 22) as “representative of the quality music played by a hard core of active traditional musicians in Dublin in the 1930s and 1940s”. The other accordion player in the quartet was Leitrim born Bill Harte and according to Offaly accordion player, Paddy O’Brien, it was Harte who showed Brogan “the cross fingering on the B/C box when Sonny bought one” (P. O’Brien (Offaly), personal communication, 2 Dec 1998).

Sonny Brogan was a central figure in the Dublin traditional music scene of the middle decades of the twentieth century. He provided “the largest individual contribution” to Breandán Breathnach’s publication Ceol Rince na hÉireann (Breathnach 1963: 11) and was a regular visitor to the Pipers’ Club in Thomas Street, where he was held in high regard for his encyclopaedic knowledge of tunes in both standard and unusual settings, as well as his unique interpretations of traditional tunes on the two-row accordion. This was attributed to the fact that he had “played a ten-key melodeon most of his life and was a wizard on it in terms of re-arranging tunes because no sharps or flats were available on it” (P. O’Brien (Offaly), personal communication, 2 Dec 1998). According to fellow accordion player, Éamon de Buitléar:

> Sonny Brogan was a traditional musician… and an excellent box player who had learned single-row playing on the melodeon before he graduated – if that’s the correct term, to the two-row. It meant that he had an advantage in that he was a real traditional box player unlike some box players who only listen to other accordion players. Sonny had listened very much to fiddle players and flute players. (de Buitléar in Harris and Freyer 1981: 122)

Offaly accordion player Paddy O’Brien (personal communication, 4 Jan 1999) notes that Sonny Brogan “didn’t do much cross fingering except when he had to, as an example when he played in the key of D he’d have to deal with the F sharp note which is on the outside row on BC boxes”. He suggests that:

> Sonny was more into melodic exploration which comes from his days as a ten-key player because having no sharps or flats on the non existing outside row he would rearrange the melody on the one-row; he became very creative with such tunes as the “Rights of Man”, “Toss the Feathers”, “The Tempest” and “The Repeal of the Union”. (P. O’Brien (Offaly), personal communication, 4 Jan 1999)
Brogan himself (1963: 12) maintained that “players of the old school who played the “ten-key” instrument known as the melodeon had a better sense of ornamentation”. He believed that the reason for this was that “they had to use their imagination to get over difficulties arising from the lack of certain keys on their instruments” and if the tune could not be played exactly as played by pipers, fiddle and flute players, the melodeon players “were very clever in changing the setting slightly so as to make it a good melodeon tune without changing the air”. He felt that accordion players who had not played the melodeon were at a disadvantage as they did not have “these tricks” and were cutting “themselves off from the traditional style of box playing” (Brogan 1963: 12).

Sonny Brogan was one of two accordion players included in the line up of Seán Ó Riada’s Ceoltóirí Chualann, who were originally brought together to perform as a “traditional orchestra providing music for Brian McMahon’s play, The Honey Spike at the Abbey Theatre” (Ó Riada 1999: 289). Sonny Brogan and fiddle player John Kelly, were originally introduced to Ó Riada by accordion player Éamon de Buitléar who “invited them out to Seán Ó Riada’s house in Galloping Green in preparation for Bryan McMahon’s play” (É. de Buitléar, personal communication, 25 Apr 2008). There are some differences of opinion regarding the name of the play which Sonny Brogan and the other members of Ceoltóirí Chualann played for in the Abbey Theatre. However, according to Éamon de Buitléar, who also played accordion with Ceoltóirí Chualann:

The original name of Bryan McMahon’s play was The Golden Folk and the Listowel Drama Group from Bryan’s own village won an award in its production at the Athlone Drama Festival. Bryan made some changes to the play for an Abbey production and re-named it The Song of the Anvil. There were further changes for the production in 1961 when Ceoltóirí Chualann played in the orchestra pit all during the performance. The title of the production at that time when Sonny was involved was The Honey Spike. (É. de Buitléar, personal communication, 25 Apr 2008)

Considering the stance taken by Ó Riada, in his 1962 radio series Our Musical Heritage, against the use of the accordion in Irish traditional music, it is surprising that he included not one but two of those same instruments in his new group. Paddy Moloney, who was the piper with Ceoltóirí Chualann, “voiced his objections at Ó Riada’s plan to use two accordions in Ceoltóirí Chualann” (Glatt
1997: 42), perhaps reflecting the considerable opposition to accordions that existed among certain sectors of the traditional music community at that time:

I was anti-accordion at the time… I thought it was a deplorable and vulgar instrument that was often out of tune with itself, unlike the wonderful concertinas and melodeons I had grown up with. Accordions just didn’t fit in with the sound I wanted to hear. (Moloney in Glatt 1997: 42)

Nonetheless, Ó Riada persisted and Éamon de Buitléar suggests that the reason why Ó Riada wanted to have Sonny Brogan and fiddle player John Kelly in Ceoltóirí Chualann was because “they were old traditional musicians and they would certainly have all the old tunes” and according to de Buitléar, they would soon tell them if they “were doing something radically wrong as far as traditional music was concerned” (de Buitléir in Harris and Freyer 1981: 122). Éamon de Buitléar also felt that Ó Riada believed the presence of the two older musicians “would ground the younger musicians in the group” (É. de Buitléar, personal communication, 8 Apr 2008). In the early 1960s, Sonny featured with the group on two Radio Éireann series, Reachaireacht an Riadaigh and Fleadh Cheoil an Raidió, while a solo recording featuring Brogan playing two reels, The Hut in the Bog and Gormon’s Reel was included in the set of three L.P. records containing musical examples used for Ó Riada’s radio series, Our Musical Heritage. In discussing Brogan’s playing of the two reels, Seán Ó Riada explained why he was drawn to the accordion player’s music:

One of the very few players who can make their music sound like Irish music is Sonny Brogan of Dublin. He understands the limitations of his instrument, but strives to counteract these, not by wrongly-placed ornamentation, but by emphasising the traditional elements. His ornamentation is usually confined to single cut, or grace-note, and the roll, as in these reels, where restrained ornamentation and subtle variation are far more telling and eloquent than the fashionable plethora of chromatics. Too little ornamentation is better than too much. We should always be able to hear the tune distinctly. (Ó Riada 1982: 71)

However, by the early 1950s, a new way of playing chromatically on the two-row accordion tuned in B and C was coming to the attention of musicians and listeners alike, and it may have been the countless imitators of this new style that Ó Riada was referring to when he mentioned the “fashionable plethora of chromatics” above. Chapter 10 will consider the developments of the second half of the twentieth century, when the accordion made further strides along the journey into tradition.
Chapter 10
“To B and C or C#/D – That is the Question”

Offaly accordion player, Paddy O’Brien (personal communication, 4 Jan 1998) suggests that “one could say that the first fifty years of the twentieth century was a time of melodeons, single-row boxes and also some odd makes of experimental accordions with no particular model favoured more than the other”. An anonymous writer in a 1969 edition of Treoir, the official publication of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, when commenting on the playing of accordion player John Joe Gannon, remarked that “his style of playing the ‘box’ was one of several styles to be found throughout the country in the first half of the century” (Anon 1969: 6). While it would be fair to say that the accordion in Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century had developed into a two-row fully chromatic instrument with the potential for playing in any of the ‘fiddle and flute’ keys, it was not until the second half of that century that the full capabilities of the instrument were realised and exploited. The early years of the 1950s were an important milestone in the journey of the Irish button accordion because during that period, several historically significant developments occurred which shaped its future role in Irish music. This chapter will explore the major developments of the second part of the twentieth century – developments which propelled the instrument to new levels of both popularity and criticism and which saw the instrument become included in almost every facet of traditional music life. As in the previous chapter, while the path travelled by the instrument is traced, the key individuals who directed and charted the course of that ongoing journey into tradition will be introduced.

10.1 New Directions

Irish historians (Lyons 1973, Brown 1985, Keogh 1994, Foster 1989, Ó hEithir 2000) are in agreement that “the 1950s were a time of economic depression” (Keogh 1994: 214). The Republic of Ireland Act had been passed in 1949 under the leadership of John A. Costello of the Fine Gael party, who declared that “Ireland was a republic outside the British Commonwealth” (McCormack 2002: 314). By 1951 Fianna Fáil were back in power and their focus was on economic
matters which included “the development of the country’s resources, the creation of employment and… attracting foreign capital for industrial investment” (Ó hEithir 2000: 81). Despite these ambitious plans, emigration, which had halted temporarily during the Second World War, began again, with Irish people leaving their homeland in vast numbers in the post war years. Keogh (1994) suggests that an estimated 400,000 emigrated during the 1950s, and notes that for those who remained at home “there was little cheer” since “the number of people in employment dropped by almost a quarter between 1946 and 1953 and the real wages fell so that the average industrial worker earned less in 1958 than he / she had done in 1950” (Keogh 1994: 218). Giblin et al (1988: 62) observe that “the unemployment rate would have been far higher were it not for the fact that emigration increased to rates not previously seen since the 1890s”. The 1950s also saw an increase in internal emigration from the countryside to the towns and cities with Dublin, in particular, experiencing a large influx of young people in search of work. According to Brown (1985: 218) “the trains and buses at weekends were packed, throughout the 1950s, with new urban dwellers returning to maintain contact with their roots in the countryside”. Brown (1985: 217) also noted that large scale external emigration during the 1950s, “while posing a severe ideological challenge to the independent Irish state, actually reduced the dimensions of the practical problems it faced” since the departure of huge sections of the rural population to London and other English cities meant that the scale of population crowding into Dublin was manageable.

In the 1950s, many traditional musicians were among those who departed the Irish countryside in search of work. This resulted in the beginnings of an internal process of urbanisation of a music which, up to then, had existed, for the most part, in a rural setting. Kearney (2007: 3) suggests that during the 1950s and 1960s “Dublin became the site of intense development in Irish traditional music” with the rejuvenated Piper's Club based in Thomas Street becoming a major centre of musical activity in the capital. Bohlman (1988: 67), when discussing the move from rural to urban settings, observes that in such cases “the geographic basis of folk music has not disappeared, but it has effectively migrated from rural to urban models, from simple to complex settings” where, according to Bohlman, “new boundaries arise; the influences on musical genres are greater, but no urban musical grayout is in sight”. Traditional musicians at this time also travelled to
cities in England where they adapted to their new surroundings by developing new ways and new locations in which to play their music. Hall (1995: 6) describes how sessions involving group playing began in Camden Town in London as early as 1948, and he notes that “these pub sessions were not dissimilar to domestic music-making in rural Ireland” even though “the public bar was not a private kitchen”. Irish musicians also travelled further afield to America, where the process of urbanisation of Irish music had been taking place from the second half of the nineteenth century, reaching its peak during the early years of recording in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although rural house dances where traditional music was played continued well into the late 1940s and early 1950s in Ireland (J. Ryan, K. Doyle, personal communications, 2007), there were fewer of them due to the introduction of the heavy handed Public Dance Hall Act. According to Curtis (1994: 14) this meant that “many musicians, deprived of a natural platform, laid aside their instruments, having no further use for them”. This development, along with depopulation of the countryside during the period, led to a decline in traditional music in many rural areas. Hamilton (1996a: 85) suggests that “one of the main reasons for this decline was the radical changes that Irish rural society was undergoing at the time”. He believes that “traditional music suffered heavily” because people were attracted to “other forms of music and entertainment”. He also acknowledges that traditional music had been abandoned by many who viewed it “as a badge of backward ruralism”. Accordion player Joe Burke (personal communication, 5 Apr 1999) recalled how:

…there was very lean times back in the… thirties and forties for the music and the music wasn’t respected – no matter what you played or how you played it and the music was confined really to rural Ireland and there was a lot of snobbish… bigotry and all that in certain towns around the country and we weren’t long… as a free state really but there was a lot of class distinction… and the music was looked down on by a lot of the more educated people and that would be in the towns… different to the countryside and the rural parts of Ireland… they were still regarded as peasants and I’m afraid that did exist a lot in the early days. (J. Burke, personal communication, 5 Apr 1999)

According to Dowling (1996: 64) “the period between 1940 and 1965 witnessed the almost total extinction of traditional music as a community-oriented activity”. He listed a number of factors which he believed had “overwhelmed the social and
economic life of the rural community”. These included “the steady growth of urbanised lifestyles, modern entertainment forms, consumer values, ideologies of national modernisation and the gradual assimilation into Anglo-European culture”. The arrival of new technology such as the gramophone and radio, while beneficial to traditional music on one level, also contributed to the decline of the music by creating a much greater awareness of other lifestyles and culture, especially among young people in rural areas. As a result “the cultural life of the community fell into dissolution as it was rejected for urban and cosmopolitan models” (Fairbairn 1994: 573). According to Ó hAllmhúrún (1998: 122), the traditional musician of the 1940s was “shunned by the educational establishment, ignored by the popular press, and derided by urban music societies”. This, Ó hAllmhuráin maintained, was in sharp contrast to the status afforded “to his ‘high art’ counterpart” and resulted in many traditional musicians of the time having “a low self image of their role in Irish music and of its place in contemporary Ireland” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1998: 122). In such a climate Fairbairn (1994: 573-574) believes that:

…the low esteem in which music was held in the 1940s and 1950s sorted those with an intense personal relationship with the music from more pedestrian and socially-oriented players. Only those who related to the music as a purely personalized and solitary art form had any real reason to keep playing. The emphasis upon variation in contemporary performance is partly the heritage of these gifted and creative musicians. (Fairbairn 1994: 573-574)

Fairbairn (1994: 574) argues that “the subsequent evolution of the music in the hands of the solo player moved away from the basic requirements of the dance” and this “separation of music from social dance activity catalysed change in musical style as well as in performance contexts”. Although music was still played for dancing, it was music for listening which came to dominate the world of traditional music in Ireland and the wider diaspora during the 1950s and 1960s. Flute player Michael Tubridy acknowledges this, noting that “the fact that a lot of musicians do not play for dances any more releases them from a lot of constraints. They do not have to pay the same attention to phrasing, and they can put in notes and decorations wherever they will fit” (Tubridy in Fairbairn 1994: 574) while whistle player Micho Russell observed that “playing for listeners and playing for dancers are two different things” (Russell in Fairbairn 1994: 574). This idea of music for listening was to be central to the development of the accordion in Irish music during the second half of the twentieth century and became an important
factor in stylistic changes which, although they had begun to take shape from the 1930s on, really started to gain momentum in the early years of the 1950s.

10.1.1 Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann – A Competition Culture

One of the landmark events which was to facilitate music for listening and provide support for the new stylistic changes mentioned above, was the foundation of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) which took place after a series of meetings in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath. In January of 1951, representatives of the Dublin Pipers’ Club, which had been based in Thomas Street since the early years of the twentieth century, met with like-minded people who were interested in forming a branch of the Pipers Club in Mullingar. A decision was taken to form an organisation which would promote Irish traditional music and be open to players of all traditional instruments. At a second meeting it was agreed that a fleadh cheoil would be held in Mullingar during Whit weekend to coincide with the Gaelic League event, Feis Lár na hÉireann. In October 1951 the officers of the first standing committee were elected to Cumann Ceoltóirí Éireann as it was then known, and in January 1952 the name was changed to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Henry 1989, Ó hAllmhuráin 1998). Within five years the organisation had branches in six counties with the All Ireland Fleadh of 1956 in Ennis, Co. Clare attracting incredible crowds of musicians and listeners. Taylor (1988: 55) notes that “the early Fleadhanna must have been tremendously exciting and emotional for musicians who had been neglected for too many years”. The first constitution of CCÉ was drawn up in 1955 and had the following aims and objectives:

To promote Irish traditional music in all forms;
To restore the playing of the harp and the uilleann pipes in the national life of Ireland;
To promote Irish traditional dancing;
To foster and promote the Irish language at all times;
To create a closer bond among all lovers of Irish music;
To cooperate with all bodies working for the restoration of Irish culture;
To establish branches throughout the country and abroad to achieve the foregoing aims and objects. (Henry 1989: 69)
This new organisation provided settings for musical change as well as new audiences and musical contexts and was to have a dramatic bearing on how traditional musicians were perceived throughout the 1950s and 1960s. A young Seamus Connolly, when interviewed in 1969, remarked that Comhaltas was “doing tremendous work and only for them Irish music would be lost completely”. He added “older musicians will tell you that there wasn’t nearly as much music being played years ago” (Connolly in ‘Finian’ 1969:3). Competitions were among the many new contexts provided by CCÉ for musicians. These were organised at local, regional and national level as part of the fleadhanna cheoil. Using competitions as a means of bringing musicians together in an attempt to revive music was not new in traditional music. According to Moloney (2000:7) “three festivals, known as the ‘Granard Balls’, were held in Granard, Co. Longford, in 1781, 1782 and 1785” with “monetary prizes on offer for the best players”. Another festival organised in a similar attempt to stem the decline of harping was the Belfast harp festival of 1792 and prizes were awarded to the top three performers “although each harper who competed received some monetary consideration” (Moloney 2000:8). Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Feis Ceoil and Oireachtas na Gaeilge also “introduced competition as a means of promoting traditional music and song” (Hamilton 1996b:47).

