Policing Irish Music: Capt. Francis O'Neill and Traditional Music in Chicago

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Abstract

This article situates Francis O'Neill in the context of Chicago's police department and in the context of other collectors of his era. O'Neill administered a large urban police force in a booming dynamic city. The article finds parallels between policing and collecting, and it further points to colonialist practices that O'Neill's genuine and heartfelt enthusiasm for Irish music obscure. Like other collectors, O'Neill focused on identifying and extracting unique, rare, and distinct tunes from community rather than on documenting his community's habitual practices and ordinary tunes.

Keywords: Ireland, traditional music, Chicago, policing, oral tradition

Irish music might be described as an unruly business. Especially regarding dance music, there is the long tradition of avoiding standard tune names, or forgetting the names of tunes, or refusing to name them altogether.[1] Hornpipes can turn into reels and reels into jigs, and the tune and its turn may migrate. There's the relative disinterest in harmony, with its stresses on theory and rules. There's the stubbornly non-standard pitch and a creeping regional modality. And there's the historical tradition of disreputability: the dance music being disdained by the upper classes and the church, subject to aspirational regulation, chased into farm kitchens and pubs, hounded in folk memory by censorious priests breaking up the crossroads dance. So much of the lore and legend of Irish traditional music extols the itinerant piper, unencumbered by domestic duties, regular hours of employment, or requirements of respectable decorum; knowing no rules other than the customs of local hospitality. An unruly business altogether, compared with, say, it's much more popular but less celebrated 19th century peer, the brass band, derived from military practice– orderly and rule-bound. Even today, when people meet to play Irish traditional music in a pub session, there are rules, but they typically must not be spoken or formalized: the entire business should appear "unruly" and most certainly ungovernable.

So it's interesting that the single most influential collection of Irish dance music, a collection of 1001 instrumental tunes, came from Chicago police chief Francis O'Neill, a man professionally dedicated to the enforcement of rules, laws and civic codes, formalized in statute books and enforced with the help of lawyers, judges and jails: a man who, at all times, stressed his police rank and graced every book he published with images of himself in the full uniform of the General Superintendent of Police. Yet here is his printed means to access an unruly artform.

O'Neill's Music of Ireland, published in 1903 while he was Chief, collected 1850 pieces of Irish music and was the largest collection of specifically Irish music to date.[2] He followed that book in 1907 with *Dance Music of Ireland*, a collection of 1001 instrumental dance tunes, often referred to as "the Bible" of Irish traditional music. Following that, he published two extremely valuable anecdotal histories of Irish music and musicians, based on his experiences as a collector and a lover of the music. Aileen Dillane (2016) has described the relationship between O'Neill's output and his adopted city and the degree to which O'Neill's Chicago, as a particular expression of modernity, as an organizing principle, and as civilizing force, shaped the way in which musical knowledge was collected and arranged for redistribution in the latter part of the long nineteenth century.[3]

To build his collections, O'Neill drew on published and unpublished manuscripts as well as the musical practices of the Chicago Irish. In Chicago the Cork-born O'Neill could hear tunes from every county in Ireland. As Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman have noted about O'Neill's Chicago,

> Ireland came to O'Neill, it is often argued, in relatively undisturbed social totality in the shape of a large and representative migrant community in Chicago, allowing for a view of the island that would have been more or less impossible back at home at this particular time. (Stokes and Bohlman, 2003: 20)

O'Neill used his status as a police captain to find good musicians jobs on the force, and he relied on a network of officers to find musicians with distinctive tunes in Chicago's vast neighborhoods. He would get reports from a patrolman or sergeant of someone who had a lot of tunes, and then off he would go to see if the man had a tune they never heard before–a new one for the collection.[4]

The music collections required an extensive effort of curation and comparison, much of it done with sergeant James O'Neill (no relation). Was this tune a distinct tune, or just a variation of another tune? Was the B part of this tune the same as the A part of this other tune? The second phrase in this tune–it sounds American not Irish. Shall we change it? The tunes arrived, often, in a profound disorder–the disorder of urban life in Chicago, with its boomtown growth and its population of drifters, chancers and criminals; the disorder of America's mixed vaudeville commerce, full of ethnic imposture and cross-cultural appropriation; the disorder of politics, the politics of Chicago graft and favour mongering, and the sometimes-murderous factional politics of Irish nationalism. O'Neill had to sort out all these things at once. His police work and his collecting were closely related.[5]

A thoughtful, intelligent man, O'Neill saw the role of the police as "keeping order", a phrase that obscured the class interests he served. When he directed his patrolmen to intervene in the Pullman strike of 1894, the biggest strike in US history, he explained that protecting replacement workers, allowing scabs to replace strikers, was keeping order. A man of orderly habits who did not drink, smoke, or gamble, O'Neill found refuge in order, both as a policeman and as a music collector.[6]

Scientific categorization in police work

Officer O'Neill was an ardent supporter of systems of order. As he rose through the ranks on his way to the Chief's position, he was particularly enthusiastic about the Chicago police department's pioneering work in forensic record keeping–mug shots, Bertillon measurements, and statistics on crime and recidivism (see Figure 1 below). Chicago was the second or third largest city in the US; heavily industrialized, dynamic and innovative. It was also notoriously violent, even by US standards, and police used a number of techniques to try to track and identify criminals and suspects.

