

THE REGULARS DISCUSS TRADITIONAL SINGING

Ten o'clock of a Tuesday night at Danny Finn's. Most of the regulars were there, although a good few were watching the Red Sox game on the big-screen TV at the end of the bar. Mike the dog had decided to spend the night with the kids, so I was solo. I sat down and ordered a cider - for the vitamin C of course - and noticed after the usual greetings that the conversation in progress seemed to be about singing.

- And do you remember that night when Joe Heaney came into this very pub? asked The Bunser. - He was up here visiting some relatives and they brought him here. Begod that man could sing the horns off a puck goat, in either the Irish or the English. Big baritone voice, it would put a chill up your spine to hear him. The sean-nós singing at its best, if you ask me.

- I recall it only too well, replied Rooskey. - Joe sang "Rocks of Bawn" in English, then that Irish one about the Connemara cowboys. I never heard the like . . . what a singer. Your man Graham from the North is fine too, and Frank Harte the Dublin man, but Heaney was one of a kind.

- A moment, Rooskey. What may I ask are you talking about with your Connemara cowboys? asked Larry Doyle, slowly putting down his pint. - I was here that night too and heard him sing no such song, at least as far as I could tell.

- He most certainly did, replied Rooskey emphatically. - I recall someone, I think as a matter of fact it was your wife's cousin Dennis, asked Joe the name of the song, and he said "Casey and Two-Gun" as clearly as I'm speaking to you now. Dennis and I couldn't figure it out, neither of us having much of the Irish, but after a lot of heavy thinking and a couple or three Jameson's each, we came to the conclusion that Casey and Two-Gun must be the Connemara version of Butch Cassidy and the Sun-dance Kid . . . I was about to ask Joe Heaney if he'd give us a verse or two of "Rose of San Antone" in Irish, but he launched into "Morrissey and the Russian Sailor", all 37

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verses, before I had the chance to say anything. But I have to tell you I was surprised to hear him sing cowboy songs, especially in Irish.

As commonly happened after statements of Rooskey's touching on cultural matters, there developed a certain degree of confusion mingled with consternation among the assemblage. Most affected were Paddy Joyce and Liam the Tailor, both of whom had grown up in west Galway and who looked upon themselves - if not always each other - as the pub's sole true guardians of the Tradition (always spoken of with a capital T). Now they were engaged in a heated conversation with one another, a bilingual conversation punctuated by slaps on the bar and questioning looks at Rooskey.

Finally Liam the Tailor left his stool and walked over slowly to Rooskey.

And can you recall any of the words of this "Casey and Two-Gun", friend Rooskey? he inquired with as much civility as he could muster. - Because you know I grew up in Leitir Mór, far out in Connemara, not ten miles from Carna where Joe Heaney was from. And I heard all the songs as my mother and father (God rest the pair of them) had them from their grandparents, and as Joe Heaney himself had them from his parents . . . It was obvious to all that Liam the Tailor was making perhaps the supreme effort of his life to keep control of his temper, which could grow to alarming proportions very quickly.

He paused briefly, his bright blue eyes flashing no further than six inches from Rooskey's face. - *AND NOT ONE TIME DID I EVER HEAR ANY REFERENCE TO A CASEY OR A TWO-GUN!*, he almost screamed. - *NOT ONE TIME EVER!*

The pub rattled; Jimmy the bartender had to make a swan dive to keep twobottles of top shelf Scotch from crashing to the floor. Larry Doyle, who had

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gone to the gent's, ran back inside at the sound of the screech and didn't come out again for several minutes, and then only very carefully. A young couple sitting quietly in the corner holding hands across the table got up and practically ran out of the pub. I silently thanked St. Francis that Mike the Dog had taken the night off.

Rooskey was shaken but unconvinced. - *I may be a simple Longford man, Liam Kenneally, he said in a voice that was itself a marvel of self-control. - And I may not have the command of the Irish tongue that you and Mr Joyce have, I blame the Christian Brothers for that, especially if you must know a big Cork bosthoon named Brother Vanillus or some such who used beat the bejayzus out of us with a hurley bat when we couldn't get out poor Longford infant tongues around the big Irish words in the Creenanaspal, the Apostles' Creed . . . he'd call us amadháns and eejits and much worse in two languages, three if you count Corkonian . . . but as far as I'm concerned, "Casey and Two-Gun" was the name of the song, and no amount of ill temper or bad manners from you is going to change it.*

Liam the Tailor was about to reply when The Bunser, who had been sitting quietly enjoying the whole performance, suddenly jumped off his stool with an inspired look on his face. - *This song you're talking about - is this the way it goes?* he asked, humming a few bars of music to a Rooskey still trying to catch his breath after his previous impassioned oration to Liam the Tailor.

- *'Tis indeed, cried Rooskey. - The very same "Casey and Two-Gun" that Joe Heaney sang in this pub years ago . . . let's see, how does it go again ? . . .*

The Bunser's face was strangely contorted, and it looked for all the world as if he were biting the insides of his cheeks to keep from laughing. Liam the Tailor and Paddy Joyce were under no such constraints - they were laughing so hard that they had tears in their eyes. Everyone else at the bar, even the TV contingent who hadn't paid much attention to the discussion prior to this, was in total confusion wondering what was so funny.