According to Vallely (1999:79) Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann “has always targeted young people as the key to keeping the music in circulation”. Consequently, from the earliest days of the fleadh cheoil, music competitions for young and more senior members were the main feature of the event. Vallely (1999:79) also observes that “since the 1950s the fleadh cheoil competition structure has become CCE’s merit scale, and striving for the recognition that this offers has improved general playing standards hugely and has also attracted new participants”. Moloney (1992:563) notes how “success in the competitions represents an officially recognized validation of personal style and conveys prestige and status on the competitor”. It is interesting, at this point, to note that competitions were not mentioned in the original aims of the organisation but, from the very outset, they were an integral part of the fleadh cheoil experience, and it was in this area that CCÉ was to have some of its most powerful effects on repertoire, style and instrumentation. The scope of this thesis does not allow for any in-depth study of
this subject but, since it does have particular relevance to the journey of the button accordion into the Irish music tradition, a brief overview of the main issues relating to competitions is relevant at this point.

Cohen (1995: 436) suggests that “social practices involving the consumption and production of music… draw people together and symbolize their sense of collectivity and place”. Thus competitions encouraged musicians from all over Ireland to attend the *fleadh*, where they were greeted by enthusiastic and appreciative audiences. Listeners were given the opportunity to hear musicians from all corners of Ireland, most of whom could not otherwise be heard unless they were broadcasting on the radio. Musicians also had the chance to meet and play with musicians from other regions that they might only have heard of previously. Duets, trios and céilí band competitions provided new contexts for players to perform together and there was often intense but friendly rivalry particularly, in the céilí band competitions which, to this day, form the high point of the *fleadh*. It has been widely recognised however, that traditional music competitions, while having a number of positive attributes such as those mentioned above, also produce a number of unintentional results particularly associated with solo playing, and it is really with the benefit of hindsight that these can be documented. Cooke (1986) described reactions to the introduction of a traditional fiddling competition in the Shetland Islands where parameters were laid down as to what kind of music should be played:

Another event that same year was the holding of the first competition in traditional fiddling. It was sponsored by the Shetland Folk Society, which awarded the prize of a locally made violin to the winner. The competition generated some controversy. For one thing some of the tests included playing Scottish pieces and some Shetlanders argued that this was inappropriate to a competition in traditional Shetland fiddling. But others opposed the whole notion of turning fiddling into a competitive activity – for them the fiddle had traditionally expressed the togetherness of communities and they felt it was wrong to encourage an activity which singled out (literally) a winner. (Cooke 1986: 129)

In America, fiddle competitions or “contests” as they are known, take place regularly and have become an important part of the fiddling calendar. However, they too have attracted much comment as, over the years, one particular style of playing has become legitimised and seen to be the style to play:
Musically speaking, the pressures of competition have resulted in the dominance of a highly polished, deliberate, complicated style of contest fiddling, strongly based in the longbow techniques of Oklahoma and Texas. This has led many ambitious competitors to abandon local styles and tunes in favour of south-west based contest fiddling, a development that upsets some fiddle association members but seems perfectly natural to others. (Blaustein 1993: 262)

As has happened in other countries, the competitions held during a *fleadh cheoil* also validated particular styles of playing, instrumentation and repertoire in Ireland. With regard to repertoire, this was in part because the rules for competitions in the early days indicated the types of tunes which were acceptable. In the case of Donegal and Kerry for instance, highlands, barndances, slides and polkas were not included and so, by omission, the perception was that they were not considered suitable. Henry (1989: 91) believes that “this results in feelings of regional discrimination” and points out that “critics say that CCÉ is trying to standardize the music by limiting the competitions to the genres supposedly played all over Ireland – the jig, reel, hornpipe, and slow air”. Nearly fifty years after the foundation of CCÉ, during the course of fieldwork in Ireland, Fleming (1999: 229) “found that Comhaltas was the subject of intense debate among musicians” very often revolving around “fears about music standardization, loss of musical diversity and a lack of control over how Irish traditional music is publicly portrayed”. She suggested that “because Irish traditional music is based on variation within certain musical forms and has distinctive regional styles, musicians felt threatened by the implication of standardization in Comhaltas’s music competitions”. As with repertoire, instruments were validated as traditional or not by their very inclusion or exclusion, although it must be pointed out that the two-row accordion had a competition of its own from the very beginning of the *fleadh cheoil* movement, while the single-row accordion, or melodeon, up until recent times was relegated to the miscellaneous competition.

One of the most important effects of the *fleadh* competitions however, is that of the unconscious validation of particular styles of playing. Henry (1989: 68) suggests that “those types or styles of music selected for presentation acquire an implicit seal of official approval, and those which are not selected suffer neglect and less chance of survival”. Blaustein (1993: 268-269) has noted that “in Ireland as elsewhere, competition accelerates stylistic change and standardization”. He
acknowledges that “it is only natural that competitors should emulate the performances of winning contestants” but points out that “the unintended result is the restriction of the full range of styles and tunes to suit the criteria of the judges”. As a young fiddle player entering fleadh competitions, I very quickly became aware that if one played in a certain manner one stood a far better chance of progressing. Furthermore, I also knew that there were particular kinds of tunes which could never be played in competition and, while trends changed every now and then, they really didn’t steer too far away from what became recognised among many fiddle players as a competition style of fiddle playing.

This situation also applied to other instruments and particularly, from the earliest years, to the button accordion. Accordion player Jackie Daly won the All Ireland senior accordion competition in 1974. A press and draw player, he changed his style of playing to the B and C style that had been made popular by Paddy O’Brien and Joe Burke during the 1950s and 1960s. According to Daly, “Comhaltas were into the B and C” while “regional styles were not popular at competitions”. Despite the work involved in changing his style of playing, Jackie returned to his former style some months after winning the All Ireland accordion competition believing that “push and draw suits the regional style more” (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997). Offaly accordion player Paddy O’Brien, (personal communication, 2 Dec 1998), commenting on the year his namesake, Tipperary accordion player Paddy O’Brien, won the All Ireland senior accordion competition in 1953, noted that “after that year Paddy O’Brien’s style with the BC accordion became all the rage among lovers of accordion music and so began a trend as lots of people began buying Paolo Soprani BC accordions throughout the 1950s and 1960s in particular”. He added “indeed almost everyone who played in or won box competitions played BC box ever since” Fiddle player, Seamus Connolly agrees, observing that “everybody in the competitions played ‘The Yellow Tinker’ and ‘The Sally Gardens’ just to be sounding like Paddy O’Brien and they all wanted Paolo Soprani accordions” (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006). Máirtin O’Connor (personal communication, 19 Feb 1997) was “never into competitions as such” and commented that he wouldn’t have modified his accordion playing “in any way to accommodate competitions standards” while fiddle player, Ben Lennon felt that the people who control musical organisations “are very narrow minded” and that they “limit themselves
strictly to their versions of Irish music and have no time for any other form of music” (Lennon in MacAoidh 1982: 10). Henry (1989: 91) concurs with the idea that an inevitable effect of competitions is the legislation of style through the selection of the winner and the subsequent articulation of the reasons for that choice. He describes CCE as a “sponsoring organization that is in important measure funded by a national government” (Henry 1989: 68). He explores the effects that such sponsorship has had on traditional music in Ireland and notes that instruments possibly in danger of disappearing such as the uilleann pipes can be revived and supported while new instruments attempting to gain entry to the tradition are sometimes actively discouraged such as the bouzouki. He also acknowledges that CCE have accepted two of the newest instruments in the tradition – the accordion and the banjo.

As mentioned above, the two-row button accordion was included in the list of competitions when the first fleadh cheoil took place. By then, two very distinct playing styles or systems associated with two-row accordions had emerged in Ireland, and the two musicians most credited with the development of these styles were Joe Cooley and Paddy O’Brien. In an article titled ‘The Fortunes of Irish Music’ published in a 1976 issue of Treoir, the magazine of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Séamus MacMathúna wrote the following:

> Around Clare, Tipperary and East Galway two men were delighting thousands of followers with their interpretation of Irish music on an instrument which until then, had never really been accepted as suitable for that music. They were Joe Cooley of Peterswell, and Paddy O’Brien of Portroe, the two men who must mainly be credited for the sudden popularity of the ‘box’ in the fifties and sixties. (MacMathúna 1976:11)

Accordion player Joe McNamara was a contemporary of both players and believed that “only for Joe Cooley and Paddy O’Brien there’d be no box players in the country” (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996). Joe Mills, the accordion player with the Aughrim Slopes Céilí Band declared that he had “yet to hear somebody better than Paddy O’Brien on the accordion” (Mills 1976: 17) while another member of the Aughrim Slopes, Jack Mulkere stated that “Joe Cooley… was probably one of the greatest accordion players in the history of Irish traditional music” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1974: 20). Both Paddy O’Brien and Joe Cooley
were born in the 1920s and grew up at a time when the two-row accordion was beginning to make its presence strongly felt in Irish traditional music. Both men also grew up in musical families and environments which provided many opportunities and contexts for their emerging talents.

10.2 Joe Cooley

Joe Cooley was born in 1924 in Peterswell, Co. Galway where his family played an important part in his introduction to music. His parents both played melodeon and their home was well-known as a gathering place for musicians and dancers. Peterswell was the location for the first music class given by the influential music teacher Jack Mulkere who began teaching in the locality in the autumn of 1923 (Ó hAllmhuráin 1974). There was, therefore, a plentiful supply of traditional musicians in the area. Among his first pupils were Mick and Jack Cooley, older brothers to Joe and they, along with many more of Mulkere’s pupils, greatly influenced Joe. Joe himself attended some of Jack Mulkere’s music classes in the 1930s and Mulkere was later to comment that Joe’s music “had a type of “call” or “draiocht” that would make one listen to as well as dance to” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1974: 20). From an early age it was evident that Joe Cooley was a “profoundly charismatic figure in traditional music” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1999a: 88) and his accordion playing was very much in demand at the various house dances and other events taking place in the South Galway and North Clare areas. Kevin Doyle, whose home, like that of the Cooley’s, was a well-known location for dancing and music, remembered the many visits paid to his family by the Cooley brothers. Kevin recalled how “Mick Cooley happened to come around then. Mick was working at Clarkes in Crusheen, he was the older. Mick was playing the box and quite a good box player too. Oh God we thought he was great” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007). Joe McNamara recollected that the “Doyles… were musical people” and that “it was beyond in Doyles” that he “first met Joe Cooley” (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996).

He used to play D/D# and I was playing G/G# and we used play together... G/G# and a D/D# were a great blend -the two boxes… and when they were played together properly you’d think it was the one box playing the whole time. (J. McNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996)
As well as being an exceptional musician, Joe Cooley was also “an accomplished athlete and achieved substantial recognition as a hurler” (McCullough 1976: 469). Kevin Doyle and Joe Cooley played hurling together as teenagers. According to Kevin (personal communication, 9 Aug 2007), Joe “was over visiting Clarke’s in Crusheen where Mick was working and Danny Clarke, God rest Danny, got him to play with Crusheen” with the result that Kevin, who was already playing with the team, and Joe “played minor with Crusheen in 1941”. Kevin recalled how, at this time, Joe Cooley “became very much attached to our family”. He was always welcomed with open arms and became so comfortable with the Doyle family that he often arrived unannounced even in the early hours of the morning:

Joe Leary and Joe Cooley would go back West Clare to play over there some way and they had the motorbike and on the way back they’d come into our house three or four or five o’clock in the morning open the latch on the door and upstairs and into bed and mam would get up in the morning “oh the lads are here”- knowing who they were. The two boys they’d be up in bed and they’d get up about one o’clock in the day and mam would get them breakfast and they’d start playing and they might stay for two days, Joe Leary and Joe Cooley. And I had an Uncle John there and the poor man nearly killed himself dancing. He’d be up stepping all day you know, he loved it you know and the two boys would play there all day… they were great characters. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

Joe Cooley quickly became renowned for his musicianship and playing which was described as “vigorous, colourful, and strikingly individual” by McCullough (1976: 469) who also noted that “his music never failed to produce a strong and immediate emotional response in his listeners”. Ó hAllmhuráin (1999a: 88) suggests that Cooley’s playing “was deceptively simple and straightforward, but with a remarkable ‘lonesome’ quality which infatuated followers, inspired dancers and created a legend of the player in his own time”. Kevin Doyle (personal communication, 9 Aug 2007) believes that with regard to Joe Cooley’s music one has to “forget about technical stuff because technical stuff hasn’t got the expression, it doesn’t give the feeling”. He described listening to a young, very technical accordion player and stated “it’s like a computer with him you know… I mean he’s brilliant but there’s no expression coming, no feeling”. According to Kevin “it takes good music to make you jump out there and dance” and he believed Joe Cooley had what it took. When asked by Jack Mulkere “what was it about Joe?” Kevin replied that Cooley had “a lot of character in his music… there was a glow, there was something there… he was a great character. Simple”. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007).
McCullough (1976: 469) maintains that Cooley’s “style of accordion playing was unique in several respects and combined elements of the newer, post-World War II accordion style developed and expounded by Paddy O’Brien and Joe Burke with the older style of box-playing that retained to a large extent the phrasing, articulation, and ornamentation used by players of the single-row melodeon”.

Smith (1992: 257) notes that, from the 1930s on, the two-row accordion began to gain in popularity, and although many accordion players simply continued to play single-row or melodeon style on these new two-row instruments, “two playing styles associated with two-row accordions developed – extended melodeon style and chromatic style”. In an extensive analysis of a number of tunes played by Joe Cooley, he demonstrated how Cooley was “using the techniques of extended melodeon style to create a distinctive personal style” (Smith 1992: 280).

During the 1940s Joe Cooley played all over Clare and Galway and his arrival always stirred the crowd. Kevin Doyle (personal communication, 9 Aug 2007) remembered how Joe Cooley could thrill an audience. On one occasion, Kevin had been asked by Mike Preston, a regular musician at the Sunday night dances in the Doyle home, “to get Joe Cooley to go and play for an LDF dance in Barefield”. According to Kevin, the “LDF was a local defence force that joined up… to help out during the war”. Having cycled to Peterswell, Kevin “got Joe to come… to Barefield and he played there with them”. Kevin related how the night ended:

Well, Joe Cooley stood up for the last dance, well look at that, nearly lifted the floor out of it, the music you know was great… I don’t know if Joe Mac was there or not but the music was great and Cooley of course lifted it and… he was the life of the music those days you know. (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007)

Fiddle player Joe Ryan recalled how “when Joe Cooley came on the scene, oh my goodness me, he really set the place on fire, he drove the people crazy” (J. Ryan personal communication, 13 Jul 2007). Ryan remembered Cooley playing at a concert in Miltown Malbay around 1948:

I remember I was at the concert in Miltown the first one, big concert there… well he came out, he came out on the stage and he’d the jacket off and such a powerful butt of a man and the sleeves folded up and of course the cigarette, the cigarette constantly and he pulled out the accordion. Oh man, I’ll never forget it and he started off with the “Lassies of Bon Accord” and the place was in bits, they just went berserk. He resided in Ennisteen then, he worked as a mason there and there
used to be this pub there in Parnell Street of a Saturday night, oh my goodness, ‘twas Paddy Markham’s, ah japers, he was a wonderful character and a lovely personality too. (J. Ryan, personal communication, 13 Jul 2007)

Joe Cooley was a member of the first Tulla Céili Band which was brought together by piano player Teresa Tubridy in 1946 to compete at Féile Luimní in Limerick. The band included flute players Paddy and Jim Donoghue and fiddle player Paddy Canny, who were previously members of the Ballinahinch Céili Band. These musicians were joined by fiddle players P. Joe Hayes, Bert McNulty and Aggie Whyte. When the band got together for their first rehearsal “someone remarked that it would be nice to have an accordion, and somebody else remembered a good young box player from just over the Galway border, and so they sent for Joe Cooley of Peterswell” (Taylor 1988: 51). The band won the competition and Seán Reid was heard to say on the day “sure the Clare musicians – everything in the way of traditional music they mopped it up!” (Taylor 1988: 51). In the late 1940s Joe Cooley moved to Dublin where he shared accommodation with Kevin Doyle and his brothers: “I was up at Kildare for two years and then Joe wanted to come up to Dublin where we were and mam gave him the address and he had nowhere to stay so he stayed with us in this small room in Dublin, the smallest house in Dublin I suppose you could say” (K. Doyle, personal communication 9 Aug 2007). Music was plentiful in the house and the landlady, whose daughter was learning to play the piano, loved it. Visitors included fiddle players Aggie Whyte and Seán Maguire, piper Johnny Doran and accordion player Sonny Brogan and “if you wanted to hear the music you had to stand outside the door, just about. There was no room in the house, small little lounge room, she had a piano in it… and we took over the house ‘twasn’t her house at all ‘twas ours” (K. Doyle, personal communication, 9 Aug 2007).

Joe Cooley played with the Tulla on their first broadcast for Radio Éireann in 1948, before he and his brother Seamus emigrated to London where they became central figures in the traditional music played in that city. Among their contemporaries in London were the piper Willie Clancy, fiddle players Bobby Casey, Michael Gorman and Máirtín Byrnes, flute player Roger Sherlock and accordion players Eddie Bolger and Raymond Roland. On his return to Ireland in 1951, Joe Cooley rejoined the Tulla Céili Band. Accordion player Paddy O’Brien, from Co. Tipperary, had
replaced Cooley during his time in London, and for a number of years, the two accordion players most credited with directing and charting the course of the instrument in Irish traditional music during the 1950s and 1960s (MacMathúna 1976) played alongside each other in the Tulla Céili Band. At the 1953 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Athlone, both men competed against each other with Paddy O’Brien placed first and Joe Cooley taking second place. In that same year, fiddle player Paddy Canny, also a member of the Tulla Céili Band, was the first winner of the Coleman Cup in the senior fiddle competition (Sheedy 1990).