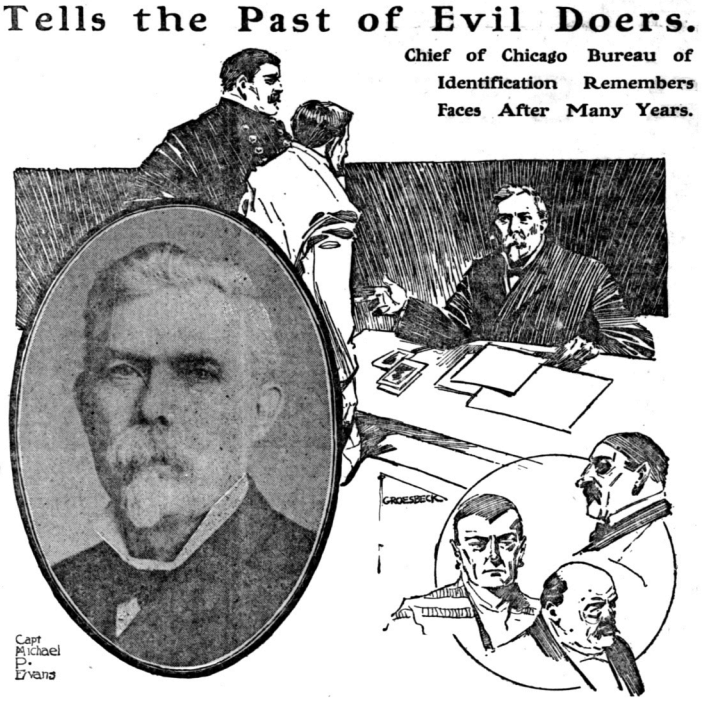

Figure 1 – *Chicago Tribune*, 7 May 1903

The "Rogues' Gallery" was one method: police photographed each suspect, recorded their name and crime, then figured some way to organize them for efficient review, which was the difficult

part. O'Neill frequently assisted Captain Michael Evans, who ran the photographic bureau and patented a method of storing and accessing the photographs. When the Chicago police started their "Rogues Gallery" in the 1880s, working with Evans gave O'Neill "a great deal of practical experience in taking snapshots of thugs". O'Neill said of his time taking pictures of crooks, "that is one of my sins that has not been found out". He said this after his music collecting activities were similarly made public, probably in an unsuccessful attempt to embarrass him by political enemies. In February 1901, someone had called the police and the newspapers claiming O'Neill had been kidnapped or assassinated: he had slipped out to play some music with his frequent collaborator Sergeant James O'Neill. The story made front page news: it was the first time O'Neill's collecting activities were exposed.[7]

Mug shots were never as reliable as claimed. Consider these four photographs taken from the small collection of "mug shots" in the Chicago History Museum's photo archives (see Figure 2).

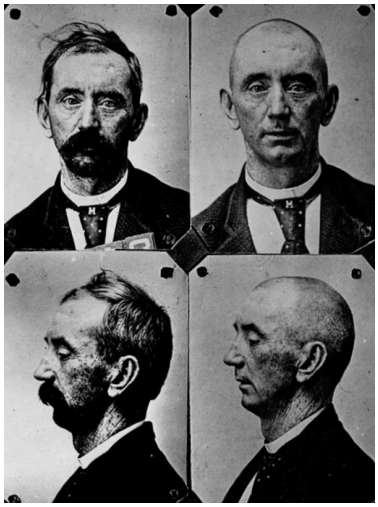

Figure 2 – Convicts-Rogues Gallery. Created between 1889 and 1895, when O'Neill was a Lieutenant and then Captain in the Police. Chicago History Museum, ICHi-176773

Is this the same man, or two different men? Would you send a man to jail, or the gallows, on this evidence?

Criminals would often try to thwart the camera by distorting their features or by moving their heads. Nineteenth century mug shots will sometimes include the hands of two policemen, pressed against the skull of the unfortunate detainee to keep him from blurring the shot. A short Edison film from 1904, *Subject for the Rogue's Gallery*, dramatized this process (https://youtu.be/0VxGqjtuJuE). And in this cartoon from the *Chicago Daily News*, O'Neill is part of a team of cops struggling to hold "the grafter" still so he can be photographed for the "Rogue's Gallery" (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 – *Chicago Daily News*, 27 August 1901, 1

O'Neill also ran a "school" for other police chiefs across the country, in which he proudly described Chicago's innovative development of not just the mug shot, but the "Bertillon System" which prevailed before fingerprints replaced it around 1910.[8] Alphonse Bertillon was a French policeman who reasoned that there were things about a person which could never change, and which the suspect could never distort–eye color, the shape of the ears, the width of the head, the distance of the eyes apart, the length of the forearm: Bertillon devised a system of measurements for each person arrested. A clerk would take the measurement and each arrestee would get a "Bertillon card" with numbers for each measurement. Done right, Bertillon claimed, the system would make it possible to transmit a "telegraphic portrait" from one city to another, a stream of numbers that could be used to reconstruct the suspect (Cole 2001; Rhodes 1956; Sekula 1986).

