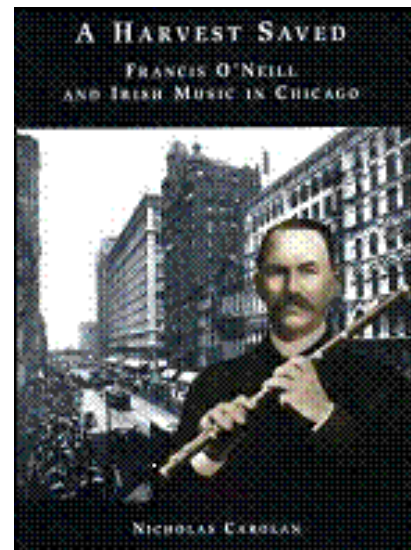


## Francis O'Neill – The Savior of Traditional Irish Music

People who love Irish music agree with Tommy Makem when he says, "Irish music is a vast reservoir and vital resource and is as strong, and maybe even stronger today than ever before." But the reservoir of Irish music was almost dry years ago before an Irish born Chicago police officer took it upon himself to save Irish traditional music.

That police officer was Francis O'Neill, the youngest of seven children, born in Tralibane, County Cork in 1848, during the great famine. At the age of 16, his family sent him off to enter the priesthood, but instead he became a cabin boy on an English merchant vessel who landed in San Francisco in 1866. He did some ranching in Montana, spent some time in New Orleans and Missouri. In Missouri, he married Anna Rogers, whom he had met on one of his voyages from Ireland. They moved to Chicago in 1870 where they raised ten children.

In 1873, O'Neill joined the Chicago police department. He quickly rose in the ranks in the police department through his natural intelligence and political savvy. In 1901, he was named General Superintendent, where he earned respect for his efforts to reform what had been a corrupt police department. He was also to gain recognition for his toughness and honesty. In 1905 he retired and devoted the rest of his life to his great love of Irish music gained during his childhood in Ireland where he learned to play the flute and listen to the musicians at crossroad dances near his home.



In American, O'Neill saw that while Irish music was being played from memory, it was not written down. His avocation became to write down on paper what he heard played by visiting Irish musicians, or what he overheard in shops, on streetcars, or any place that was playing Irish music. The Captain formed the Irish Music Club with the many Chicago Irish musicians. With the Club and help from his nephew, James O'Neill, he began to collect and publish Irish music.

By taking advantage of his position in the police department, he would hire any pipers coming to the Chicago area and put them on the police force. He would have them play their music which he would reproduce on his tin whistle or flute for a police sergeant who would write the music down. Searching old books, diaries, letters and other publications, he would

cross reference the various tunes and words. Through these means he made an enduring contribution to his native Ireland and Irish culture through the gathering and publication of the largest collection of Irish music ever assembled.

His collection of songs and tunes was donated to the University of Notre Dame in 1931. By the time of his death in 1937 at age 87, he was credited with publishing eight books, among which were *Music of Ireland, Dance Music of Ireland, Gems of Irish Melody, Irish Melodies, and Waifs and Strays of Gaelic Melody*. In all he collected 3,500 traditional Irish tunes, some dating back to 1550. Richard Jones, a music librarian at the University of Notre Dame, says, "The music would have died or it would have gotten changed so much the original never would have been remembered." Some of the music cannot be found anywhere else. He also wrote of his experiences in collecting Irish music in *Irish Folk Music, A Fascinating Hobby (1910)* and *Irish Minstrels and Musicians (1913)*.

Yet, in his last years, O'Neill was a "very disappointed man," said Mary Mooney Lesch, his great-granddaughter, "as he felt the Irish would love the music, but they wanted American music." Today he remains an obscure figure, but he is greatly admired by the traditional Irish music lovers. Paddy Ryan, music officer of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann, the organization that promotes traditional music in Ireland, concurs. He said, "Chicago is a very important place in the history of Irish Traditional Music, because of Francis O'Neill." In County Cork he has been honored with a statue, and in the fall of 1999, the Chief O'Neill Pub and Restaurant was opened in Chicago by All-Ireland musicians Brendan and Siobhan McKinney to celebrate Francis O'Neill's life and achievements and to keep his musical tradition alive and well in the city he loved.

Journalist Leonard Aronson highlighted Francis O'Neill in his "Chicago Stories" series. In the profile he compares American music to Irish as follows: "Popular music in America tends to be generational, connecting listeners in one generation, but dividing them from those of others. In Ireland, because the traditional music has been respected and virtually unchanged for hundreds of years... it is music that somehow helps us cross the barriers of class, age and ethnicity and makes us feel that we are all in this together." As is customary with Irish cops, they take action when it is needed. When Irish music needed a savior, Francis O'Neill took action.

(Written by Joseph McCormack, November 2004)

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