In 1954 Joe Cooley emigrated to America where he lived in New York, Boston and Chicago, eventually settling for many years in San Francisco. While in New York he played with Paddy O’Brien, who had also emigrated in 1954. In Chicago he joined with his brother Séamus who had remained in America after a tour with the Tulla Céili Band in 1958. They were founding members of the Glenside Céili Band, and they played regularly on the radio throughout the early 1960s, as well as in Hanley’s House of Happiness and the Kerryman’s Club. Joe Cooley left Chicago in 1965 and settled in San Francisco where “when he first came, he was working hanging billboards, signs, advertisement, and it was hard work” (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997). He quickly became popular with the few musicians living in the area and was a regular visitor to the home of Patricia Kennelly and her parents, both of whom were Irish dancers. Patricia, who was very young when Cooley arrived in San Francisco, was instantly drawn to Cooley’s music – “I told somebody once, I think if Joe Cooley played the tuba, I’d be playing the tuba now. It was him and it was the way he played, it wasn’t necessarily the accordion I was drawn to but the fact that I loved the way he played” (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997). She learned to play the accordion from Joe Cooley, who used notation indicating which button to press and which to draw as well as playing by ear to teach her. She recalled how she would “count the buttons and a little dot meant that you would press and a straight line meant that you would pull and that’s the way I started to learn” (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997). Cooley would tell her that “he would play it and then he would say, you know, six press draw and he’d go on then and if we were going to go to the outside row he would make a little V and put the number on the outside row” (P. Kennelly, personal communication 28 Jul 1997). Kennelly acknowledged that it was difficult at times as they both played
accordions pitched in different keys, Cooley’s was in D/D# and Patricia’s was in C#/D and “he’d often be playing outside in” to suit her accordion. According to Kennelly, Joe Cooley was a very friendly person and fitted in wherever he went. “There was always people staying in his house, he had an open door and he would always have people back for dinner or they’d stay overnight, all different kinds of people” (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997):

He got involved with playing folk music and so they would invite him to come to different things, and he was so different than anyone else there. He was this man in his middle age and they were all maybe in their twenties and everybody had long hair. It was a real changeable time in the sixties, especially San Francisco and he’d just fit in with everyone. He had no problem getting along with all people, every kind of people. And he loved music too, so he loved hearing different kinds of music. (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997)

While Cooley was in San Francisco he played in the Gráinneog Céilí Band with Galway accordionist, Kevin Keegan and Joe Murtagh, a flute and fiddle player from Miltown Malbay in Co. Clare. He also became involved in teaching music to a number of other people in the San Francisco area along with Patricia Kennelly. These included Miliosa Lundy and John Lavel “who still sustain his East Galway style” (Ó hAllmhuráin 1999a: 88). Kennelly indicated that rhythm was the main feature of Cooley’s music that these musicians absorbed:

He had a particular rhythm, a very strong rhythm. Great rhythm and I think people learned that, if they learned anything at all. You know, that was the first thing they learned. Joe played very slowly, very definitely, although not always. It depended on the occasion. Like there’s a tape of him playing for a wedding and it’s great and it’s quick and it’s lively you know, and it’s great. But I think as his preference I’d say he probably played a little slower. That suited his style a little bit more. (P. Kennelly, personal communication 28 Jul 1997)

Fiddle player P. Joe Hayes who played with Cooley in the Tulla Céilí Band also observed that Cooley preferred to play slowly. In 1982, when discussing the revival of set dancing, he remarked on the fact that contemporary dancers were expecting music to be played very fast and added “Joe Cooley was a man that played very slow but people danced to that music” (Hayes in Taylor 1988: 61).

During his time in America, Joe made several trips home to Ireland, one such in 1963 when collector and broadcaster, Ciarán MacMathúna arranged a recording
session in Bridie Lafferty’s house in Drumcondra. Bridie was the pianist with the Castle Céili Band and the gathering of musicians included fiddle player Joe O’Leary with whom Cooley had travelled all over Clare and Galway during the early 1950s “travelling dusty, icy or rainy roads on a motorcycle, the fiddle slung over Cooley’s back, the accordion tied to the fuel tank” (MacMahon 1975: 4). Joe finally returned to Ireland in the summer of 1972. Such was the charismatic appeal of his music that people thronged to small venues all over Clare and South Galway to hear and see him play. According to accordion player, Tony MacMahon, “Joe Cooley was a kind man and particularly indulgent of other musicians” (MacMahon 1975: 5). It would seem that he was also very encouraging towards younger musicians. John Whelan (personal communication 16 Aug 1995) met Joe Cooley for the first time “in a session in Clare which Brendan Mulkere set up for a bunch of students”, a session which John describes as “a lot of fun”:

We waited a long time for him, I guess he was going from place to place and he finally… got there and he played for quite a while… I was very young and I played a couple of tunes and Joe didn't really talk to anybody but he… kind of beckoned to me and we had a few words. You know the irony for me, I was so young and, at that time, didn't really understand a lot of things and I didn't comprehend the importance of an encounter like that. He gave me some words of encouragement and stuff like that and you know, we also have to remember he was very sick at that point, I mean he didn't live too much longer after that… but his music was incredible. (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug, 1995)

On November 29th 1973 Tony MacMahon arranged an RTÉ recording of Joe Cooley’s music in Lahiffe’s Bar in Peterswell, Co. Galway. Joe was joined on that occasion by his brother Jack on bodhrán and by Des Mulkere on banjo. MacMahon (1975: 2) believed that the people present “felt in their hearts that this was to be the last great blast of ceol with Joe. They were right”. The music from this session along with four sets recorded in 1963 by Ciarán MacMathúna and a track featuring Joe and Séamus playing together in Chicago can be heard on the album Cooley released by Gael Linn in 1975 after Joe’s untimely death on December 21st 1973. Carson (1996: 3) described the first side of that recording as “one of the best recordings of Irish traditional music ever made”.

Most of today’s generation of accordion players and many other musicians remember when they first heard Joe Cooley’s music and the impact it had on
them. Máirtín O’Connor, describing the first time he heard Joe Cooley play, recalls that he “was blown away completely… listening to Cooley’s music” and was amazed at how Cooley “could have this fantastic positive output of energy without being very technical, or technically orientated” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998). Sharon Shannon first heard Joe Cooley playing the reel *The Boyne Hunt* and “was completely mad about” it. She tried to copy the way he was playing the tune but discovered that it “was completely impossible… to do it when you’re playing B/C style” and she “couldn’t figure out how he was doing it at all” (S. Shannon, personal communication, 13 Feb 1998). Many musicians when talking about Joe Cooley’s music are in awe of his ability in arranging the music and the particular flair he had for making the tune his own:

> He’d do the funniest things. Even when I listen back to the tapes I have now, sometimes I say, ‘How did I miss that?’ Like, he had a great way of arranging a tune. That it could be just one note here or there but I thought it was brilliant. I loved the way he played and how he put together a tune. It seemed like he never played the tune the same way twice. And it seemed to be on the spot. But I don’t know that. I don’t know enough of his earlier days to be able to say that, but he did seem to be very spontaneous. He would be outrageous sometimes too. He would end a tune like, he’d end it on the first part and there’d be a big flourish ending or he would do something outrageous in the middle of a tune that would just make people laugh. People would all smile or laugh you know and he’d definitely capture their attention anyway. (P. Kennelly, personal communication, 28 Jul 1997)

### 10.3 Paddy O’Brien

Joe Cooley played what Smith (1992) termed an extended melodeon style, developing the system used by the early single row players and championing the press and draw style. The other style of playing on a two-row accordion was the chromatic style, and the man most associated with that style of playing was Tipperary accordion player, Paddy O’Brien. Born in Newtown, Co. Tipperary, in 1922, Paddy O’Brien came from a long musical lineage. According to his daughter, Eileen, “the O’Brien family musical tradition can be traced back to Paddy’s grandfather Pat O’Brien” of ‘The Bridge’ in Newtown, Nenagh” who “played both fiddle and concertina” and “was a highly respected musician in the area” (O’Brien 2009: 2). Paddy’s uncles, Mick and Paddy, were celebrated fiddle and concertina players while his father, Dinny, “was an accomplished fiddler and
the leader of the original Bridge Ceilí Band” (O’Keeffe 1996: 163). The O’Brien home was a famed gathering place for musicians and family and neighbours gathered there regularly for music and dancing. Paddy began learning fiddle from his father Dinny at the age of seven (Finian 1970: 10) while his sister Mary also played fiddle and concertina. In addition, both siblings learned step dancing. Paddy’s mother was Ellen Ryan from Gurteenakilla, Newtown and, like her husband, came from a musical family. Her brother, Tommy Ryan, played the melodeon and the fiddle and he and Dinny became great musical friends, often playing music together at the many house dances in the locality around Newtown, “an environment steeped in Irish traditional music” (Ó Riain 1994: 6). Tommy’s children also learned to play music and Paddy’s first cousin was the renowned fiddle player and composer, Seán Ryan (O’Brien 2009). His brother, Joe, remembered music being played at the O’Brien home, describing how “the house used to get so overcrowded with musicians, dancers and listeners that people used to sit on the wall outside and listen to the music resonating from the house” (O’Brien 2009: 4).

While the young Paddy O’Brien’s immediate and extended family provided his early musical environment, it was a visitor to one of the musical gatherings in his home who introduced Paddy to the two-row accordion, and paved the way for one of the most significant changes in the course of the accordion’s journey into tradition. In the late 1920s, a new Garda Sergeant was stationed in the neighbouring village of Portroe. Sergeant Jack Kelly was “a brother of the famous composer and fiddler, Paddy Kelly from East Galway, and he owned one of the first two-row accordions in the area” (O’Keeffe 1996: 163). Jack Kelly was a regular visitor to the musical gatherings in Paddy’s home and “rather than carry the accordion back to Portroe on the bicycle, he used to leave it at the O’Brien home” (O’Brien 2009: 5). While one-row melodeons were quite common in the area, the two-row instrument would have been a novelty at that time, and quickly attracted the attention of the young Paddy O’Brien. According to Joe Burke:

Paddy took it out of the case to have a look at it and experiment with it and be God he discovered that he could... play it a bit and then he developed it from there on and developed a mighty technique. (J. Burke, personal communication, 5 Apr 1999)
Kelly’s accordion was a Hohner pitched in G/G#, a tuning that was also used by Joe MacNamara of the Tulla Céili Band and Joe Mills of the Aughrim Slopes Céili Band (J. MacNamara, personal communication, 2 Jul 1996). According to Paddy’s daughter Eileen, her father was “blessed with perfect pitch” and therefore “the recognition of the importance of the pitch of the accordion would have been instinctive to Paddy” (O’Brien 2009: 5). The fact that he was already a competent fiddle player by that time led him to approach the accordion from the point of view of a fiddle player as he indicated himself many years later – “I try to achieve the same variations on the accordion as are possible on the fiddle” (O’Brien in Finian 1970: 10). By the age of fourteen, Paddy O’Brien had become a highly skilled accordion player and had also acquired a B/C Hohner accordion bought for him by his parents in “Whelan’s Music and Electrical Shop” in Nenagh (O’Brien 2009: 5). In 1936, along with his father Dinny on fiddle and Puckane flute player, Bill Fahy, “he made the first of many broadcasts for 2RN, the predecessor of Raidió Éireann” (O’Keeffe 1996: 163). The performance, which was broadcast live from Kincora Hall in Killaloe, was described in the local newspaper, The Nenagh Guardian, as “a treat in itself” and reached “audiences in Ireland and parts of Scotland, England and Wales” (O’Brien 2009: 5).

Throughout his teenage years and into his twenties, Paddy O’Brien, who by then was playing one of the new Paolo Soprani accordions which had come onto the market, continued to develop the style which was to capture the imagination of musicians throughout the Irish traditional music community in the ensuing decades:

Like an artist with a new concept of painting, or the scientist with a new discovery, Paddy O’Brien brought into existence a new and refreshing style of traditional playing which in time was to be the criterion for accordion players. (Finian 1970: 10)

As mentioned earlier, the fact that Paddy O’Brien was a fiddle player before he began playing the accordion meant that the sound he was seeking from the accordion was related to the way traditional music was played on the fiddle. According to Séamus Connolly, “the sound he had in his head, he wanted that sound to match the things that the fiddlers were doing- dee dee dididom daddle dom- that kind of thing” (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006). As well as being influenced by the fiddle playing of his father, Paddy O’Brien was also very impressed by the music of
fiddle player and composer Paddy Kelly, who was a brother of Sergeant Jack Kelly. Paddy Kelly was one of the original members of the Aughrim Slopes Trio, which later became the Aughrim Slopes Céilí Band (Hall 2000: 26). The members of this band visited the O’Brien family home during the 1930s, and Paddy O’Brien and Paddy Kelly became great friends, with Paddy later joining the Aughrim Slopes. According to Eileen O’Brien (O’Brien 2009: 7), her father regarded Paddy Kelly “as one of the finest fiddle players that he had ever heard”. She observes that “Paddy Kelly appealed to O’Brien first of all as a fiddle player but also because he had a vast repertoire of music which he generously passed on to him”. Fogarty (in O’Brien 1992: 3) notes that Paddy O’Brien “developed a system of playing which exploited the potential of the two-rows and enabled the music to be played in almost all the popular major and minor keys”. This new style was “rich in ornamentation and embellishment” which Fogarty suggests was influenced by O’Brien’s “expertise on the fiddle”. The fingering system used by O’Brien was very different to that being used by earlier players of the B and C accordions such as Sonny Brogan. Offaly accordion player, Paddy O’Brien, described the difference, stating that “Sonny’s style was different because it was more staccato and unlike Paddy he didn’t do much cross fingering except when he had to, as an example, when he played in the key of D he’d have to deal with the F sharp note which is on the outside row on B C boxes” (P. O’Brien (Offaly), personal communication, 4 Jan 1999). Seamus Connolly recalled how O’Brien may have been introduced to the fingering he used:

I asked him about the fingering one time, did he develop that fingering, how did he come up with it and he said “I didn’t come up with it”, you know, there was a family in Roscrea and they had a dance band at the time I think it was Billy Cummins one of the Cummins and there were brothers that had a band and travelled around and so Paddy learned that style of fingering but he developed it then later. (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006)

While his earliest influences were the local and visiting musicians, Paddy O’Brien extended his repertoire by travelling to the neighbouring counties of Galway and Clare to meet with other musicians. As well as playing with the Aughrim Slopes, O’Brien also joined the Tulla, replacing Joe Cooley who had left for London. On Cooley’s return both accordion players played side by side in the band. (Taylor 1988: 55)
As did Joe Cooley in 1954, Paddy O’Brien “boarded the emigrant ship to America to seek his fortune in New York” in January of that same year (O’Brien 2009: 9). The night before he left home, Paddy made the recordings that were to set the world of Irish accordion playing alight. At the instigation of Count Ian O’Kelly (O’Brien 2009), who was a friend of both Paddy O’Brien and Galway accordionist Kevin Keegan, the Columbia Gramophone Company recorded three 78rpm six sides – of Paddy’s playing in the O’Brien home in Newtown (O’Brien 2009: 9). In later years, Paddy O’Brien related the story to Seamus Connolly of how the recordings were made:

He emigrated, I think, in 1954 after he made those Columbia records. He told me he made them in Newtown, in his house in Newtown, he wouldn’t go to Dublin, he wouldn’t go to the studio to record he was too shy, too nervous and I remember the lines that he said to me that night when he told me that story he said ‘Can you imagine what was in my head when I was playing them, I was leaving home what I thought was forever going to America’, he didn’t want to go but he had to go ‘cause he needed the work. (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006)

Paddy O’Brien spent eight years living in New York where he worked on the buses. According to accordion player Martin Mulhaire, who also emigrated to New York in the 1950s, Paddy “could have made as much money working three nights a week in the dance halls as he made on the buses”. He would, however, have had to “conform to the popular style of the time, playing ‘The Stack of Barley’ and old time waltzes” (Mulhaire in O’Brien 2009: 13). Paddy was not prepared to do this and instead he continued to develop his style and became a major figure in the traditional music scene in New York. Flute player Jack Coen credits Paddy O’Brien “with getting him back into the music after a period when he hardly played at all” (Moloney 1992: 176). This was through house sessions organised by O’Brien when “himself and Jack Coen and Larry Redican met religiously in one another’s homes on a Wednesday night and they’d go through O’Neill’s collection, you know, they’d be looking for a tune” (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006). Other musicians who joined these house sessions were fiddle players Andy McGann and Paddy Reynolds.

During O’Brien’s time in America, the New York Céilí Band was formed and included the musicians mentioned above, along with flute player Mike Dorney, pianist Felix Dolan, Jerry Wallace on piccolo and drummer Chris D’Arcy. In 1960
they travelled to Ireland to take part in the Céili Band competition at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann which was held in Boyle, Co. Roscommon (Hitchner in O’Brien 2009: 15). Kathleen and John Nesbitt (in O’Brien 2009: 79) recall hearing Paddy O’Brien play with the New York Céili Band on that occasion and described it as “hugely exciting because it was the first band from the U.S. to compete in this event and included many household names of the traditional music world such as Larry Redican, Felix Dolan to name but two”. The band was placed third in the competition, while Paddy O’Brien, Jack Coen and Larry Redican took first place in the trio competition (O’Brien 2009: 16).