O'Neill was extremely enthusiastic about the Bureau of Identification and in his annual report to the City Council for 1903, he described the bureau's work. "During the year 2,481 negatives were taken", he told them, "There were 11,698 photographs printed and finished with the descriptions and records also written on each of them" ("Report of the General Superintendent of Police of the City of Chicago" 1903: 77). As a result "we have now some 43,000 Bertillon cards and records and 10,000 old photographs taken previous to the installation of the Bertillon system" (ibid.). He proudly noted that

> all the records taken since June 1891, contain a detailed statement of each case; also, criminal records collected from all parts of the world. This collection of photographs, records, etc., cost the City of Chicago some $300,000. In case of fire, if this collection or even a part of it was destroyed, there would be absolutely no way of replacing them. (ibid.)

This was of course the key problem of his job and profession–how to sort out the criminal from the law abiding, how to detect the criminal under the superficially wholesome appearance; how to identify and classify the most significant element of the millions of people who made up Chicago, how to find stable distinctiveness in dynamic complexity.

His melodic collecting work engaged the same set of issues and drew from O'Neill's experience with the latest identity tracking methods. O'Neill had thousands of tunes, and he had to figure out which were distinct and which were mere variations. It was a vast problem of forensic identification and organization.

A forensic model for music: Child ballads and the organization of variation

Of course, O'Neill was not the first to apply a scientific methodology to gathering and categorizing music. Identification and organization have always been a defining challenge for those engaged in the collection of tokens of an oral tradition. Stories, songs, and tunes (when not written down) constantly move, shift and change and are rarely performed in the exact same way. The collectors of such materials have always been presented with the overwhelming task of categorization, which includes bounding the genre, sorting the gathered fragments, ordering the body of work, and surgically removing any outliers. Ballad collector Francis James Child has probably had the biggest impact on this process in the parallel fields of folklore, musicology and ethnomusicology (Spencer 2011).

As Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard (and one of the earliest professors at The Johns Hopkins School before returning to Harvard), Child produced from 1853 several editions of English poetry in a series. Of the 130 volumes, eight documented Anglo-Celtic balladry: *English and Scottish Ballads* (1857-1858). Child was especially fascinated with oral remnants of a higher form of parlance that lingered on in memory before they were transcribed to paper. For Child, this "oral literature" (a wonderfully oxymoronic term) was a window into basic human literary artforms (Harris 1991). A scholar of Chaucer, Child found that Chaucer's inclusion in his works of both oral and written traditions made each particularly difficult to categorize. English balladry must have been a refreshing turn for Child, and his system for coding and analyzing texts was much more applicable.

Child strove to find what he considered to be the most authentic, pure, and unadulterated version of each ballad, whether by folk utterance, transcription, or printed source. Often this meant distilling multiple versions into a clean text that he determined to be the original version: an ur-text. Child expanded his original 1857-1858 work over the course of twenty-one years, publishing the full range of his "acceptable" texts, variants, and fragments of each ballad

(Cheesman and Rieuwerts 1996: 12). Child's undertaking was massive and distinct, and established (at least in the minds of Child and his disciples) a complete and closed canon of Anglo balladry. In his final years on the project, he was joined by his protégé George Lyman Kittredge (1860-1941), who eventually wrote the preface to the massive publication (Child 1857-1858: xxvi). The following years, in which scholars attacked this canon and turned to the melodies of the ballads as a source of knowledge, became an era known as "The Ballad Wars," and pitted institutional approaches and systems (including the early use of wax cylinder recorders) against each other as the fields of folklore, musicology, anthropology and eventually ethnomusicology figured out how exactly to pursue scholarship in music.

This was also a moment in the modern era in which a judicious application of scientific method was sure to enhance the impact and importance of any endeavor. In later years, Chris Goertzen (1985) published an exhaustive scientific analysis of variant movement and change in the fiddle tune "Billy in the Lowground" throughout the southeastern region of United States, with a careful deployment of the Finnish Historic-Geographic method on a massive number of tune variants over time. Unlike Child, Goertzen incorporated regional transmission and melodic shift into his study, demonstrating on detailed maps that the "folk process" included migration and variation. Had either Child or Goertzen employed ethnography to their "oral literature" and tune variation–asking their singers or fiddlers where and from whom they had picked up the song or tune–the results would have been much more nuanced and precise (but arguably outside of the original intent of the study).

O'Neill must have been somewhat ahead of his time in this way, as he often noted in his tune books the source of a melody.[9] Partly this stemmed from his dual identity as an immigrant and musician. A model of success in America, he was always concerned to identify what he could regard as genuinely Irish, while enjoying the affluence his American success afforded. O'Neill also published biographies of many of his sources in his *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (1913), with a number of tune attributions. This is not to say that O'Neill was perfectly precise–tunes were often named by O'Neill or his transcriber and arranger James O'Neill after friends or named after people in positions of power (Carolan 1997). O'Neill's publication of a fiddle tune entitled "Mayor Harrison's Fedora" reflects this, named after the Chicago mayor who appointed O'Neill to the highest position on the police force, and most certainly had a parallel life in the oral tradition under a different name or names.[10] O'Neill's florid dedication page to Mayor Harrison, in a copy of *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (1913) given by O'Neill to the mayor on 1 December 1913, can be viewed on the *Capturing O'Neill* digital humanities site.[11] Housed in the special collections of the Chicago Public Library, it is surely a token of O'Neill's attention to those in powerful positions, and may suggest the influences O'Neill was under in his naming of tunes and his publication of books.