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- *Rooskey my treasure*, said The Bunser, gently placing his hand on the other man's shoulder. - *The name of that song is "Casadh an tSugáin". It means "the twisting of the rope" in Irish. The Irish sounds like "Casey and Two-Gun", but it's not a cowboy song and it has nothing to do with any Two-Gun Casey except to you and Dennis who tried to make some sense of the whole thing by making up an English name that sounds a lot like the Irish name. Dennis, bless his heart, was just trying to be helpful.*

Rooskey nodded, but from the vacant look in his eyes it was obvious that the comprehension level was still minimal. - *You understand what I'm telling you?* asked The Bunser, and Rooskey nodded with all the conviction of a rubber German shepherd.

But the confusion was obviously not confined to Rooskey alone. - *Very ingenious*, said Larry Doyle, nodding with a serious look as the two Connemara men continued to gasp with laughter a few stools away. - *Very novel and ingenious. And the song about the twisting of a rope, now that could refer to a lasso of some sort that Two-Gun Casey found helpful in his occupation, I often remember seeing Tom Mix using one at the Saturday afternoon double-feature when I was a nipper, he could do all manner of marvelous things with it. I think he had a name for it . . . or maybe that was his horse. I wonder did Two Gun Casey have a horse as well . . . ?*

- *I repeat: it's not Two-Gun Casey, but 'Casey and . . . or no, 'Casadh' . . .* The Bunser, realizing the futility of the effort, stopped abruptly in mid-sentence and sat down defeated on his stool. After a moment's reflection - and, as he said later, a short but heartfelt prayer for forgiveness for having gotten involved in any way, shape, or form in the conversation - he practically begged Jimmy the bartender for a double Bushmills, which he downed in one determined gulp.

- *And why wouldn't he have a horse?* Rooskey was asking defiantly in the meantime. - *Do you think he rode around on an old one-eyed jennet? No, nothing but*

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the finest sleekest beast for our Two-Gun . . . a capall bán mór, he spat out with a vicious look in the direction of the Connemara men, who looked at one another and started chortling again. - That's 'a big white horse', he explained for Larry Doyle's benefit.

Larry Doyle slid his stool closer to Rooskey's. Great fiction was about to be created, the Tradition was about to be enhanced, and he wanted to be part of it.

- I wonder if Joe Heaney had something in the song about those Indian maidens, lovely long dark hair and feathers and beads, begod I couldn't get enough of them when I was young, Larry Doyle said. - I often wished the Cherokees or Apaches or whatever they were would decide to leave the prairie and settle in the next parish to ours. Oh, maybe not all of them, just a few families, and daughters with names like "Gentle Dove" and "Spotted Fawn" . . . well, they never showed up, and when I got tired of waiting I married my late wife, you all knew her, one of the O'Kellys from Leitrim, and after the second week of marriage I knew she would never be mistaken for a dove or a fawn or any other non-threatening creature. And that family of hers were as close as ever I got or would want to get to a fierce warlike tribe of accursed heathens. Sure covering themselves with war-paint and waving tommyhawks and bloody scalps would have represented a big improvement over their usual behavior, especially when they came to visit us. It used take us days to clean up the mess. I swear to God her brother Tommy drank two gallons of kerosene - I swore it was in the garage when they came and nothing but an empty container was there when they left. But I could never prove it.

- And isn't it a miracle that Joe Heaney would have a song about all of this, in Irish too, said Rooskey. - Amazing the way the two cultures, Celtic and cowboy, manage to . . . to intertwine. He nearly broke four of his fingers trying to demonstrate to Larry Doyle what he meant by "intertwine". - Well, that's what makes our own traditional singing so wonderful. Even if we don't understand all of it, still you get the feeling out of it, you get out of it what you bring to it.

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- Well said, Rooskey, hear hear! said Larry Doyle. *- Bring a lot of yourself to it, and get as much back. Very well said indeed.*

The Connemara men were past laughter and into helpless head-shaking and tear-wiping when The Bunser and I left the pub. Larry Doyle and Rooskey waved a quick good-bye and got back to the business at hand. You could almost

sense Two-Gun Casey, his bold capall bán mór, his trusty lasso, and the Indian maidens all coming alive in that tiny corner of Danny Finn's pub, being welcomed into the Irish tradition. You knew that very soon everybody left in the bar, including the Connemara men, would be deeply involved in the creative process (and as we heard the next night from Jimmy the bartender, that's exactly what transpired).

The cider had started to get to me, but I almost hated to leave. Somewhere in Heaven, I was sure, Joe Heaney was trying to figure it all out. I hoped Flann O'Brien was around to help.

- Slán abhaile, Mr. B., said The Bunser, who was heading to the gent's as I got up to head out. *- Sounds like a lot of traditions are in mortal danger in there. Let us pray they survive the night.*

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