Paddy O’Brien returned to Ireland with his family in 1962 and settled in Dublin, where he joined the Lough Gowna Céilí Band. By then his style of playing and his tune selections were being widely copied by countless accordion players, not just all over Ireland, but also in England where, according to Hall (in Smith 1992: 322), throughout the 1950s “the Irish pubs in North London bristled with young lads playing ‘The Yellow Tinker’ and ‘The Sally Gardens’ copied from his record” made on the eve of his departure to America. According to Joe Burke “Paddy took a grasp of this… system… and he was really the first man to make a big impact and a big impact he did make and he made three records… before he went to America and they took the music scene by storm really” (J. Burke, personal communication, 5 Apr 1999). After two and a half years in Dublin the O’Brien family moved back to Newtown, where Paddy formed a quintet known as The Iniscealtra with fiddle players Paddy Canny and Seamus Connolly, multi-instrumentalist Peadar O’Loughlin and piano player George Byrt. With the Lough Gowna and Iniscealtra bands, Paddy O’Brien made numerous radio broadcasts (O’Brien 2009) and these ensured further dissemination of his style. His method of playing the B and C accordion became the new standard for accordion players and his recordings, which revolutionised accordion playing, “were to have enormous impact on the generation of players who began in the 1950s” (Snyder (1995: 16). Máirtín O’Connor (personal communication, 19 Feb 1998) suggests that “what he was doing at the time would have been very radical for the instrument or very innovative rather than radical” although he points out that O’Brien “always remained… firmly rooted in the tradition” and “was a great force in the squeezebox world”.

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Coplan (1993: 42), writing about connecting the present with the past in the creation of a new genre, stresses the importance of creating “continuity between familiar and alien realms of experience through the display of cultural knowledge” and suggests that:

When a singer borrows metaphors, symbols, proverbial usages, characters or incidents from another genre, he at once revitalizes and transforms tradition and clothes himself in its authority. This ability to manipulate as well as display cultural knowledge establishes his right to his audience’s attention and sustains his moral imagination. (Coplan 1993: 42)

In the development of his method of playing the B and C accordion, Paddy O’Brien, while revitalising and transforming the accordion tradition in Irish music, constantly referred back to the tradition in which he was so grounded. Joe Burke (personal communication, 5 Apr 1999) suggests that:

…one of the reasons why he sounded like he did sound… is that his father was a fiddle player and of course he was a fiddle player himself and I think his concept of music… there was more of a fiddle influence in his music than there was in any of the accordion players before that. He would have thought in terms of fiddle music and played it on the box.

Although he was using a modern version of the instrument, to do so, “any kind of embellishment he put in was always within the boundaries of the old music” (Burke in O’Brien 2009: 11). Having grown up listening to fiddle, flute and concertina music in his home, “Paddy O’ Brien developed a smooth approach that captured the nuances of pitch and ornamentation pipers and fiddlers were able to achieve” (Snyder 1995: 16). His smooth execution of this ornamentation in particular impressed his many admirers:

I think what Paddy did was, it seems to me, nobody played that smooth roll that Paddy could get because of the way he played the BC… Nobody played it that way because you couldn’t play it that way, you know what I mean, the D/D# you couldn’t get it, you’d have to go in and out, he could just do it on one motion and then all of a sudden when everybody heard that sweet flowing sound as opposed to the sharper in out sound I think so many people grabbed on to that… I remember I just fell in love with Paddy’s playing… Paddy’s style – that very smooth style, that’s what was all in vogue when I started playing in the fifties. (F. Dolan, personal communication, 9 Nov 1996)
Liam O’Connor, who originally came from Brosna in Co. Kerry, played fiddle for many years alongside Paddy O’Brien in the Ormond Céilí Band. While he thought the accordion players he heard when he was growing up were great, he found they played in a “jerky” manner. When he “first heard Paddy O’Brien playing on a BC box” he “was completely captivated by his style of playing”. O’Connor was particularly impressed by “the flow of music and the smooth triplets and rolls” which he felt O’Brien “slipped out with pleasurable ease”. According to O’Connor, Paddy O’Brien had a “beautiful traditional style of playing which seemed to embody all the tradition of years past but was strictly and unmistakably his own” (O’Connor in O’Brien 1992:33). Paddy played for a number of years in duet with fiddle player Seamus Connolly, who remembers when he first heard Paddy O’Brien’s playing, and the impact it had on him:

In 1955 there was a regatta in Killaloe and I wasn’t playing music at the time and… God I forget the fella’s name, he had a shop in Nenagh, an electrical shop. He used to sell all the old 78s and he was doing the sound for the regatta and he had those big loudspeakers in Killaloe and I went down the street and I heard the Sally Gardens, the Yellow Tinker… and I ran up to the house to my father to come down to hear this. Never in my life had I heard… .I had heard my uncle play who was a great sort of melodeon style who played in the key of C and the press mostly but this whole impact that it had on me, I hadn’t heard this, to me it sounded like a flute or a fiddle it was so smooth, ‘twas less of the chopiness and so my father came down and Willie Ryan, that was the fella’s name who had the shop, so he sold my father that record at the end of the day. Willie Ryan told my father he’d have the other records in the following Saturday. My father cycled on the bicycle into Nenagh to get the two records and brought them back with him and we wore them out and I still have those records. (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006)

When Seamus Connolly first heard Paddy O’Brien’s music O’Brien was in America. In 1960 however, he got to hear Paddy O’Brien playing in person when the New York Céilí Band played at the All Ireland Fleadh Cheoil in Boyle Co. Roscommon. He was later introduced to O’Brien by Jim Kennedy, a mutual friend (O’Brien 2009: 18). According to Connolly “he was playing a grey box… and he made a tape for me of tunes that I had never heard. He brought all these tunes back from America (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006). Seamus Connolly and Paddy O’Brien played regularly as a duet on Paddy’s return from America and recorded an E.P. together with Charlie Lennon on piano. Although the recording is still today considered one of the finest examples of fiddle and accordion duet playing, neither Paddy O’Brien nor Seamus Connolly were happy with the end result:
When I played with Paddy ‘twas kind of the thing to do, you would match one another and I suppose ‘twas the style at the time. I’m not sure exactly that I agree with all that, just get there and tear into it you know. To me ‘twas just too perfect you know and it lacked something… ‘twas nice when you listen to it, it was a nice duet, kind of mad stuff together but there was still something missing from it to my mind. Paddy and I, we hated it you know, Paddy couldn’t stand it and I couldn’t either and again when it came out it was too fast and we didn’t play that way although maybe we thought we didn’t. Maybe our adrenaline was running high. It seemed awful high it seemed faster although it seemed in pitch, yeah we didn’t like it. (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006)

As well as playing with the Iniscealtra and in duet with Seamus Connolly, Paddy O’Brien also began teaching music on his return to Newtown. Always passionately interested in céilí bands “he formed several from among the pupils who attended his classes” (O’Brien 2009: 21) and coached them for participation in the Fleadh Cheoil competitions. The band he became most associated with from the 1970s onwards was the Ormond Céilí Band who won three All Ireland titles in a row between 1979 and 1981, and a fourth title in 1984. Although he had composed some tunes prior to this period, it was at this time that Paddy O’Brien began to compose prolifically, producing not only individual tunes but sets of tunes for the Ormond Céilí Band to perform at the Fleadh competitions. Máirtín O’Connor (personal communication, 19 Feb 1998) believes that Paddy O’Brien “was a fantastic musical mind” and “he composed some fantastic tunes”. His compositions were also taken up by many young accordion players and used in the accordion competitions at Fleadhanna Cheoil, as were his versions of tunes.

Luton born accordion player John Whelan, winner of the two-row button accordion competition at every age level at All Ireland Fleadhanna Cheoil, spoke about his source for competition tunes:

I was fortunate enough to meet Paddy O’Brien and my father had a reel to reel tape deck and so he taped everything, all the sessions, and some of the sessions have great historical content now, you know, all these years later, but I have some great music from Paddy O’Brien which was a tape where I learned a lot of tunes for competitions. (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995)

As a twelve year old, Whelan (personal communication, 16 Aug 1995) remembers meeting Paddy O’Brien at a Comhaltas function in London when “Paddy and Seamus Connolly were the guest musicians”. He recalls how “in a different way that everybody revered Joe Burke there was this kind of silent reverence for Paddy O’Brien”.
I kind of sensed… like this man is special you know and of course now, I'm a lot older and you listen to his tunes and his phrasing and the technique and what he did for Irish music in general then, and since then, you know, writing the kind of music that he's written over the years… it's fabulous stuff. (J. Whelan, personal communication 16 Aug 1995)

Slawek (1993: 162), in a discussion of the impact of Indian musician, Ravi Shankar “on the recent history of North Indian Classical music” comments on the “singular role Ravi Shankar has played as a mediator between the traditional musical culture of which he is a part and the modern cultural spheres within which he exists”. He notes how “since the early 1950s Shankar has stood as a role model for numerous Hindustani musicians of the younger generation” (Slawek 1993: 162). According to Slawek “this has resulted… in his playing style becoming one of the most widely emulated”. However it has also resulted in Shankar often being regarded “as non-traditional both by Indians and non Indians”. Similarly, while Paddy O’Brien’s new method of playing chromatically on the accordion was widely accepted and emulated by hundreds of accordion players during the 1950s and 1960s, it must be acknowledged that there were many who continued to believe that the press and draw style of accordion playing was much more traditional than the new, modern style so eagerly adopted by a majority of accordion players in the 1950s and 1960s. While Paddy O’Brien was recognised as an innovative and masterful musician, many who copied his method failed to reach a high standard of playing and it is perhaps their contribution to traditional music that caused doubt about the new modern style of playing the accordion.

Carson (1986: 34) suggests that “the inherent weakness in B/C playing is that less bellows work is involved than on basically one-row systems of playing: this results in a legato effect which diminishes the articulation necessary for dance music”. Jackie Daly concurs, noting that “if you play B and C, notes run into each other more, you can’t punch out the rhythm. Press and draw makes more breaks in the rhythm which makes it more traditional and distinctive” (Daly 1982). Paul Brock believes that the adoption of the new style led to a “terrible sameness” in accordion music from the 1950s onwards and suggested that there was a loss of drive in the music. He added that “at that time Joe Derrane’s playing was available… could be heard but was considered unfashionable” and Brock feels that “it was a great mistake that musicians ignored what happened for the first fifty years of this century”. (Brock 1982). However, Seamus Connolly makes the point that:

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…that was the way Paddy wanted to play and there are people out there who will criticise Paddy for doing away with the thing that was there in the past but it’s not Paddy’s fault that everybody wanted to emulate him you know. You could say the same thing about Michael Coleman and James Morrison, that they did away with the regional styles but it wasn’t their fault – that was the way they wanted to play, we all copied them… that’s my argument about the thing, it wasn’t Paddy O’Brien’s fault that he played it the way he did. (S. Connolly, personal communication, 21 Jul 2006)

The direction of Irish accordion playing was certainly changed and the new B and C style was to remain unchallenged for over twenty years.

10. 4 Joe Burke

The sound which dominated the accordion style of the 1960s and early 1970s was that of Joe Burke who has been one of the most influential musicians in Irish accordion music in recent decades:

His style influenced everybody… stylistically most players were starting to play like Joe Burke, sounding like Joe Burke and everybody wanted the Joe Burke tuning. (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995)

Carson (1986: 34) suggests that “Joe Burke is to the B/C box what Michael Coleman was to the fiddle, a player of immense technical resource and imagination who has left a definitive stamp on the music”. As with Paddy O’Brien, Joe Burke’s smooth style of playing was imitated by countless accordion players. Carson (1986: 34) argues that the fact that “he has inspired a host of second-rate imitations is not, of course, his fault” and maintains that “Burke makes a virtue of the technical problems of the instrument, while to other players the technical problems are just that”.

Joe Burke comes from Kilnadeema near Loughrea in East Galway. Like many of the accordion players who have made their mark on the journey of the button accordion into Irish traditional music, he grew up in a musical house. His father “could play a couple of tunes on the tin whistle or an old flute” (Burke in Hitchner 2004: 1) and his mother played an old Hohner accordion tuned in G/G#. There was set dancing every Sunday night in the Burke home place and Joe began
playing on his mother’s G/G# accordion, learning how to play his first tunes from his uncle Pat, who also played the accordion. Joe believed he had an advantage as he “was listening to music the whole time” (Burke in Hitchner 1994a: 4). A visitor to the family home introduced the young Joe to the possibility of playing across the two-rows:

…a man called Martin Grace, an accomplished accordion player who had an unusual style for the time (playing across the two-rows), visited the farm with a threshing machine, and was sitting in the kitchen drinking tea when he saw the accordion under the table. He asked who played and proceeded to knock out a few tunes. Joe had never heard this style of playing before and Martin showed him some of the basic rudiments of his accordion technique. Martin Grace was involved with the renowned Ballinakill Ceili Band with Aggie Whyte in the forties, and he played with that band for many years. (Chambers 2005)

Joe Burke also plays flute, fiddle and pipes. Growing up in East Galway, an area rich in fiddle and flute music, it was from practitioners of these instruments that he learned much of his early music. He was influenced in particular by fiddle players Paddy Fahy and Paddy Kelly. The 78rpm discs of Michael Coleman also attracted the young Joe Burke and he studied them with great intensity, observing (in Hitchner 2004) that Coleman “had these spontaneous, innovative subtleties in his fiddling that would baffle anyone who tried to follow him”. Hitchner (1994a: 5) notes that Coleman’s “choice of tunes and the approach he took to them had a deep effect on Joe’s evolving repertoire” while Burke’s “fascination with fiddle music” led Small (1996: 4) to suggest “Joe Burke is a fiddler, though with an accordion in his hands”.

By the time Joe was fifteen he was playing “a B/C button accordion, on which he progressed in technique at an amazing rate” (Hitchner 1994a: 5). He had also heard Paddy O’Brien’s 1954 recordings which, according to Burke (in Hitchner 2004), were “a revelation. Paddy found things in the B/C that no one had discovered, and no one had come up with that standard of playing before on the B/C”. These recordings made a huge impact on Joe Burke as did the music of fellow Galway accordion players, Kevin Keegan and Joe Cooley.

I think the reason why Paddy and Kevin and Joe had such an influence on me was that they were the first accordionists I ever heard play like fiddlers… They could play the fiddle tunes with a lot of the same techniques and ornamentation that a fiddler would use. That was what attracted me to them. (Burke in Hitchner 1994a: 5)
Burke also acknowledges that, after years when traditional music was looked down upon, the early 1950s witnessed a change, and traditional music became more visible:

There was a revival and there was an opening up of things and the Fleadh Cheoil's had started and Ciarán Mac Mathúna's Job of Journeywork. The radio station at last put out some people around the country to collect the music that was there for hundreds of years but never really acknowledged before and Ciarán and Séamus Ennis and Seán MacRéamoínne went round with their mobile recording unit and they recorded people that were never heard on radio and if they were never heard on radio they wouldn’t have been known at all in Ireland but a lot of things contributed I think to this change that happened as far as I’m concerned in the early fifties. (J. Burke, personal communication, 5 Apr 1999)

One of the changes mentioned by Joe Burke was the beginning of the Fleadhanna Cheoil. At the 1959 and 1960 Fleadh Cheoil na hEireann Joe won the senior accordion competition (Carolan 2004: 45). He was also the leader of the Leitrim Céili Band which won the senior Céili Band competition in 1959. In that same year he recorded the last two 78rpm to be made on the Gael Linn label (O’Keeffe 1999c: 48) and as with Paddy O’Brien some years earlier, winning the senior accordion competition, coupled with the 78rpm recordings, ensured widespread dissemination of Joe Burke’s style of playing. Like his mentors, O’Brien, Keegan and Cooley, Joe Burke moved to America and lived in New York until 1965. While there he formed a musical partnership with fiddle player Andy McGann, who had been a pupil of Michael Coleman. Together they recorded an L.P. titled Joe Burke, Andy McGann and Felix Dolan Play a Tribute to Michael Coleman. Burke returned to Ireland where he formed another musical partnership with the Belfast fiddle player Seán Maguire. They recorded Two Champions on the Outlet label with Josephine Keegan on the piano.

In 1988 Joe Burke returned to America and remained there until 1992. By this time his smooth effortless style had been emulated and admired by a generation of younger players. Sharon Shannon, who began playing on an accordion tuned in B and C before later switching to the press and draw system, recalled the first time she heard Joe Burke play:

The first time I heard Joe Burke it was on the telly years ago and he was playing the Bucks of Oranmore and I thought it was amazing, it was brilliant. (S. Shannon, personal communication, 13 Feb 1998)
Accordion player Verena Commins (personal communication, 26 Apr 1998) describes how when she was “growing up, Joe Burke was God, you know, and that’s how we all had to play”. Small (1996: 3) observes that “fluency, virtuosity, variety” and “high good humour” are “some of the qualities ever present in Joe Burke’s playing” and notes that “he has the biggest and most devoted following of any traditional musician today”. According to Jackie Daly:

He was the main man; Paddy O’Brien and Joe Burke were the two men who really made the B and C. (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997)

10.5 Jackie Daly

As has been outlined earlier in this chapter, the 1950s marked a watershed in the history of accordion playing in Irish music. The 1970s and 1980s also marked a period of significant change for the accordion and traditional music in general which reflected the changing social contexts which had begun to emerge during the 1960s. Moloney (1992:320) observes that “the 1960s were a time of economic resurgence for Ireland with a profusion of new jobs creating a young work force with disposable income for the first time in the history of the republic”. An Irish Times correspondent writing in the late 1970s notes how “the Ireland of the 1970s contrasts sharply with the internationally popular image of a sleepy back-water on the fringe of Europe. No longer is this the rural island of the emigrants, but a fast-growing industrializing frontier on the edge of industrial Europe” (Brown 1985: 258).