Waxing and booking the tune

But this fungibility of tune and title is inherent in the folk tradition and seems not so out-of-place in O'Neill's publications. As mentioned above, a tune's name can be relatively unimportant to traditional musicians,[12] but the tune (and its variants) are very important.[13] Francis O'Neill did not read music well and relied on others–especially James O'Neill–to transcribe melodies for his collection efforts (Mac Aoidh 2006; de Grae 2012). Traditional players have turned to O'Neill's books as some of the most important windows into an "authentic" oral tradition, yet players also know that the notes on the page are merely prescriptive–they are a melodic template for the addition of regional style, personal interpretation, and in-the-moment variation.[14] As with any traditional melody, the notes are the structure of the tune, and the flair is between the notes. Even O'Neill noted that the work was not exact.

> it all depends on individual taste as to which version of a tune is the most meritorious; and as it has been transmitted orally…variants and diversity of settings have naturally multiplied…Why should palpably inferior versions or variants of traditional tunes be exempt from correction or alteration? (Carolan 1997: 43).

Another window into whether O'Neill and his transcriptionists were able to capture the structure of the tunes "correctly" comes through a remarkable intersection of timelines–an intact oral tradition in a surge of emigration to America; a nostalgic resurgence of Irish folk traditions in the diaspora as a folk revival back home anticipated political turmoil; and the invention (and piper Patsy Touhey's use) of the Edison wax cylinder phonograph.

Patrick J. "Patsy" Touhey was born in Cahertinna, county Galway in 1865 and emigrated from there to America with his family at the age of three (Mitchell and Small 1987: 1). An accomplished uilleann piper on the stages of New York, Boston and other cities, Touhey was invited to play as a part of an Irish cultural display in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (ibid.: 3-4). He most probably ran into an Edison phonograph machine for the first time between performances at the Fair. Edison had received patents for his wax-cylinder machine in 1878 and had immediately gone into production, marketing the machine for letter dictation purposes, though the mass-produced machines did not gain widespread use until the 1890s. Edison eventually realized that other companies were having much better success selling recorded music, and retooled production for entertainment. Just before the turn of the century, Touhey was approached to enter a recording contract to produce cylinders of Irish traditional music. However, as Capt. O'Neill wrote in a 1911 letter to a friend in Ireland, Touhey "could not get enough for his time from the record people. His theatrical business is more profitable…They found a cheaper man McAuliffe and cheaper work of course" (*An Pıobaire* 1974: 4). James C. McAuliffe was the American-born replacement piper and recorded a few wax cylinders for Edison to extremely lackluster reviews.

Patsy Touhey must have taken notice of the potential market for recordings of his performances, as on 20 April 1901, the following advertisement began appearing in the *Irish World* newspaper (see Figure 4 below):

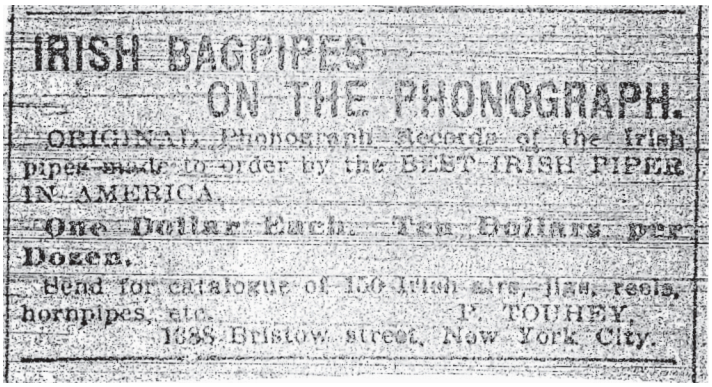
IRISH BAGPIPES
ON THE PHONOGRAPH.
ORIGINAL Phonograph Records of the Irish piper made to order by the BEST IRISH PIPER IN AMERICA.
One Dollar Each. Ten Dollars per Dozen.
Send for catalogue of 150 Irish airs, jigs, reels, hornpipes, etc. P. TOUHEY,
1588 Bristow street, New York City.

Figure 4 – *Irish World* [New York newspaper] 18 May 1901, 8

It is not known how many wax cylinder recordings were made by Touhey, but it is assumed that he made them in his home, on a private Edison phonograph machine purchased just for this purpose and posted them to his customers. A number were in the collection of Capt. Francis O'Neill, and sent by O'Neill to his colleague and confidant, Rev. Henebry in Waterford, Ireland, among others (Spencer 2010b). At the publication of *The Piping of Patsy Touhey*, by Pat Mitchell and Jackie Small (1986), fewer than fifty of these cylinders were in the hands of archives and private collectors. Mitchell and Small painstakingly transcribed each recording, note for note, variation by variation–a *descriptive* notation of actual performance, rather than O'Neill's *prescriptive* notations of an imagined ur-tune. Since publication of that book, another two dozen cylinders were in the private collection of Milwaukee's Fire Chief Michael J. Dunn (which had been sent to him after the death of O'Neill's son, Rogers) and donated to the Ward Irish Music Archives.[15]

