

MUSIC and THE CLAN IRWIN ASSOCIATION

Our CIA Chairman Barbara Edelman recently sent me copies of music associated with the Irwin surname which had been shared in past Holly Leaf Chronicles. These are wonderful song texts about Irwins, Irvings and Irvines. They include an ancient harp tune Planxty* Irwin by Turlough O'Carolan; ballads, The Laird of Drum (mentioned in James M Irvine's new book on the Irwin Surname) and Kirkconnel Lea; dance tunes, The Irvings' Welcome to Bonshaw Tower (Strathspey) and Kirtlewater (Reel); and even a slow air for pipes, Major Irvine of Barra which was dedicated to Clan Irwin. Barb and I discussed just how we could make these available on our Association Website so that everyone can enjoy them. We could create a link to a Clan Irwin Association UTube Channel or another of the many music apps so that clan folk could contribute music individually or in groups. There are many new resources available for doing this sort of thing. Musicians, both professional and amateur, have been sharing music on social media during our recent unpleasant confinement. I have been recording O'Carolan tunes on my channel. Any CIA members who would like to participate in this exciting new venture, please do let us know!

My journey with Scottish and Irish music began in 1964-5 while attending the University of St Andrews in Scotland. I was familiar with folk music as I came of age during the sixties. I had played the piano and joined singing groups wherever I could. I took a guitar with me to St Andrews and joined a Folk Music Club. The University had a St Andrews Student's Song Book for use at "sing-alongs" which included Scottish, Irish, and American folk songs. Traveling extensively throughout Europe that year, I was able to add folk songs and tunes from other countries. Some years later, I learned to play Bluegrass tunes on a 5 Stringed Banjo. There is saying that "old age doesn't come on its own" and mine came with arthritis in my hands. No longer able to play stringed instruments, I happily discovered that I could easily convert all the folk songs and tunes I knew to the piano and enjoy them all over again, and the playing actually helps the arthritis!

It was serendipitous for me to see that Planxty Irwin was included in this collection. I first heard an arrangement for guitar many years ago. It was the first tune by O'Carolan that I recorded after composing a couple of variations on the melody and arranging the accompaniment. O'Carolan (1670-1738), was the last of the Irish harper-composers and the only one whose pieces have survived in any number. His music is often referred to as Folk-Baroque as he was influenced by the Italian Baroque, popular in Ireland at that time. This tune was composed for Colonel John Irwin of Tanrego House in County Sligo, Ireland in about 1714, not long after the peace of Utrecht when the Colonel came home from the wars, including exploits in Flanders. My husband Andy and I had a grand time finding Tanrego House while on a trip to Ireland in 2017. The words are nice but takes a bit of creativity when trying to sing them to the tune. Colonel Irwin must have been a jolly fellow!

We will take our way without delay, to see a Noble, brave and gay.
The Gallant Colonel, near the sea, Him I mean to treat of:
With mirth and joy he fills his glasses, delights to cheer both lads and lasses,
This is John I will answer, the brave English Irlander.

PLANXTY IRWIN



An Irish folk singer-songwriter named Andy Irvine was the founder of the Irish band Planxty and they have an arrangement of Planxty Irwin on one of their albums. They also recorded The Ballad of Billy Gray, written by Norman Blake, an American singer-songwriter, who was born in Chattanooga, TN, where I was born. Andy Irvine said that he heard that song being played in a Pub in Cork, Ireland and liked it enough to record it. This is good example of how folk songs travel the world. I will be sharing stories of the other songs and tunes and giving updates on the proposed music project in future articles in the Holly Leaf Chronicle. STAY TUNED!

Susan Irvine McRae

*Cutting through the speculation of just what PLANXTY means, The Chieftains' original harper, the late Derek Bell, said in an interview, "Nobody knows the meaning of the word Planxty. It does not mean 'Slainte' (Here's a health)...Definitely by a psychologic reference, a word like Planxty is an onomatopoetic reference to the plunking of the wire harp string and he (Carolan) decided to make up his own little word and that was the end of it. That's my theory." (Fair Melodies, Turlough Carolan: An Irish Harper, Art Edelstein p.92) I rather like this explanation best!