The changed social climate of the 1970s, in particular, owed much to political changes which took place during the closing years of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s. In 1959 Seán Lemass succeeded Éamon de Valera as Taoiseach and immediately embarked on a programme of attracting foreign investment to Ireland. This policy of expansion differed markedly from the protectionist policies of the De Valera years and resulted in Lemass presiding “over an opening up of the economy that prompted, or coincided with, a similar opening up in social life” (Ross 2008: 48). Between 1960 and 1969, “350 new foreign companies were established in Ireland” (Foster 1989: 579) this due, for the most part, to the ambitious Programmes for Economic Expansion which had been introduced by T.
K. Whitaker, the influential Secretary of the Department of Finance from 1956 to 1969 and Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland from 1969 to 1976 (Foster 1989). Lyons (1973: 628) suggests that Whitaker’s initial report “entitled Economic Development… can be seen as a watershed in the modern economic history of the country” while McCormack (2002: 314) notes that the programme “was very successful with a sustained growth rate of 4% per annum for the years 1959 to 1964” during which “unemployment and emigration was cut, investment increased and national output soared”. This had implications for society as a whole and, for the first time ever, many people, who hitherto had scraped a living from small farms, now had money in their pockets. This was due to the arrival, in their local areas, of factories which provided wage-paying jobs. With Ireland’s entry into the European Economic Community in 1973 and the subsequent opening up of the jobs market due to regional development, the new availability of cash meant that people could afford to buy cars, washing machines, televisions and many other modern comforts. According to Ó hAllmhuráin (1998: 134), “by the 1970s, Ireland had undergone a rapid series of pivotal changes. The self-conscious nativism of the 1940s had given way to an emergent pluralism, urbanisation and industrialisation”.

The changed social climate of the 1970s and 1980s, so different to that of the 1940s and 1950s had implications for how traditional music was performed and how it was perceived by Irish and international audiences. Curtis (1994: 34) observes that this period “could be viewed from two standpoints”. According to him:

…there was the world of commercial Irish music with its focus on the promotion of the full-time professional traditional and folk performers… then there was the non-professional world of traditional music, represented by the majority of musicians around the country: the fiddlers, pipers, concertina and accordion players who play for the sheer love and enjoyment of the music. (Curtis 1994: 34)

Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, writing about this period (in Curtis 1994: 25), noted that “the arrival of groups such as The Chieftains… Planxty… The Bothy Band… opened up the music to an even younger audience. He believes that the involvement of these new groups was “the single greatest factor in the present international interest in Irish traditional music” and suggests that, because of these groups; musicians like Micho Russell could “sit alone on a stage in Germany and receive tumultuous applause for
playing his tin whistle in his own pure style”. The mid 1970s also signalled further change in the fortunes of the accordion in Irish music. In 1974 Jackie Daly from Kanturk, Co. Cork won the senior button accordion competition at *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* in Listowel. One accordion player interviewed for this study remembers hearing Jackie Daly play on that day and remarked on its importance as a landmark in the history of the accordion in Irish music:

> Well if you go back as I was growing up so you take each kind of progression… in the accordion world, the next progression that I remember was… from Joe Burke to Jackie Daly… and so you know, I remember seeing Jackie in the All Ireland when he won the All Ireland in competition and it was you know, this guy, with this, you know, funny looking beard and stuff and it was like this guy's cool man like he's dressed different than everybody else, he's got a different accordion than everybody else and he got up there and played like this incredible music. (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995)

Jackie Daly grew up in a musical household where his mother was a great singer and his father played the harmonica and accordion. Jackie began playing on a harmonica but before that, his first experience of playing music was on “plastic pan pipes”:

> What motivated me to start was I got a lucky bag when I was about five years old. There was a plastic pan pipes inside, they weren’t in tune or anything but, by blowing them, I found I could make two or three notes at the beginning of a tune. I thought if I can do that I might try the harmonica. I got a harmonica and I learned to play it really fast. (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997)

Jackie began playing accordion at the age of “six or seven” and found it to be “very similar to the harmonica”. He learned tunes in the press and draw style from his father, and later began going to the local hall where accordion player Mick Williams played for dancing every Wednesday night – “I didn’t dance, I just sat in the corner” (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997). From an early age Jackie was attracted to the rich fiddle tradition of Sliabh Luachra. One of the greatest influences on his early musical development was fiddle player, Jim Keeffe, a former pupil of Sliabh Luachra fiddle master, Padraig O’Keeffe. Jim encouraged Jackie to play with the musicians at the crossroad dances held at an open air platform known as “the stage” on the outskirts of Kanturk and the two became great musical companions. According to Jackie:

> I started going to the ‘stage’, as it was called, on Sunday evenings and by arriving early, before the crowd, I would get Jim to teach me a few tunes. There were very
few tape recorders around the locality at the time, so it was a case of keeping the tunes going in your head on the way home so as not to forget them. (Daly 1977: 2)

At the time, Jackie was playing an accordion tuned in C/C# as “concert pitch instruments in C#/D were actually quite rare so its players were usually playing in the wrong key” (Chambers 2009). Máirtín O’Connor observes that “it would have been very hard in the seventies to find a C#/D instrument. You could have scoured the country looking for one or maybe D/D#. They were relatively rare” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998). According to Jackie, “the accordion was C and C# and the fiddle was tuned down a half tone. That’s the way we always played”. Jackie eventually acquired a C#/D accordion when he “started travelling more and playing at sessions” where concert pitch was required (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997).

In the late 1960s Jackie moved to Holland and worked there until 1973 (O’Keeffe 1999a: 99). On his return, he was encouraged to enter the senior button accordion competition at the Fleadh Cheoil. As discussed earlier, Jackie, like many other accordion players, was aware that B and C was the style which appeared to have been most successful in competitions over the previous twenty years. He changed from his press and draw style to the B and C style of playing and won the All Ireland senior accordion competition in Listowel in 1974. In the months after winning the All Ireland, Jackie reverted to his press and draw style of playing and the music of Sliabh Luachra, and recorded his first solo album. As with Paddy O’Brien and Joe Burke before him, this recording helped to bring his distinctive playing style to a wider audience. It also introduced a change in the sound of the accordion. Jackie’s experiments with tuning the reeds of his accordion “straight”, which involved tuning all the reeds to exactly the same pitch, resulted in a new mellow, closely tuned, dry sound, which blended easily with other traditional instruments:

In 1974… I got a present of an accordion in Cork, it was a black Paolo Soprani… the reeds were rubbish in it but I experimented with them and discovered how they were tuned and then I tuned them very straight, even straighter than I do now. (J. Daly, personal communication, 26 Mar 1997)
This new sound was much copied by young accordion players playing traditional music from the late seventies. It also led to the beginning of the emergence of what Smith (personal communication, 21 Jan 1996) terms “the new melodeon style”:

That was at the time when Jackie Daly started and that first L.P. of Music of Sliabh Luachra… came out and the impact of that you know… if you like, it was such a good reversal, I think… if you wanted to describe that process, I mean you’d have to put Jackie pretty well central if not absolutely the leader of it… just to describe that process of what I’d call the new melodeon style. (G. Smith, personal communication, 21 Jan 1996)

In 1977 Jackie recorded an album with fiddle player, Seamus Creagh, on the Gael Linn label. This had an instant impact on the music of the late 1970s and in addition to featuring the dry sound and the rhythmic press and draw style of playing, the resultant tight blend of accordion and fiddle could also be heard, and set the standard for future accordion/fiddle partnerships. Australian born accordion and banjo player, Paul Louden remembers hearing the album:

For me, the Jackie Daly, Seamus Creagh album, it was the first Irish album I ever bought, it still influences me, I still listen to it… it’s very rhythmic. The rhythms on it, I remember, were very strong. I learnt a lot of tunes from it. (P. Louden, personal communication, 19 Jul 1995)

In the late 1970s, Jackie Daly became a member of De Danann, and spent almost four years with the band. Apart from Ceoltóirí Chualann, this was the first time that an accordion had featured strongly in the line up of a group playing Irish traditional music on the concert stage. It resulted in “the popularity of the instrument” being affected “in a positive way” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998), and ensured that the press and draw style of playing on an accordion tuned in C#/D was brought to an international stage. The two main influences on Jackie’s playing – the music of Sliabh Luachra and the music of the 78rpm era – were also given a new platform. Jackie himself acknowledges his interest in the recordings of early twentieth century musicians in America:

Interest began for me as I played in the press and draw style. Lots of the early musicians in America that was the style they used, so it was natural for me. The material as well, the sort of tunes suited my style. That was how the band got into it really. (Daly 1982)
This new and exciting fusion of sounds had a major impact on the world of traditional music, and Jackie is widely credited with adding a new dimension to the history of Irish button accordion playing through his lively and exuberant performances at that time. John Whelan (personal communication, 16 Aug 1995) believes that the “unique sound that De Danann created” signalled a new era in Irish traditional music:

…not only with the way they went about recording the music and picking the tunes… but the sound was different. It was no longer an accordion player with the B/C Joe Burke or… Paddy O’Brien. The sound… was something very different… and a certain era grew out of that, the same way it grew out of Joe Burke… the actual style and the way of playing the box and the sound from the rhythm, the way the rhythm pattern of the music went. (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995)

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s Jackie played with many of the prominent groups playing Irish traditional music on a world stage. As well as De Danann, these included Patrick Street, Buttons and Bows, Reel Union and Arcady. This resulted in his style of playing press and draw being brought to the attention of young accordion players, many of whom were impressed with what they heard and wanted to play in this new style:

I think it was Jackie Daly, to a certain extent, had this massive impact when he appeared playing C#/D music, when it was completely different music. And a lot of B and C accordion players reacted and wanted to play that music, and changed to C#/D because of that. I mean, I know loads of people that were B and C that now play C#/D. (V. Commins, personal communication, 26 Apr 1998)

John Whelan (personal communication, 16 Aug 1995) observes that many accordion players were influenced by Jackie Daly’s playing “partly because of recordings with De Danann” but also through “Jackie’s album with Seamus Creagh and the albums with Kevin Burke”. He suggests that many of the accordion players who came after Jackie Daly adopted “that style” noting that “the way those guys play came initially… from Jackie”. William Hammond (personal communication, 5 Jul 1995), a banjo player who began playing the accordion in the late 1980s, was attracted to the C#/D style of playing through listening to the music of Jackie Daly, and was particularly taken with the sound of Jackie’s accordion:

I like that style of playing… I find that probably the open style tuning that people use on the B and C sometimes puts you off the music. Very open reeds, that didn’t appeal to me. Then, when I heard Jackie playing very tight… the reeds were very
tight together, the sound was more distinct. It felt better to listen to. (W. Hammond, personal communication, 5 Jul 1995)

Máirtín O’Connor, initially a B and C player, unhappy with the sound of his accordion and aware that “some instruments got bad press because they kind of steamrolled sessions” remembers that during “the mid seventies… word kind of circulated that it was possible to have your accordion tuned” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998):

And I remember being very delighted with that possibility because I didn’t like the sound of my instrument at the time. There was a lot of tremolo and I remember saying at the time – “if I ever have a band I won’t have an accordion in it” – and that would have excluded myself because of that tremolo… I didn’t like the sound, just the sound itself. I found it a bit grating. Then I remember seeing all sorts of possibilities when I heard you could actually have it tuned because to me at the time it meant that the instrument would have a much better possibility of blending with all sorts of instruments. I remember being really excited about it. (M. O’ Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)

Máirtín met Jackie for the first time in Galway during the 1970s, and was “really taken with the heart in his music” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998). He describes Jackie’s playing as “having a lot of space in his music in terms of… a fantastic sense of timing”:

There are certain things associated with his playing, you know the timing and a lot of energy and I suppose certain ornamentations that would be peculiar to him… the triplets and staying on one note a fair bit… I think he has a very special sense of rhythm and great feeling in his playing but great space at the same time, very uncluttered… that was another great thing about his playing that I thought, was he delivered the unexpected even though there would be all this space, you know what I mean and then there would be a little dagger thrown in and it would hit you right between the eyes, I think that was a major thing in his playing. (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)

Like his predecessors before him Jackie had a major influence on young accordion players. Mairtín O’Connor (personal communication, 5 Jul 2000) believes that “Jackie has made a good impact” and “has been a good influence on younger musicians”. In his home place of Sliabh Luachra, accordion player Paudie O’Connor was drawn to Jackie’s music:

I listened an awful lot to Jackie Daly especially the stuff he played back in the seventies, early eighties. I liked that tape he had on his own. I listened to that an
awful lot for a while. I suppose the stuff he was playing with *De Danann* and all that, I mean I really liked that music… they’d be the two types of music that I’d like. In ways they’re very close and in ways they’re very different but if I was ever listening to music now, if I wasn’t listening to the local stuff, I love listening to that early *De Danann* and Jackie Daly… I love that style of box playing. (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000)

Paudie (personal communication, 5 Jul 2000) believes that Jackie “took all the kind of nice things the likes of Joe Derrane and all these guys were doing back in the twenties but made it sweet to listen to as well”. Although Paudie finds the music recorded by Kimmel, Conlon and Derrane fascinating, he acknowledges that, as he likes “sweet sounding music” he “wouldn’t have the patience to listen to a whole pile of it”. He credits Jackie Daly with introducing a “whole new style of playing”:

I think Jackie took everything that was good about that music, added a kind of a new style with the rhythms of the music of Cork, Kerry and Limerick and all that and married these new techniques of box playing into that and came up with a whole new style of playing… It was the whole idea that he was taking the local music and different techniques of ornamentation and stuff, he was bringing all this in, so it kind of freshened up the local music, it was something new so that’s why it probably took my interest. (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000)

According to Paudie “no Sliabh Luachra musician ever used the trickery and stuff that Daly was putting in to those type of tunes and he managed to marry the whole lot together. He was the first person to do that” (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000). At this point, on the journey into tradition, a new way of playing the accordion in Irish traditional music had been established. A new sound which allowed for better blending with other instruments was also introduced and the old press and draw system of playing was elevated to a new status in Irish traditional music circles.

### 10.6 A New Generation – A New Acceptance?

P.J. Hernon, speaking about accordion playing in the second half of the twentieth century described the various eras as he saw them:

You would have the Cooley era… you’re talking about the forties and fifties. Unfortunately I never heard enough of Cooley – even to this day I would like to
By the closing decade of the twentieth century the accordion’s journey into tradition seemed to have come full circle, from Joe Cooley’s press and draw style through Paddy O’Brien’s innovative B and C style, Joe Burke’s distinctive interpretation of that style, Jackie Daly’s return to the press and draw style and his adaptation of that system into “a whole new style of playing” as described by Paudie O’Connor (personal communication, 5 Jul 2000). The accordion was also experiencing levels of popularity unprecedented in the previous decades and not just among accordion players.

The importance of the individual in shaping and directing the paths taken by the accordion in its journey into tradition has been a significant thread running throughout this study, and it came to the fore again in the early 1990s. In March 1992 the Seville Suite, composed by Bill Whelan, was first performed by the RTE Concert Orchestra in Dublin’s National Concert Hall, with accordion player Máirtín O’Connor featuring as one of the soloists. Joe Burke (personal communication, 5 Apr 1999) described O’Connor as an accordion player with “a tremendous technique… great variations… a man that took on all kinds of music and you could nearly consider him fearless”. However, Máirtín himself (personal communication, 19 Feb 1998) described the experience as “the most terrifying moment of my life”:

It was the first time playing with an orchestra, it went out on live TV and it was in front of all these dignitaries… I remember it was that combined with… seventeen and a half minutes of the Battle of Kinsale… this mad cacophony going on behind me and then the whole thing subsided to one drone on a cello and then I had to play this little jig… and I remember being so terrified at the time that I was actually talking to my fingers to go on to the next note… it was like they were moving through glue. And then when the orchestra came in fully it felt like you were in the sea being carried along by the waves. It was a lovely feeling. (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998)
Like Jackie Daly, Máirtín played with many of the groups involved in Irish traditional music since the late 1970s including *Midnight Well* and *The Boys of the Lough*, with whom he did “a very enjoyable tour… in America around 1980” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998). Máirtín also played with *De Danann* and *Reel Union* remarking that “around 1983 basically Jackie and myself did a kind of a swap, he played with Dolores for a while and I went off and joined *De Danann*” (M. O’Connor, personal communication, 19 Feb 1998). He became involved with further collaborations between accordion and orchestra including working with *Riverdance*, *The Irish Chamber Orchestra* and in more recent years with the *Contempo Quartet*. As with Paddy O’Brien before him, he has explored new possibilities on the two-row accordion and is also a renowned composer on the instrument.