Francis and James O'Neill were known to use a wax cylinder recorder occasionally when working with traditional musicians in Chicago, sometimes recording visiting musicians in the Police Chief's parlor, or in the home of James O'Neill.[16] A comparison of the detailed Mitchell and Small transcriptions of Touhey's playing (with all the ornaments and variations), to O'Neill's published ur-text version (especially when one can hear an original recording of the source for the tune's transcription) reveals that the O'Neill notations effectively stripped down the playing of so many players, to present just the barest bones of each tune. A perfect example is the various manifestations of the "Shaskeen Reel". O'Neill sent Rev. Henebry a wax cylinder recording in 1907 of Touhey playing the "Shaskeen Reel" and described the recipient's reaction in a letter to William Halpin of County Clare.

> As a Christmas present which was sure to be appreciated, I forwarded in 1907 to Rev. Dr. Henebry, at Waterford, Ireland, a box of Edison phonograph records which Sergeant Early generously

> permitted me to select from his treasures. Among them was The Shaskeen Reel played by Patrick Touhey. The clergyman's comment is best expressed in his own words: 'The five by Touhey are the superior limit of Irish pipering. One of his, 'The Shaskeen Reel', is so supreme that I am utterly without words to express my opinion of it… Why, there is no Irish Musician alive at all now at all in his class! If things were as they ought to be, he should be installed as professor of music in a national university in Dublin. And that is what I think of Patsy Touhey and his pipering' (Mitchell and Small 1986: 10). [17]

O'Neill's published transcription of this tune is barebones, a series of eighth notes that stick closely and methodically to the train track, while Touhey's recorded wild abandon and improvisation threatens to derail the train and set the dry hills on fire.

Nevertheless, O'Neill's efforts to capture and catalog Irish traditional melodies in Chicago were valiant and impactful, and his publications have functioned as a singular window into the oral tradition at a very important moment in the history of Ireland and the Irish diaspora. That his efforts took place at the dawn of the recording era is important as well, as recordings of Irish music in America became influential in Ireland as there were no other sources (Spencer 2010a). Fiddler James Kelly stated that "The early recordings were coming into Ireland from the States and the musicians who were making those recordings were becoming influential because they were making recordings–no one had made them before" (Payer 1997/1998). O'Neill's efforts to document and police traditional music and to codify onto paper a slippery oral tradition caught and kept a repertoire that was fleeting and evasive, yet it also impacted the natural processes and change inherent to this artform.

Reconstructing from memory

In 1902, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article on O'Neill's collecting efforts, making the comparison between police work and music collecting explicit: "Chicago Leads Ireland as Storehouse of Irish Music" (1902: 5). O'Neill and his collaborators forensically recreated tunes from half remembered scraps. The reporter wrote "a striking example of this is in the air, 'The Woods of Kilmurry'". This was one of the old, elusive, and ever fugitive airs which Chief O'Neill had tried to call back from the time when, at the spinning wheel, his mother wound up the old song with the words: "The flourishing state of Kilmurry". The article explained that

> only the last bars going with these words were remembered sufficiently to recall. [James] O'Neill put these bars on paper, played them to the taste of the Chief, and then set to work to write backward on a strange Irish air to a logical Irish beginning. This he has done. (ibid.)

And the Chief and his colleagues "are satisfied that the world's judges of Irish music will find it so" (ibid.). O'Neill assumed his Irish-born collaborators, musicians, were entitled to determine what was and was not Irish. His work with James O'Neill also delved into this policing of Irishness in the tunes, and the two O'Neills worked together to act as gatekeepers. Paul de Grey (2012) has written on their process, and notes that after the O'Neills would read through transcriptions or previously printed tune collections and find a melody of interest,

> the two would then examine the tune in more detail and, if so agreed, make alterations to it. In the case of a tune already in Francis's repertoire, these alterations were made with the purpose of bringing the tune in line with his memory of it; other tunes might be modified to make them sound more idiomatically Irish. (de Grey 2012: 71)

Yet this selective collection and liberal interpretation were less about exactness and more about the chase. As de Gray notes, O'Neill's "purpose, after all, was not to write a scholarly music history but to rescue a musical heritage that he feared was under threat" (de Grey 2012: 71).

O'Neill also depended on a team of people to hunt down tunes, many of whom were his subordinates on the police force, including Patrolman John Ennis, Sergeant Barney Delaney, Sergeant James Early, and his chief collaborator Sergeant James O'Neill.

> Sometimes a whole company of enthusiasts have been enlisted to run down a certain air, jig, reel, or hornpipe which was known to them by name, or perhaps by a single strain. Weeks and months have been spent on the lookout for it and perhaps after many difficulties it would be picked up in the whistle, song, or humming of some unexpected and adopted citizen of Chicago. (O'Neill 2008: 138)

The author of this 1902 *Chicago Tribune* article deliberately compared O'Neill's team to detectives fanning out across the city looking for suspects, until, as the reporter phrased it, the "elusive fugitive air" is finally placed in custody. "Whenever he encounters a fugitive air", wrote

the *Inter Ocean*, O'Neill "cannot rest… he has in this manner caught 1400 different melodies" (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 March 1902: 5; *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 5 June 1901: 5).

An earlier article in the *Tribune* described how when "Francis O'Neill was Captain at the Stock-Yards, one of his sergeants told him of a boy who could play marvelous music on the violin – especially the Irish jigs. Captain O'Neill investigated", and discovered a sixteen-year-old orphan, George West, a prodigy on the fiddle. "That discovery has given him more satisfaction than if he had located a score of crooks" wrote the reporter, and

> since Francis O'Neill first discovered young West, the boy has been under his watchful eye. Recently the Chief took him to a meeting of the Irish Historical society at the Calumet Theater, South Chicago. In October the Chief will bring him before the meeting of Irish jig players at the Auditorium. (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 July 1901: 44)

George West, however, resented this watchful surveillance, or perhaps found it controlling. He stopped playing the Irish music O'Neill preferred and by 1907 O'Neill told Alfred Perceval Graves that George had "degenerated into a common bar room or 'shindig' fiddler" ("O'Neill to A. P. Graves", 1906: 7-8).

West's reluctance was not unusual. O'Neill often complained that people did not want to give him tunes they regarded as personal or familial property, and the relationship between police work and collecting extended into a willingness to use the coercive authority of the badge to encourage "sharing". He sometimes showed up in his full uniform to encourage someone, or pay them, or buy them drink. As he noted, "The prestige of rank and influence contributed not a little to the success of obtaining cherished tunes from persons disinclined to give circulation, or publicity" (O'Neill 2008: 173). He sent patrolman John Ennis "undercover" so he could overhear and memorize some tunes the musicians did not want to give up. O'Neill recalled "happening into a Chicago theater one evening a pianist was pounding No. 761 for a stage dancer. The tune was mine before I left", he wrote (ibid.). Three other tunes "were similarly acquired…I followed a hand organ for about an hour in Chicago in order to pick up the strains of No. 1222" (ibid.). The hand organist used the tunes as a part of his living: so did the pianist "pounding out" tunes in the theater (ibid.). The tunes lived in a community of practice with an ambivalent relationship to the authority of the police and a different understanding of ownership. O'Neill did not ask them if he could acquire their tunes and add them to collections that bore his name and his photograph.[18]

Other musicians in O'Neill's orbit developed similar dispositions. One of O'Neill's favorite uilleann pipers (also his brother-in-law), Barney Delaney, fell into O'Neill's disfavor. Delaney had been employed by O'Neill on the police force and was a prolific supplier of tunes for O'Neill's collection–transcribed by James O'Neill and set into wax cylinder on his own personal Edison device. But O'Neill was upset by Delaney's move away from Chicago. He wrote to a friend in Ireland of Delaney "although pulled out of obscurity and befriended for more than a fourth of a century by yours truly proved an ingrate, and I have none of his records" (*An Pıobaire* 16/17, 1974: 5). O'Neill elaborated in another personal letter, stating that "yesterday [8 March 1912] Bernard Delaney the smoothest and most rhythmic piper 'twas ever my lot to hear left Çhicago to reside permanently at Ocean Springs on the Gulf of Mexico, 900 miles away" (*An Pıobaire* 18, 1974: 4). In a letter later that year he bitterly mentions that Delaney "sold his [phonograph] machine and records to a stranger although planting himself and his wife on my hospitality for a few days before his departure" (ibid.). In another, O'Neill makes the dig "Delaney now a rich man won't do anything for anyone" (An *Píobaire* 16/17, 1974: 3). Even Selena O'Neill, who arranged O'Neill's collections for parlor piano to elevate traditional music to higher classes, may have eventually feigned deafness to avoid taking on a new publishing project.[19]

O'Neill's efforts of collection were also not very popular in his Irish American community–there was no general clamor among Chicago's Irish population for a large print collection of tunes. As Barry O'Neill wrote in his introduction to the 1973 reprint of *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, O'Neill financed a printing run by Lyon and Healy of 2,000 copies (O'Neill 1973: *vi*; Carolan 1997: 44), and the collection

> was a financial failure. This seems odd considering that the census of 1910 counted over 4,000,000 Irish-born or first generation in America. The price of the book was $250. Certainly, the American Irish are no less conscious of their national origins than other ethnic groups. (O'Neill 1973: *vi*)

The immigrants played the tunes they knew from home and tunes they learned in house parties, saloons, dance halls. They blended them with new tunes or repurposed American tunes, as people do when there is no one telling them not to. The systematic, orderly collection was O'Neill's idea, and it came out of his experience as a police officer administering, ordering, cataloging, surveilling and classifying a huge industrial city.

The other side of O'Neill

Police work could involve this kind of rational administration, but it also could involve the exercise of violence. O'Neill related proudly how, during the Pullman strike, he led squads of men to break the strike: he told of how he led a group of officers into what he called "an anarchist saloon" and "administered a salutary drubbing to all found within except the proprietor, who stood behind the bar in mute terror" (O'Neill, 2008: 66-67). The men in the saloon, he said, were "shouting defiance and denunciation on us" (ibid.). The Pullman strike was the largest strike in US history. Irishmen made up both the leadership and the rank and file of the unions involved. Denouncing the police is not a crime. Would you denounce the police as they protected workers brought in to replace you? O'Neill would administer a "salutary drubbing" (ibid.).