During the 1980s and early 1990s the playing of Jackie Daly and Máirtín O’Connor, both of whom had espoused the press and draw system of playing the two-row accordion, had an enormous influence on a generation of young accordion players. However the B and C system was still the predominant style played in the accordion competitions at *Fleadhanna Cheoil*. Like John Whelan (personal communication, 16 Aug 1995), Paudie O’Connor also associated tunes from the repertoire of Joe Burke and particularly Paddy O’Brien with competitions:

> I’ve listened an awful lot to him I listened to rakes of him when I was in my competitions mode… I mean you were knocked and ridiculed for playing anything… I mean you play something that wasn’t from that repertoire and the first thing you got on your adjudication sheet was ‘bad choice of tune’. It was always the first thing you got on your adjudication sheet ‘good choice of tune’ or ‘bad choice of tune’. (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000)

Paudie maintained that a ‘bad choice of tune’ would be “a tune that was of a style that wouldn’t give you the chance to bring out all the rolls”. He suggests that adjudicators seemed to feel that “it was more important to have a tune that gave you the chance to bring out everything you could in your technical ability rather than playing a tune that sounded well and represented something”. During his days playing in *fleadh* competitions Paudie noticed that the adjudicators “were all B/C players” which meant that, as Jackie Daly did in 1974, many people, but especially young musicians, would attempt to play the style they thought was required:
By their nature all kids are competitive… invariably because of the competitive nature of kids you’ll play whatever because initially you don’t realise the importance of your own music versus other music and you’ll just play any tune that gives you a chance to win your competition or whatever. (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000)

The B and C system continued to be the style most taught in music classes up and down the country (W. Hammond, L. Egan, J. Murphy, personal communications, 5 Jul 1995) and this may have been a defining factor in the constancy of the B and C in competitions. Earlier in this chapter it was noted that competitions held at Fleadhanna Cheoil endorse and validate certain styles of playing and repertoire. Paudie O’Connor, a greyhound racing enthusiast, likened what he saw happening in greyhound racing to what he experienced in accordion competitions for many years:

It reminds me actually… it’s getting like greyhounds, there’s two or three sires, ok I mean all the breeding is gone very tight where winners are all coming from the one bloodline and it’s the same with the music. The whole thing is gone so tight with regard to competitions, unless you’re coming from one of these bloodlines with regard to your repertoire of tunes and the type of music you’re playing you’ve no chance. (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000)

By the early 1990s a new phase in the accordion’s journey into tradition was taking place. Musicians, who had learned the B and C system in music classes when they were younger, began to take divergent paths along that journey. In my opinion, three main pathways can be identified. Some accordion players, attracted to the sound and rhythms of the press and draw system, simply acquired C#/D accordions as they became more available and changed their style of playing to press and draw. B and C player, Verena Commins, described how accordion maker, Dougie Briggs followed this path:

He started playing B and C and then, like, I remember him saying, you know, the Jackie Daly/Seamus Creagh album totally changed the way he listened to Irish music and because of that he changed to C#/D because he just thought he couldn’t play that music on the B and C. (V. Commins, personal communication, 26 Apr 1998)

Graeme Smith (personal communication, 21 Jan 1996) observes how Melbourne based accordion player Joe Fitzgerald, originally from Co. Clare, had always been “regarded in Melbourne and probably in Australia as the cream of the B and C
players and… two or three years ago he sent away and got himself a C#/D and that’s what he plays now… there’s the sound he wants and he’s aiming for”.

Some B and C accordion players embraced the press and draw style of playing and, unrestrained by the pitch issues which beset earlier players of that system, proceeded to play both B and C and C#/D, often bringing two accordions with them to sessions or performances. Two of the most influential young accordion players during the 1990s, Dermot Byrne and Sharon Shannon, play B and C as well as C#/D accordions, although both currently gravitate more towards the press and draw style of playing. Verena Commins (personal communication, 26 Apr 1998) observes that Dermot Byrne “can literally pick up a B and C or a C#/D accordion and play it and play the same tune in the same key on both of them and play it exactly the same and you wouldn’t know which he was playing”. Dermot Byrne (personal communication, 12 May 2010) explains that he plays C#/D “when playing with the group Altan… as it’s more suited to the dynamics of the group and it’s more punchy and lively”. However, he believes that “the B and C system suits Donegal fiddle music better”. Sharon Shannon remembers that she began playing C#/D after she tried to copy Joe Cooley playing the reel *The Boyne Hunt*. Unable to get the sound she was hearing she watched Tulla accordion player, Andrew MacNamara:

I used to be trying to play like him, play that tune, trying to copy him and it was impossible to do it when you’re playing B/C style. I couldn’t figure out how he was doing it at all and then from watching Andrew Mac I discovered that there was a different system and I started…. I tried it the other way which would be just playing C fingering on the B and C, it would have been in C then… so I discovered that what he was doing was C fingering on probably a C#/D or a D/D# that Joe Cooley was playing… When I was about seventeen or eighteen I got a C#/D Hohner and I started playing that. Now I just use both whichever suits. (S. Shannon, personal communication, 13 Feb, 1998)

Other B and C players were reluctant to change their playing system and felt that they could get the sound associated with C#/D without moving to a C#D accordion. These musicians continued using the B and C system, but actively sought out the expression and rhythms that they were hearing in the press and draw style, and applied them to the B and C system:
When I heard Jackie Daly playing I knew that it was different but… it was ages before I knew there was such a thing as C#/D. I thought everybody played B and C… you know people would say to me “what tuning do you play in?”… because of the way I learned I didn’t even realise that one-row was B and one-row was C. (V. Commins, personal communication, 26 Apr, 1998)

Realising that Dougie Briggs had changed from B and C to C#/D and hearing him play, Verena remembers thinking – “there was no way I was going through the whole rigmarole… I didn’t think that I couldn’t play, you know, very similar to how he was playing… on his C#D”. She describes the main features of the press and draw system as “the lift” and the fact that “it’s more rhythmical… it’s almost a physical thing that you can see… it’s in the action of playing rather than just in the… melody line” (V. Commins, personal communication, 26 Apr 1998). She believes that these features can be achieved playing an accordion tuned in B and C and calls it “B and C with expression” suggesting that the C#/D style has “more gaps in the music, it’s almost like the music breathes more. It has its own life to breathe… it’s almost like when you’re talking you have to breathe in certain places and you stop in certain places, it’s more natural”:

I don’t think you have to change, that you can actually play any music on any accordion and you can apply any style to any accordion. It’s how you play the music and you don’t have to play a C#/D accordion to sound like our concept of a C#/D player. (V. Commins, personal communication, 26 Apr 1998)

Sliabh Luachra accordion player Paudie O’Connor is another B and C player who believes that it is not necessary to change to C#/D to achieve the sound associated with the press and draw style. Very influenced by fiddle music, especially local Sliabh Luachra players like Paddy Cronin and Connie O’Connell, he believes that the accordion is “just a medium to bring out a certain style of music that I like listening to. I mean I don’t think I would sound a whole lot different if I was playing a flute or a fiddle, I’d still have the same style of playing I would hope” (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000).

Both Paudie and Verena believe that the availability of so many different accordions is one of the reasons why many B and C accordion players since the late 1980s do not have the sound commonly associated with the B and C style of the 1950s and 1960s. Verena remarks that:
At one time I think the accordion you played dictated the kind of music that you played. So that if you played a B and C accordion you played music similar to Joe Burke and if you played C#/D you played more like Joe Cooley or Jackie Daly or whoever. (V. Commins, personal communication, 26 Apr 1998)

Paudie O’Connor concurs, suggesting that the sound associated with the B and C system of playing during the 1950s and 1960s had a lot to do with the type of accordions being played:

People were playing a uniform type of accordion with a uniform type of tuning and… there were only a few people tuning the boxes and doing the box stuff and they were… replicas of each other… and now there’s such a wide range of accordions out there; so many different sounds; so many different types of tuning. Some of them have sixteen basses and some of them have eight basses and people are looking more at… what can you do with an accordion whereas they were just taking an accordion that was an exact replica of everyone else and just doing the same thing. I mean obviously if you play something that’s got a different sound you’re going to have a different opinion on a tune and I think that’s what’s getting kids to listen a bit more to what they’re doing and they’re doing their own thing because of those type of accordions they’re playing. I think it’s got an awful lot to do with it. (P. O’Connor, personal communication, 5 Jul 2000)

In early July 2010, a chance encounter with accordion player John Ryan from Rochester, New York, led to the discovery of another system in use for the playing of Irish traditional music on the accordion (J. Ryan, personal communication, 18 Jul 2010). This system, devised by accordion player Ted McGraw, also from Rochester and an engineer by profession, involves a three-row accordion tuned to B/C/D which allows a player to play both the press and draw and the B and C systems on one accordion and with no pitch difficulties:

My BCD boxes (there have been 3 of them) grew out of the need to not carry 2 accordions with me. There were several influences. My first encounter with button accordion music was Joe Derrane on the radio in the early 50’s. Then the Beltona solo recordings of Jimmy Shand and that neat clean style. After that, about 1955, I was old enough to go to the local Hibernian Club and met Frank Murphy, a fiddler from Westport, Mayo who turned to the box to play for dances. His music would lift you right off your feet. (T. McGraw, personal communication, 20 Jul 2010)

McGraw (personal communication, 20 Jul 2010) explains how “Joe Derrane disappeared at the end of the Boston dance hall scene… and Paddy O’Brien (Tipp) had released his three records played with the BC style. Then Joe Burke came along with lots of BC stuff”. In the early 1960s, two Kerry accordion players, Jim and Tom
Finucane, were active in the Irish traditional music scene in Rochester. According to Ted McGraw (personal communication, 20 Jul 2010) “Jim played mostly on the single row but Tommy, who played several instruments, strongly advised me to get a BC box”. Ted began playing on an accordion tuned to B and C but found that he had difficulty with the cross fingering required to play in the key of D:

I didn’t have any trouble with G but I didn’t do very well with the amount of cross fingering required on the BC to get D. That coupled with not really liking the sound of D on the BC, led me to carry a BC and a DG box to play in a little band we put together in the 1970s. I’m an engineer by profession; my degree is in physics, so this little problem seemed interesting! I ended up marrying Jim Finucane’s sister-in-law, also from Tarbert, and one day found his old 3 row Hohner laying around in pieces, I asked him for the remains. This led to building my first BCD. (T. McGraw, personal communication, 20 Jul 2010)

This was the accordion that John Ryan was using to play press and draw style on the D row and B and C style on the other two-rows – all on the same accordion. Could this be an indication of the direction the accordion might travel in the ongoing journey into tradition in the twenty first century?

By the close of the twentieth century the accordion had travelled even further along that journey, coming from being a new voice within the tradition in the closing decades of the nineteenth century to becoming accepted as an established member of the family of instruments on which Irish traditional music is performed. Many of the developments of the closing decades of the twentieth century contributed enormously to that acceptance – not least the rise in the number of people tuning accordions, and the availability of a wide range of recordings featuring the many different accordion sounds. The shape and size of accordions changed dramatically during that period and while many opted to stay with the Paolo Soprani – “the cadillac of accordions” (J. Whelan, personal communication, 16 Aug 1995), many more chose to play the smaller lighter accordions that Graeme Smith (personal communication, 21 Jan 1996) dubbed “the green accordions” and which blend so well with other instruments playing traditional music. As in the 1950s and 1960s, the direction of Irish accordion playing on the journey into tradition had changed except that, rather than one system dominating all others, all the systems associated with accordion playing in Irish traditional music – the single row melodeon, the C#/D and the B and C – were existing in harmony, each system having found its place in the tradition.
Chapter 11

Journey into Tradition

The tradition itself will absorb what is worthwhile and discard the rest.
(Munnelly 1999a: 143)

The main purpose of this thesis has been to examine the journey of the button accordion into Irish traditional music, and to establish how it became a member of the family of instruments on which that music is performed. In the introductory chapter, I raised a number of questions about the accordion which interested and intrigued me. When was it invented and where? When did it first arrive in Ireland and in what form? Who played the instrument in its earliest days? How did they know how to play it? What kind of music was played on it? How was it played? What were the factors that led to the adoption of the instrument into Irish traditional music? In addressing these questions, I discovered that the accordion, in its journey into tradition, had not followed one direct path, rather it had taken many different pathways in its quest for acceptance into Irish traditional music. This study has shown that, once it became established as an instrument on which Irish dance music could be played; the accordion rapidly became involved in all elements of the tradition. Considered a modern instrument, it quickly embraced new technologies, such as recording and radio, and featured strongly on the earliest recordings of Irish music, including the first discs made by Ellen O’Byrne DeWitt in 1916.

While the main focus of the thesis has been the journey undertaken by the accordion into Irish traditional music, it has become evident that a similar journey into other cultures was taking place simultaneously, with the accordion permeating many traditions worldwide with exceptional speed. It also became clear that the story of the accordion’s journey into tradition reflects the story of any new instrument’s experience, and that the conditions and factors which led to its adoption into Irish traditional music could apply to any other instrument entering the world of traditional music. This raised a further series of questions with regard to the arrival of a new instrument into a tradition. What happens to the instrument and what happens to the tradition? How do some instruments become accepted while others are abandoned almost immediately? The idea of an instrument being
on a journey lent itself to addressing many of the above questions. By mapping the accordion’s journey into tradition, along a number of pathways, a picture began to emerge of how an instrument enters a culture. The accordion’s journey could be said to have begun over 3,000 years ago when the earliest of the free reed instruments, the mouth blown Sheng, was first played in China. As has been noted in Chapter 3, the arrival of the Sheng in Europe inspired many instrument makers to investigate the principle of the free reed and to construct instruments based on it. From this it is possible to conclude that, rather than being an overnight discovery, the invention of the accordion was actually the culmination of a series of inventions which had taken place for many years prior to 1829, when it was first patented in Vienna.

This study has provided evidence that the accordion reached Ireland as early as 1831, and has shown that its arrival coincided with a period when music was of great importance to all sections of the Irish population. The level of musical activity evidenced in contemporary newspaper advertisements for music shops and concerts, along with the evidence gleaned from travel writers of the time, points to a people for whom music was an integral feature of their lives. I have found that Irish traditional music of the nineteenth century was also remarkably resilient, despite the cataclysmic events of the Great Famine and the subsequent pessimistic outlook portrayed by many of the collectors, particularly O’Neill (1913). Perhaps part of the resilience of traditional music was its ability to absorb elements such as the quadrilles and new instruments and adapt and use them to further sustain it in times of need. The opening decades of the nineteenth century, for example, witnessed the almost complete disappearance of the Gaelic harping tradition, but dances from Europe such as the quadrille were adapted by the dancing masters and breathed new life into the tradition. Likewise, the decline of piping was a feature of the closing decades of the same century, but the accordion made its appearance in the tradition around the same time and, because of its rhythmic advantages, was particularly suited to playing for the sets, as the adapted quadrilles had become known.

The story of the accordion’s journey into tradition has turned out to be a story of adaptation to the prevailing historical and social contexts it encountered along the
journey, and throughout the thesis there are numerous examples of how the accordion not alone adapted to but embraced and accepted the many changes and challenges in its surroundings. This leads to the conclusion that there are two major factors which are of paramount importance in the adoption of a new instrument – firstly, the strength and resilience of the existing tradition and secondly, the ability of the new instrument to be almost chameleon-like in its capacity to change and adapt to any circumstance. In my opinion, the presence of both of these attributes facilitates the successful assimilation and acceptance of a new instrument.

From the outset, I felt that it was important to acknowledge the important part played by historical and social contexts in the journey of the accordion into tradition, and I believe that this has been justified. By establishing the historical and social contexts prevailing in nineteenth century Ireland, for example, it was possible to conclude that, although the accordion was available for sale in Dublin as early as 1831, it did not come into widespread use among the traditional music community until well after the Great Famine. Newspapers from that period, through such details as prices of accordions in advertisements for music shops and details of concerts where the accordion was offered as prizes, provided revealing insights. Such data, along with information about the many new instruments arriving into the country during the early decades of the nineteenth century, allowed a number of further conclusions to be reached with regard to the accordion’s early years in Ireland. Firstly, of all the new instruments which were exhibited during the opening decades of the nineteenth century, the only ones to be eventually adopted by Irish traditional musicians were the free reed instruments – the accordion and concertina. Secondly, while the accordion was instantly attractive, initial high prices, when compared to the low wages and lack of a cash economy among the traditional music community, suggest that the instrument was played mostly by the better-off classes for at least the first three decades of its existence in Ireland. Thirdly, a reduction in prices and the availability of mass produced instruments in the latter decades of the nineteenth century leads to the conclusion that it was during this time period that the instrument, in the form of a ten-key melodeon, began to be taken up by traditional musicians.
The issue of how traditional musicians might initially have learned to play the accordion when it first came into their hands was a recurring puzzle throughout the research for this study. Certainly, evidence presented in the thesis shows that tutors for the accordion were available from the earliest days of the instrument’s invention, and may often have represented a starting point for learners. However, it is my belief that they may not have been much used by traditional musicians. In exploring how earlier traditional musicians learned to play other instruments I have noted that, up until recently, many earlier musicians simply heard music all around them but never had formal lessons – they learned to play ‘by osmosis’. Therefore, it seems feasible to propose that early accordion players simply worked out how to achieve the required notes and then transferred the music they had in their heads to the instrument. The process of acculturation was another important factor in how accordion playing styles developed, and I would argue that the existing fiddle tradition seems to have been the tradition most borrowed from in the establishment of the various styles. It also became apparent during the course of the study that any instrument is simply a medium which can be adjusted to the musical needs of the culture, and the extent of the suitability of the new instrument for the performance of the music it encounters appears to be a major factor in the process of acceptance of that instrument into the tradition. In my opinion, the accordion was a particularly good medium for the performance of Irish dance music.