O'Neill also multiple times defended torture of suspects; "sweating" and the use of what they called "the water cure", similar to waterboarding. "Right here I wish to remark", he wrote in his Annual Report for 1903, "that there are carping critics of this department who maintain that to 'sweat' or persistently interrogate a prisoner is barbarous and that such a practice should be abolished" (*Chicago Police Dept, Report of the General Superintendent of Police*, 1903: 17; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 October 1902). O'Neill referred to a then-notorious case, the "car barn bandits", and insisted

> All I care to say in reply is, that if the "the stomach pump", as it is sometimes called, had not been applied to Marx he never would have confessed to complicity in the raid on the car barn; neither would he have "squealed" on his accomplices (ibid.).

Police work was rough and often violent.

The poet Michael Donaghy, born to Irish immigrant parents in the Bronx, dramatized the coercive aspects of O'Neill's work as a collector and a cop, while also capturing his love for the music. Donaghy played Irish traditional music, like O'Neill on the flute, and when he died at fifty in 2004, a winner of the prestigious Whitbread prize for poetry, he was at work on a longer poem about O'Neill. He began "A Reprieve" with a quote from O'Neill's book *Irish Folk Music, a Fascinating Hobby* (1910): "Realizing that few of the many tunes remembered from boyhood days" were known to other Chicago Irish, he started collecting, "a congenial work which has filled in the interludes of a busy and eventful life" (Donaghy, "A Reprieve", 2014). He then imagined O'Neill trying to get an arrestee to play him a tune:

> Here in Chicago, it's almost dawn
> and quiet in the cell in Deering Street stationhouse
> apart from the first birds at the window and the milkwagon
> and the soft slap of the club in Chief O'Neill's palm.
> 'Think it over,' he says, 'but don't take all day '

O'Neill has a man in custody, Nolan, arrested for beating a Chinese American.

> Nolan's hands are brown with a Chinaman's blood.
> But if he agrees to play three jigs
> slowly, so O'Neill can take them down,
> he can walk home, change clothes,
> and disappear past the stockyards and across the tracks.

O'Neill wants tunes for his collection, but he needs to memorize the tunes:

> O'Neill lowers his eyes,
> knowing the Chinaman's face will heal, the Great Lakes

roll in their cold grey sheets and wake,
picket lines will be charged, girls raped
in the sweatshops, the clapboard tenements burn.
And he knows that Nolan will be gone by then,
But there's music here in this lamplit cell,
and O'Neill scratching in his manuscript like a monk
at his illuminations, and Nolan's sweet tone
breaking as he tries to phrase a jig the same way twice:
'The Limerick Rake' or 'Tell her I am' or 'My Darling Asleep'

Nolan is a man of disorder, an unruly, violent man, now under O'Neill's coercive authority. He can't play a jig the same way twice, or slowly: that's not how the practice of Irish dance music works. But that's how O'Neill needs it to work, so he can make it "ruly" enough to reside in a print collection. Donaghy catches how O'Neill's monkish devotion to the task of order blended with the violent world of Chicago. He captures, imaginatively, what O'Neill described when he wrote about "the careless, improvident but talented George [West]" who lived in Chicago "until an incident in his life rendered a trip to the far west advisable". In the Donaghy poem, O'Neill gives Nolan the option to leave town in exchange for some tunes. In real life, O'Neill said he learned the "Boys of Bluehill", the "Miller of Glanmire", and the "Boys of Ballinamore" from George before the police, as in the poem, told him to get out of town (ibid.).[20]

People who love Irish traditional music prefer not to see this side of O'Neill, understandably, and generally prefer the way he described himself, as a passionate lover of Irish musical traditions, which indeed he was. But if it matters that O'Neill spent the first seventeen years of his life in Cork, it surely also matters that he spent over thirty years as a Chicago cop. As Chief he three times addressed annual conventions of Chiefs of Police. In 1904, he described and praised the Bertillon system of identification, while also lamenting the rough and coarse nature of police work. He called the work "hardly attractive to a man of acute moral sensibility or highly developed intellectuality" and "repulsive to man of refined sensibilities" (O'Neill 2008: 66-67). Police had to work with "the harsh, the corrupt, the vicious and sordid sides of life" (ibid.). If he used the techniques of the police to collect Irish music, he also lamented the psychic cost.

Conclusion

In retirement O'Neill told American antiquarian Henry Mercer "whatever I may have accomplished is due in a great degree to the prestige of rank" and the "great opportunities for favors and friendship" the Chief could exercise ("O'Neill to Mercer", 24 March 1921). He went on to write, "under no other conditions would it be possible to induce such musicians as I have had to deal with to give up their cherished tunes" (ibid.). To Bernard Bogue in 1917, he complained about the "many gratuities inevitable in my intercourse with the class of people from whom co-operation was to be expected" ("O'Neill to Bernard Bogue", 1917). By this point in his life he owned three homes and wrote articles for the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archeological Society*. He was very far from the young policeman who walked the streets of Chicago and brawled with criminals.