While there were many factors which influenced the adoption of the accordion and facilitated its acceptance into Irish traditional music, it is the contention of this thesis that the importance of dancing to Irish rural communities was one of the major contributors to the ease with which the accordion became accepted among musicians and dancers. This study has shown how the accordion played a part in all aspects of dancing, from its earliest days at crossroads – where its reeds were more suited to the variable weather than pipes had been – to the halls which proliferated after the 1935 Public Dance Halls Act. Accordions were also to be found in great numbers in the céilí bands formed in answer to the need for more volume in crowded dance halls both in Ireland and in the Irish Diaspora. In all of the social changes associated with dancing, instruments such as the fiddle and flute remained unchanged, while the accordion changed in size and timbre in direct response to changing social functions, particularly in pre-amplification times. While many commentators saw the accordion as a rigid instrument, I have
found that its subtle flexibility and ability to adapt to different situations contributed enormously to its acceptance among the traditional music community. Nonetheless, as outlined in Chapter 9, the accordion and its use in the Irish music tradition was subject to much criticism from the earliest days. While some engaged in outright condemnation of the instrument, others pointed to certain undesirable aspects of playing styles as the focus of their disdain. Séan Ó Riada’s remarks on the accordion for example, suggest that he was entirely against the use of the instrument in Irish traditional music but, when viewed alongside the fact that he included not just one but two accordion players in the lineup for the innovative 1960s group, Ceoltóirí Chualann, one could draw the conclusion that he was merely criticising the many bad exponents of the new style of chromatic playing which had developed during the 1950s and 1960s.

The power of the individual as an instigator of musical change has been widely recognised in ethnomusicological literature and, in the case of the journey of the accordion into the Irish tradition, I found this concept to be particularly relevant. Blacking (1995: 160) has suggested that musical change “is brought about by decisions made by individuals about music-making and music”. While there is no way to quantify the contribution of the individuals who initially developed ways of playing the accordion in an Irish style, it can be argued that, from the very beginning of the accordion’s journey into tradition, there were exceptional individuals who, by their musical actions, moulded and shaped this product of the industrial revolution into an instrument to which traditional music, as embodied by the individual, could be transferred. This can be confirmed by evidence from the earliest recordings of the instrument which show the extent of the development of accordion playing styles by the early part of the twentieth century. It could also be argued that these recordings, made by second generation accordion players, provide a window into the world of dance music being played on the accordion in the rural Ireland of the closing years of the nineteenth century.

Research for this thesis has established a number of new facts about the history of the accordion in Irish traditional music. One relates to the earliest recorded sound of the ten-key accordion. Many accordion players believe it to be John J. Kimmel, but on further investigation, and with the help of earlier research undertaken by
Keith Chandler (1996; 1999), it was possible to determine that the earliest sound of the accordion was in fact that heard on home produced cylinder recordings made by the Scottish melodeon player, Peter Wyper, from about 1901, while the recordings made by John J. Kimmel between 1904 and 1905 were the earliest commercial recordings of the instrument. Another burning question in the early days of my research was when and where did the ‘B and C’ come from? While there was an accepted view among accordion players that Tipperary musician, Paddy O’Brien, had revolutionised the style of playing traditional music on a Paolo Soprani accordion tuned to B and C during the 1950s, there were also suggestions that the B and C accordion had been around before that. As noted by Blacking (1995: 161) “the moment of conscious change, in which individuals make a decision to move in a different direction, may have been preceded by a period of latency, in which there is a gradual feeling towards change”. It turned out that the B and C system had been played by Sonny Brogan and Bill Harte during the late 1930s and 1940s, and had in fact been championed much earlier by Peter Wyper, who played the B and C system in Scotland as early as 1915. The B and C Hohner Double Ray Black Dot accordion became available in April 1934, resulting in good quality B and C accordions becoming more widely accessible in Ireland. Accordion players began experimenting with a new style of playing the accordion chromatically. The whole issue of chromaticism also demanded consideration, and I found that there were a number of differences of opinion among accordion players as to whether the B and C is actually a chromatic or a two-row diatonic instrument which can be played chromatically. However, I have concluded that a way of dealing with this issue is to acknowledge that chromatic possibilities exist on two-row semi-toned accordions, and this study has shown that they existed as early as 1843 when Elias Howe Jr. published a tutor which contained a scale for the “semitoned or perfect accordeon” (Howe 1843: 1).

While mapping the journey of the accordion into Irish music, it gradually became evident that a number of distinct stages could be identified along that journey. The first involved the arrival of the instrument into the country in the early 1830s and its adoption by the better-off classes. The second encompassed the early days of the accordion’s use by the traditional music community from about 1870 onwards. This period was characterised by the decline of piping, the rise in popularity of set dancing, and a change in the social circumstances of many rural communities. The
next period could be said to have begun with the golden age of recording in America, when many Irish born accordion players, who had emigrated in the early years of the twentieth century, were simply in the right place at the right time. The accordion being played for those early recordings was still the one-row ten-key instrument adopted by traditional musicians in the Ireland of the late nineteenth century, and many virtuoso players, with inventive methods of circumventing the limitations of the instrument, were recorded at this time. The arrival of the two-row accordion signalled a further stage in the journey with musicians, both at home and abroad, experimenting with various tunings in the search for a solution to pitch problems posed by the available instruments.

The early years of the 1950s proved to be a watershed for the fortunes of the accordion in Irish music. The confluence of a number of events, including the founding of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ) and the development of an innovative style of playing the accordion, led to a new phase in the journey into tradition. Paddy O’Brien’s landmark recordings, made the night before he emigrated to America, took the world of accordion music in Ireland by storm. These recordings, coupled with O’Brien taking first place in the senior accordion competition at the 1953 All Ireland Fleadh Cheoil, set a new standard in Irish accordion playing. The pioneering method of playing an accordion tuned to B and C, initiated by Paddy O’Brien and further developed by Joe Burke, was embraced by competitors and although not a requirement, became the preferred style for CCÉ accordion competitions for the next three decades.

However, the 1970s heralded yet another phase in the journey with a challenge to the dominance of the B and C. Although he intentionally changed to the B and C style to compete, Jackie Daly returned to the older press and draw style of playing immediately after winning the senior accordion competition at the 1974 All Ireland Fleadh Cheoil. Again, as in the 1950s, the coming together of a number of circumstances contributed to a new era in accordion playing. Daly’s experiments with the tone of the accordion and the resultant dry sound, as heard on the album he recorded with Seamus Creagh, in addition to the international exposure of his style through his performances with the group De Danann, ensured that his playing had a major impact on a whole new audience of accordion players. This
resulted in many of them experimenting with C#/D accordions and retuning their instruments to the dry sound favoured by Jackie Daly, and later by Máirtín O’Connor. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a number of young musicians arriving into sessions with two accordions, one tuned in B and C and the other in C#/D, and as different tunes suited each system, they used which ever was more suitable. Other young B and C players who were attracted to the style of C#/D players consciously tried to emulate the bouncy articulation associated with the press and draw system without switching from the B and C system which they may have started on. Many players of the C#/D system began to revisit the music of the 78rpm era, and the music of Kimmel, Conlon and Derrane was reintroduced to a new generation of musicians. Joe Derrane himself even re-appeared after some twenty five years not playing Irish music on the button accordion. There was also a renaissance in single row accordion playing linked, in particular, to the revival of set dancing during the 1980s. It was as if, one hundred years after the accordion was first introduced to traditional musicians and set dancers, the wheel had come full circle and by the close of the twentieth century, the single row accordion, the two-row press and draw style, which was a development of the melodeon, and the B and C style, which was a totally different system of playing, were all happily co-existing within the Irish music tradition.

But while the melodeon and the C#/D and the B and C were all happily co-existing, were they really accepted in Irish traditional music, and if they were, at what point had they become accepted? The question could also be asked in another way: is the accordion accepted as an instrument on which traditional music can be played successfully, or is the accordion today considered to be a traditional instrument? Having followed the journey of the accordion into tradition and having noted the many changes in the instrument and its surroundings, as well as the resistance and opposition to it, I have to conclude that it has been accepted into Irish traditional music, and that that acceptance has taken place at various stages along the journey for different sectors of the traditional music and dance community. The arrival of the ten-key accordion, for example, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, was greeted with open arms by the set dancing community of the time, while organisations and individuals concerned with preserving traditional music certainly did not accept it and chose to ignore it.
completely. Similarly, the establishment of a new way of playing chromatically on a two-row accordion during the 1950s was widely accepted by large numbers of musicians, but there were also many dissenting voices who saw the press and draw system associated with the melodeon as more traditional despite the fact that, some fifty years earlier, it was considered to be an ‘alien instrument’.

While I believe that, at the opening of the twenty first century, the accordion is indeed accepted in Irish traditional music, I do not consider the journey to be complete. This work is just the tip of the iceberg and the possibilities for further study are endless. During initial research for this thesis, I contemplated beginning the story of the accordion’s journey around the early 1900s and the early days of recording which provide the first evidence of the sound of the instrument. However, I constantly found myself being drawn back further to the beginning of that journey, and the possibility of finding out where it all started. As the idea of a journey indicates a chronological element, this of course had consequences for the thesis as a whole, and resulted in difficult decisions being made about what to include and what to omit. Hence, there remain areas of study, pertaining to the accordion’s ongoing journey, that were beyond the scope of this thesis. Some of these have been alluded to in this concluding chapter; the fact that many young musicians in the 1990s were using both the C#/D and B and C systems, and the attempts by some B and C players to emulate the rhythmic articulation of the press and draw system are just two of them. The arrival of highly competent tuners of accordions such as Charlie Harris, Brendan Mulhare, John Brosnan and many more, and the effect their work is having on the acceptance of the instrument, is another area deserving of future study, as is the increase in the number of Irish makers of accordions.

This study has examined the relationship between the accordion and dancing, but another area of importance is the relationship between the accordion, the stage and the community of traditional music listeners. As it has done throughout the journey into tradition, the accordion has adapted to new situations encountered in these environments. These include blending in with other instruments in sessions – accordions have changed in size and timbre – blending with the classical music tradition in quartets and orchestras as Máirtín O’Connor has done, and having a
band formed around one accordion player such as the Sharon Shannon Band. All of these areas merit further study and would contribute additional information about the position of the accordion in Irish traditional music.

In presenting the main stages of the journey into tradition and in acknowledging the role of the individual in shaping and directing the paths taken by the accordion, it was possible to include only the stories of accordion players who were pivotal, in my opinion, in the initiation of a new phase in the accordion’s journey. Consequently, the valuable contributions of many great accordion players, both single and two-row players, to the ongoing story of the instrument’s journey into tradition could not be included in this thesis. While I regret this very much, the possibility of further study in this area is wide open, and there is no doubt but that a study of the vast amount of accordion players with individual styles, in Ireland and abroad, would fill another volume which would further confirm the acceptance of the instrument in the Irish music tradition.

As an illustration of how far the accordion has come in the journey into tradition I offer a final example, which I believe shows again how the wheel has come full circle. The opening and closing concerts of the 2009 Skerries Traditional Music Festival in Co. Dublin featured the very tight duet playing of two pairs of musicians. In each case the duet consisted of an accordion player and a piper playing in unison. The opening concert featured Sliabh Luachra accordion player, Paudie O'Connor with Dublin piper, John O'Brien, while the closing concert introduced two musicians born in the Irish Diaspora but now living in Ireland – Boston born Colm Gannon on accordion and London born Emmet Gill on pipes. Listening to the music and the seamless blend of the two instruments, one of which was in decline when the other arrived on the traditional music scene, one could be forgiven for thinking that both instruments had been in the tradition for the same amount of time. Certainly it was an illustration of how the accordion has claimed its place in Irish traditional music.
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Catalogue of Fieldwork Undertaken by the Author
1994 - 2010

Transcriptions of the following interviews are held in the author’s personal collection. Original letters, e mails to the author and transcriptions of lectures and phone calls relevant to this list are also held in the author’s possession.

Recorded Interviews:

The following list of interviews is arranged in chronological order

Denis O’Keeffe (Single-Row Accordion) 3 November 1994
Denis O’Keeffe was the seventh son of a seventh son and played a Globe Gold Medal single-row accordion which his brothers had bought for him in America and brought back to him in 1932. Previous to that he had played a three stop melodeon which was common all over Ireland at that time. Denis recalled that, when he was about five or six, his aunt used to play and he loved the sound of her music. In the early 1930s, Denis regularly played for dances in his locality known as “all night dances” because they would often start to play “at about nine or half past nine and play until six in the morning”.

Jack Doyle (Two-Row Accordion – D/C#) 7 May 1995
Jack Doyle comes from Camp, in Co. Kerry, and remembers a childhood full of music, recalling how “everyone in the house played”. His parents played concertina, flute and fiddle while his brother, Stanley, played the fiddle. The Doyle home was also a venue for visiting musicians. In 1947 Jack left Ireland for America where he eventually settled in Chicago, remaining there for fifteen years. While there, Jack changed to a one-row Baldoni-made accordion because the reeds were stronger than the Hohner, which he had been playing in Ireland. The Baldoni was more suited to the demands of the dancehalls where Jack often played up to seven nights a week. Jack brought the Baldoni accordion back with him on his return to Ireland, and also plays a two-row accordion made by F.H. Walters, which he plays in the American ‘Outside In’ system.
Dan Jeremiah O’Connor (Fiddle) 18 May 1995

Ned O’Connor (Fiddle / Two-Row Accordion – C#/D) 18 May 1995

Dan Jeremiah O’Connor came from Knockeenahone, Scartaglin, Co. Kerry and learned to play fiddle from Pádraig O’Keeffe, the legendary Sliebhalachra fiddle master who also taught some of his pupils how to play the melodeon. Ned O’Connor (no relation) comes from Mullen, Scartaglin and was also a pupil of Pádraig O’Keeffe. Dan Jeremiah and Ned played music together regularly in Fleming’s Pub in Scartaglin, and were widely recognised as having a great store of unusual local tunes, particularly slides and polkas. During this interview Ned explained that, although the fiddle was his first instrument, he learned to play the accordion so that he could play for dances.

William Hammond (Two-Row Accordion-C#/D/Banjo) 5 July 1995

From Cork, William, known as ‘Hammy’, played Irish traditional music on the banjo before taking up the accordion. Influenced by Jackie Daly’s press and draw style on the C#/D, William began playing on a C#/D accordion and, at the time of this interview, was attending Jackie Daly’s accordion class during the Willie Clancy Summer School in Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare. He believes that the C#/D style is more suited to dancing than the B and C style of playing.

Laurence Egan (Two-Row Accordion - B and C) 5 July 1995

Laurence Egan was a fifteen year old accordion player from Wexford when interviewed for this study. He was a B and C player as that was the system he began learning to play in music classes in his area. Although he had won the All Ireland accordion competition the previous year, he believed that competitions were “all strict technique”. He had become interested in the C#/D style of playing as he felt that “you can express yourself a lot better”. He was attending Jackie Daly’s accordion class at the Willie Clancy Summer School in Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare, to try out the C#/D system of playing.
**Jay Murphy** (Two-Row Accordion - B and C)  
**5 July 1995**

Jay Murphy lives in Co. Galway and began playing the button accordion “because it was in the house”. Her son was learning to play the fiddle at the time, her father-in-law “had a box” and, as “it was just there”, she began playing it. The accordion was tuned in B and C and she began attending classes where she learned by ear. Although she plays an accordion tuned to B and C, she is attracted to the sound of C#/D playing and this was her third year attending Jackie Daly’s class.

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**Paul Louden** (Two-Row Accordion – C#/D / Banjo)  
**19 July 1995**

Paul Louden is an accordion and banjo player originally from Sydney, Australia, but since the late 1990s, he has been resident in Feakle, Co. Clare. At the time of this interview Paul had been playing the accordion for two years and, like Jay Murphy above, started playing the accordion because “there was one in the house” where he was staying in Adelaide. The accordion he started on was a C#/D and, according to Paul, that was the main system played by all the accordion players he knew in Australia, apart from the Fitzgerald brothers in Melbourne, who played B and C at that time. Paul has always been impressed by the music of Jackie Daly and cites his recordings with Seamus Creagh and De Danann as main influences.

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**John Whelan** (Two-Row Accordion – B and C)  
**16 August 1995**

John Whelan grew up in Dunstable in England, and started playing B and C accordion in 1970, at the age of eleven. By the time he was fourteen; John had won the All Ireland accordion competition a number of times and recorded a solo album called *Pride of Wexford*. John has lived in America since 1980, having moved there after participating in the 1979 Comhaltas Tour. In this extensive interview he speaks at length about his musical life and influences, and stresses the importance of his family and in particular his father, Denis, in his musical development. He, John, describes how, because of his father’s passion for music, he was fortunate, as a young musician, to meet, hear and play with many of the prominent figures in the world of Irish accordion music. These included Paddy O’Brien, Joe Cooley, Joe Burke and Jackie Daly. John reflects that it wasn’t until much later in his musical life that the significance of those meetings was brought home to him.
Dr David Elliot

Dr. David Elliot is Professor of Music Education and Graduate Advisor for Music Education in the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions at New York University. He is a specialist in music education philosophy and was a visiting professor at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance (then The Irish World Music Centre) from 1996 to 1997. In this interview, he spoke about his grandfather, James Harry Elliot, who was from Co. Fermanagh and played the accordion, which he brought with him when he emigrated to New York around 1914. Dr. Elliot recalls how, as children, they would go to his grandfather’s house and listen to him playing “fast dance music” and “tapping his foot like crazy”. He also spoke at length about creativity and change in traditional music.

Dr. Ramon Santos

Dr. Ramon Santos is University Professor Emeritus at the University of the Philippines College of Music. A world renowned Filipino composer whose works have been performed in major music festivals around the world, he has completed extensive studies in Philippine traditional music and Southeast Asian and Southern China music. This interview was conducted with Dr. Santos during his visit to the Irish World Music Centre in November 1995. During the interview, the idea of how a new instrument becomes accepted into a tradition was explored as were the effects of such a development on the instrument and the tradition.

Dr. Graeme Smith

Accordion player and author of the 1992 Ph. D. thesis, The Social Meaning of Irish Button Accordion Playing Styles 1900–1975, Dr. Graeme Smith lectures in Musicology and Ethnomusicology at Monash University in Melbourne. In addition to Irish traditional dance music, his research interests include Australian folk music and country music, and the expression of community and nation in music. In this interview, the issue of the accordion being accepted or not in Irish traditional music was discussed, and the importance of individual players to that process was explored.
Dan Smith (Single-Row Accordion) 2 May 1996

Dan Smith was 93 years old when I interviewed him in 1996. He was a resident in the Carigoran Nursing Home in Co. Clare at the time. Dan had spent many years living and working in Philadelphia, in the United States, before returning to Ireland in the early 1960s, where he settled in Galway. He played a single-row accordion made by the American manufacturers, F.H. Walters, and had met the Flanagan brothers and knew of P. J. Conlon during his time in America. In this interview, Dan recalled learning to play the accordion from his aunt in the early years of the twentieth century. His memories of music and dancing in rural Ireland before his departure for America in 1927 provided important information for this study, as did his stories of life in Philadelphia, where he played in taprooms and dance halls.

Maureen Cronin (Melodeon / Fiddle) 20 May 1996

Maureen is a fiddle and melodeon player originally from Rockchapel, in North Cork, and now based in Ennis, Co. Clare. Her mother and grandmother played music on the concertina and she grew up in very musical surroundings. Her mother was a neighbour of the Sliabh Luachra fiddle master, Pádraig O’Keeffe, and Maureen remembers how her mother always had the concertina ready at hand in case a good tune came on the radio. She is a poet and a writer and, at the time of this interview, had four books of her poetry published with a fifth ready for publication. Her insights into traditional music, particularly the roles played by women accordion players, were very informative.

Joe McNamara (Two-row Accordion - G/G#) 2 Jul 1996

Joe McNamara was a native of Crusheen, Co. Clare, where he grew up in a musical household. His father played the concertina and, from an early age, Joe was brought to the weekly kitchen house dances in the locality, where he played any tunes he knew for the set dancers present. Joe was the first accordion player to record with the Tulla Céilí Band on 78rpm, and was a contemporary of accordion players, Joe Cooley from Peterswell in Co. Galway, and Paddy O’Brien from Portroe in Co. Tipperary. Joe’s insights into many areas of traditional music, from the 1930s on, proved very enlightening and the information he provided in relation
to house dances, clerical opposition to same, the influence of the radio, and accordion players in general, provided significant source material for this study.

**Andy McGann (Fiddle)**

9 November 1996

I spent a most entertaining morning interviewing Andy McGann and Felix Dolan together at a Green Linnet Festival in the Catskills in the United States, in November 1996. In conversation with both of them, the previous evening, they had made some interesting comments about the accordion’s place in Irish traditional music, and they agreed to put some of these observations on tape for this study. New York born Andy McGann began fiddle lessons with Catherine Brennan-Grant, before learning tunes from the legendary Sligo fiddle player, Michael Coleman, whom Andy played music with, on and off, up until Coleman’s death in 1945. Other influences on McGann’s playing included the music of fiddlers James ‘Lad’ O’Beirne, Paddy Killoran and Larry Redican. Felix Dolan, also from New York, is held in high regard for his distinctive style of piano accompaniment, and is also a flute player but, when interviewed for this study, he was wearing his accordion player’s hat.

**Jackie Daly (Two-Row Accordion - C#/D)**

26 March 1997

Accordion player, Jackie Daly, comes from Kanturk in Co. Cork. His music has been influenced by the strong fiddle based tradition of Sliabh Luachra, and by the music of the 78rpm era, particularly the music of accordion players John J. Kimmel, P. J. Conlon and Joe Derrane. He was a member of many of the prominent groups playing Irish traditional music on a world stage during the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. These included *De Danann*, *Patrick Street*, *Buttons and Bows*, *Arcady* and *Reel Union*. Jackie plays in the press and draw style on a C#/D accordion, and has been widely credited with introducing a new dimension to the history of accordion music in Ireland. He was a major influence on countless younger musicians throughout the closing decades of the twentieth century. In this interview he outlines his musical influences and career.
P.J. Hernon (Melodeon/Two-Row Accordion - B and C) 11 July 1997

P. J. Hernon plays melodeon in the press and draw style and two-row accordion in the B and C style. He is highly regarded as a player for dancers, and has been involved with a number of ceili bands, including The Shaskeen and The Swallow’s Tail. In this comprehensive interview, P.J. notes how, growing up in Carna in Connemara, the melodeon or single-row accordion was the “best loved and most common instrument”. He recalls his earliest musical memories, which included listening to 78rpm recordings of Joe Derrane, Michael Grogan and Paddy O’Brien, as well as travelling with his father to Dublin in 1955 to participate with Séamus Ennis, Joe Éiniú and Seán Ó Conaire in the Gael Linn sponsored Oícheanta Seanachaí. P. J. also comments on many of the developments in the world of the accordion in Irish traditional music in the second half of the twentieth century.

Patricia Kennelly (Two-Row Accordion – C#/D) 28 July 1997

Patricia Kennelly grew up in San Francisco where she learned to play the accordion from Joe Cooley. Joe was a regular visitor to Patricia’s family home during his years in San Francisco, and in this interview she speaks at length about his style of playing and the influence of Joe Cooley on her music. She recalls her earliest memories hearing him play in the family kitchen when she was very young, and gives details of how she learned to play the accordion from him. She describes Joe Cooley’s charismatic personality and outlines the influence he had on the folk music community in San Francisco during the 1960s.

Sharon Shannon (Two-Row Accordion – C#/D / B and C) 13 February 1998

Sharon Shannon is a household name with an international reputation. In this interview she provides a comprehensive account of her musical journey, from her earliest days growing up in a musical family in Co. Clare, to her work as a performer. She describes her influences and cites the fiddle playing of Tommy Peoples as the most important of these. She explains that, while family and the wider community provided her earliest contexts for the performance of traditional music on the accordion, it was contact with musicians from other musical disciplines that led her to the path she still travels today.
Máirtín O’Connor (Two-Row Accordion – C#/D) 19 February 1998

Máirtín O’Connor is recognised as one of the most innovative accordion players and composers in Irish traditional music. In this in-depth interview, he describes how his extended family provided his earliest introduction to the accordion and how a visitor to his locality gave him his first formal lessons on the instrument. Máirtín recalls that his first time hearing recordings of the piper Patsy Tuohy changed how he approached accordion playing. He explains the differences between the B and C and C#/D systems of playing, and outlines the main changes in the world of accordion music from the 78rpm era to the close of the twentieth century.

Verena Commins (Two-Row Accordion – B and C) 26 April 1998

Verena Commins is an accordion player born and raised in Coventry, England, where she initially learned to play from Cavan accordion player, Vincent Tighe. She has been resident in Galway since the early 1990s. Verena plays B and C accordion but is very influenced by the sounds, rhythms and expression of the press and draw style of playing. She actively seeks to incorporate elements of that style into her own playing. Verena is currently studying for a Ph. D. in the Centre for Irish Studies at NUI, Galway. Her working title is Culture Economies: Traditional Irish Music and the Concept of Sustainable Rural Development with the ‘Willie Clancy Summer School’ as her main case study.

Joe Derrane (Two-Row Accordion – D/C#) 2 July 1998

At the age of seventeen and while still at high school, Joe Derrane recorded 16 sides for the Copley label in Boston between 1948 and 1949. The virtuoso accordion playing on these 78rpm discs continues to astound musicians who hear them today. After nearly three decades not playing the button accordion, Joe made a spectacular comeback at the 1994 Wolf Trap Irish Folk Festival. In this interview he explains how he approaches accordion playing, and observes that the limitations of the single–row accordion encourages musical creativity. He also speaks about his lifelong fascination with accordions of all kinds, and describes the many pathways he followed throughout his musical life.
**Paudie O’Connor** (Two-Row Accordion – B and C)  
5 July 2000

Paudie O’Connor is an accordion player from Sliabh Luachra who has been influenced by the playing of Johnny O’Leary, Jimmy Doyle and Jackie Daly. He is also influenced by local fiddle players Paddy Cronin and Connie O’Connell. He is one of a group of B and C players who do not see the need to change to the C#/D system to achieve the sounds and rhythms associated with that system. In this interview, he indicates that he believes that the accordion is a medium through which he can play the music he enjoys listening to. He makes a number of observations regarding accordion competitions and the repertoire he associates with them, and comments on the position of the accordion in Irish traditional music at the beginning of the twenty first century.

**Seamus Connolly** (Fiddle)  
21 July 2006

Originally from Killaloe in Co. Clare, fiddle player Seamus Connolly now resides in Maine in the United States. He holds an endowed Chair at Boston College and is the ‘Sullivan Artist in Residence’. Seamus played fiddle from a young age and quickly achieved success at All Ireland Fleadhanna Cheoil. In this interview, he speaks at length about his admiration for accordion player Paddy O’ Brien. He describes his reaction when he first heard O’Brien’s music and outlines O’Brien’s musical generosity as well as the musical partnership that ensued after they first met. This resulted in a highly acclaimed duet recording – *The Banks of the Shannon*. It is directly because of Paddy O’Brien’s influence that Seamus is deeply passionate about ‘passing on’ his knowledge of Irish traditional music through his teaching, recording and publishing.

**Joe Ryan** (Fiddle)  
13 July 2007

Fiddle player, Joe Ryan, was born in Inagh, Co. Clare in 1928 and grew up in a musical environment where house dances were at the centre of much of the musical activity. In the 1940s, his family moved to Meath, and Joe, by then a carpenter, moved to Dublin where he was influenced by the music of Tommy Potts and fellow Clare man, John Kelly, with whom Joe played music regularly. In the early 1950s, Joe moved to London where his musical colleagues included Máirtín Byrnes, Bobby Casey, Tommy McCarthy, Raymond Roland and Roger Sherlock.
In this interview, the last before Joe passed away in March 2008, Joe, as well as elaborating on the accordion itself, speaks at some length, and often entertainingly, about house dances, the role of the clergy in their demise, and the great music to be heard at them.

Kevin Doyle (Two-Row Accordion – C#D) 9 August 2007

Kevin Doyle was born in 1926 in Bunnahown, north of Crusheen in Co. Clare, and grew up in a house known as a great venue for music and dancing during the 1930s and 1940s. Dances were held every Sunday night in the Doyle house, with people walking for miles to attend. Regular visitors included accordion players Joe and Mick Cooley, along with fiddle player Joe O’Leary. Kevin and Joe Cooley shared accommodation when both of them worked in Dublin before Kevin emigrated with his entire family to Australia during the 1950s. Kevin returns to Ireland as often as he can, and when interviewed for this study in his 81st year, the main focus was on his memories of the house dances, clerical reaction to them, and also his memories of his friend, Joe Cooley.

John Ryan (Three-Row accordion – B/C/D) 18 July 2010

John Ryan is from Rochester in New York, and plays a three-row accordion tuned in the keys of B/C/D, which allow him to use the press and draw style on the D row and B and C style on the two outside rows. This tuning was developed by another Rochester accordion player, Ted McGraw, who came up with the idea in an effort to curtail the need to carry around two accordions, one tuned in C#/D and the other in B and C. On the 18th of July, John Ryan was in the middle of an eighty day trip around Ireland and arrived into Kinvara, in Co. Galway, where I was introduced to what could possibly be an innovative solution to the problem of carrying around a B and C accordion and a Press and Draw style accordion.
Lectures Recorded and Transcribed:


Lecture to Aonach Paddy O’Brien Traditional Music Weekend

Joe Derrane, who had just returned to playing the button accordion, after an absence of over three decades, speaks about his personal musical journey.

Joe Burke (Two-Row Accordion – B and C): 5 April 1999.

Lecture to the Galway School of Traditional Music

Joe Burke, one of the most influential accordion players in the history of Irish traditional music, outlines the history of the accordion in that music and introduces the audience to different styles of accordion players through recordings.

Personal Communications by Letter to the Author:

Paddy O’Brien (Offaly) (Two-Row Accordion – B and C):


Accordion player Paddy O’Brien is originally from Co. Offaly. He was a member of the Castle Ceilí Band and Ceoltóirí Laighean, before moving to America, where he now resides in Minneapolis. In these letters, the difference between the style of B and C as played by Sonny Brogan and Bill Harte and that later developed by Tipperary accordion player, Paddy O’Brien, is detailed. The type of accordions available prior to the arrival of the powerful Paolo Soprani models are also outlined, as are the influences of the 1954 recordings made by Tipperary accordion player Paddy O’Brien on the eve of his departure for America.
Personal Communications by E-mail to the Author:

Keith Chandler:

Dates: 2 September 1999, 14 September 1999, 7 November 1999

Keith Chandler is an authority on accordion music from the 78rpm era and his knowledge, in particular, of the accordion in Scottish music, was extremely helpful during the course of this study. He has written numerous articles on the subject and has reviewed many reissues of music from that period. Through e-mail correspondence, he made this material available along with samples of his own newspaper research.

Éamon de Buitléar:

Dates: 25 April 2008 (x2), 28 April 2008

Éamon de Buitléar played the accordion with Seán Ó Riada’s Ceoltóirí Chualann and introduced Ó Riada to fiddle player John Kelly and accordion player Sonny Brogan, who also became members of the group. After Ó Riada’s death in 1972, Éamon formed Ceoltóirí Laighean. Through e-mail correspondence, Éamon provided valuable information for this study relating to Sonny Brogan and his time with Ceoltóirí Chualann.

Brian McGee:

Dates: 8 April 2008, 10 April 2008 (x 4), 16 April 2008

Brian McGee is Sonny Brogan’s grandson and contact was made with him by coincidence. As information about Sonny Brogan was difficult to come by during research for this study, I did a ‘Google’ search and I could not believe it when a Sonny Brogan website popped up. I contacted the site and received a reply from Brian who, through his mother, Éilis Brogan, Sonny’s daughter, provided important biographical details for Sonny Brogan.
Ted McGraw:


Accordion player, Ted McGraw, lives in Rochester, New York. An engineer by profession, he re-tuned a three-row accordion to B/C/D to allow him to play both the press and draw style and the B and C style on one accordion, thereby eliminating the need to carry two accordions. I was introduced to this system by John Ryan and, through him, made contact by e-mail with Ted. Very graciously, Ted made details of his re-tuning available to me by e-mail correspondence.

Patricia Grogan:

Date: 26 Oct 2010.

Patricia Grogan is Ann ‘Ma’ McNulty’s granddaughter. Her mother was Eileen McNulty and along with her brother Peter they performed with their mother in one of the leading Irish-American acts based in New York from the late 1920s until the early 1960s. In this e-mail correspondence Patricia sent detailed information about her grandmother as well as photographs of the McNulty Family. She also included recordings which featured ‘Naneen’ playing dance music on solo accordion as well as some recordings of the McNulty Family.

Personal Communications by Phone to the Author

Paddy Ryan (Fiddle) 17 August 2007

Paddy Ryan is a fiddle player from Co. Roscommon. During his time in England, he came into contact with Rose Conlon Murphy, a sister of accordion player P.J. Conlon, one of the first Irish born accordion players to be recorded during the 78rpm era. Rose Murphy played the melodeon and fiddle and during a phone call with Paddy, where we discussed both P. J. Conlon and his sister Rose, Paddy recalled what Rose had said to him about the way her brother played the single row accordion when they were growing up.
Charlie Harris (Single / Two-Row Accordion) 11 January 2010

Charlie Harris plays both single and two-row accordion, and is a highly regarded tuner and repairer of the instruments. He is also a mine of knowledge about Irish accordion playing during the 78rpm era, and his music has been very influenced by the recordings of John J. Kimmel and P. J. Conlon. During this phone call, he provided information about Westmeath accordion player Michael Grogan and, in particular, the pitch of Grogan’s accordion as heard on his early recordings during the 1930s.

Dermot Byrne (One/Two-Row Accordion – B and C/C#/D) 12 May 2010

Dermot Byrne is from Co. Donegal and spent much of his youth in the south west of the county in Teelin and Glencolmcille, where he was brought up listening to fiddle players John Doherty, the two brothers known as the ‘Deargs’, James Byrne and Con Cassidy. He plays both B and C and C#/D and is a member of the traditional music group Altan. In this phone call he outlined his reasons for playing both systems.

Informal Conversations with the Author:

Steve Chambers 21 August 2009

Steve is a highly regarded instrument collector and musical instrument historian, especially in the area of concertinas and accordions. He plays accordion and concertina and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of these instruments and their histories. In this conversation, during the Cruinniú na mBáid festival in Kinvara, he confirmed that Scottish accordionist, Peter Wyper, played an accordion tuned in B and C as early as 1915.

Newspapers Consulted:

The Freeman’s Journal: 1800 - 1920

The Galway Vindicator: 1846 - 1859
Radio Programmes Consulted:

RTE Radio 1 – *The Long Note: 1990 - 1992*
This series was scripted and presented by the author from 1990 to 1992, and a full set of transcriptions of the programmes, from 1990 to 1992, is in the author’s possession.

RTE Radio 1 – *Is Nostalgia a Thing of the Future: 18 Jan 1982*


Radio Sheffield: *Rose Anne Murphy: Special Folk Show 1976*

Television Programmes Consulted:

*A River of Sound: The Changing Course of Irish Traditional Music:*
Full Series 1995

*Sé mo Laoch - Joe Derrane: 19 Sept 2002*

*The Accordion Strikes Back: BBC 1: 1985*