In *Irish Folk Music: a Fascinating Hobby* (1910), O'Neill told a story that expressed this difference. With George West he went into a poor Chicago neighborhood, "through a few dark passageways and up a rickety back stairs" to the apartment of a fiddler named O'Malley, a man missing a finger on his left hand who nevertheless displayed "rapid yet correct execution." O'Malley "eked out a living playing at house dances." But he had no unique tunes, and he drank, and so O'Neill moved on (O'Neill 1910: 41-42). An alternative model of collecting, one less available to the imagination of a policeman, might have documented those house dances, rather than seeking to extract unique tunes for publication.

O'Neill's publications put him in a new, larger form of community, and brought him to the attention of folklorists and collectors, a much more orderly and rule-full community. Henry Mercer, the Harvard educated Philadelphia Archaeologist and collector of preindustrial Americana, wrote to O'Neill "to thank you however inadequately, for the great pleasure which these books are giving

me and for the very valuable and remarkable contribution which it seems you have made, not [only to] the musical history of Ireland but to folklore in general" ("Mercer to O'Neill", 1920). O'Neill's contribution is lasting, manifested by a published means for musicians to access an oral tradition.

But it also demonstrates the tensions involved in trying to codify—to police—an inherently unruly oral tradition. Armed with the cutting-edge forensic technologies of his day, O'Neill combined his love of the music and his perceptive ear with coercive police authority. Accounts of O'Neill typically stress his role as chief of police without considering what that actually meant to his practice, nor to the impact it had on how he re-framed and understood Irish music in his collections. As Marta Cook put it, O'Neill used "colonial technologies of governance [to] mobilise resources from 'authentic' points of origin", in the process presenting himself as one of the "heroic saviors of vanishing culture" (Cook 2024: 1). But that culture was not vanishing: it persisted and persists, it lingers, and morphs as oral traditions do. Cook compares Irish traditional musicians to indigenous peoples forced to express their community practice through the collector's lens. The collector represents an entirely different world view, a different form of subjectivity. Initially part of the community whose music he documented, O'Neill grew increasingly alienated from that community by the act of extracting and publishing tunes. He helped establish a distinction between the tunes and their expression by players – their life in culture, which anyone who performs Irish music for a living must still confront. It stands as a lesson in why not to attempt to codify an inherently unruly oral tradition.

Endnotes

[1] Ciaran Carson, in his book *Last Night's Fun* (1996), notes that tune names are particularly slippery in the moment: "A: What do you call that? B: Ask my father. A: 'Ask My Father'?" (13).

[2] There had been a number of other influential collections of traditional tunes previously published, but O'Neill's was distinctly set in the diaspora, which was at the time closely watching a folk revival in the homeland. O'Neill's books of tunes functioned to allow those hungry for tradition in the New World access to an otherwise fleeting oral artform.

[3] It should be noted that O'Neill published four other books of tunes, each arranged for piano by either James O'Neill (no relation) or Selena O'Neill (dubiously claimed as a relation): *O'Neill's Irish Music*: *250 Choice Selections Arranged for Piano and Violin* (1908); *Popular Selections from O'Neill's*, edited by Selena O'Neill (1910); *O'Neill's Music of Ireland: 400 Choice Selections Arranged for Piano and Violin* (1915); and two editions of *Waifs and Strays of Gaelic Melody* (1922, 1924). For examples of his intellectual community see *Capturing O'Neill* for further details. https://scalar.usc.edu/works/capturing-oneill

[4] O'Neill's methods are described in his *Irish Folk Music* (1910) and in "Chicago Leads Ireland as Storehouse of Irish Music" (1902).

[5] See Michael O'Malley (2022); Nicholas Carolan (1997). In addition, the authors of this article are involved with a digital humanities initiative called *Capturing O'Neill* which documents and contextualizes dedication pages in his publications that O'Neill personalized and signed, possibly with an eye to social status and recognition in Irish American society. https://scalar.usc.edu/works/capturing-oneill

[6] O'Neill wrote a private recollection in which he summarized his career. It was published posthumously as *Chief O'Neill's Sketchy Recollections of an Eventful Life in Chicago* (2008). O'Neill describes his actions in the Pullman strike in substantial detail (64-84).

[7] On his work with Evans see *Chicago Tribune*, 13 February 1893: 1; *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 25 August 1903: 6.

[8] On the "school" for other police departments see *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 25 August 1903: 6; *Chicago Tribune,* 20 September 1903: 40.

[9] Especially in his *1001 Gems* (1907), identifying notes are often found under the titles of tunes.

[10] Miles Krassen and Don Meade have both undertaken many excellent and detailed explorations of tunes names and sources in O'Neill's books, as has Sally K. Sommers Smith (2010).

[11] https://scalar.usc.edu/works/capturing-oneill/mayor-carter-h-harrison

[12] With the notable exception of New York multi-instrumentalist Don Meade, who has received multiple calls per week for many years with musicians playing tunes for him to identify by name or names.

[13] As an example, County Offaly-born accordion player Paddy O'Brien's exhaustive collections of tunes, which come from his memory and number in the thousands, include variations, sources, and a great number of alternate titles. https://paddyobrien.net/tune-collection/

[14] For a detailed discussion on the idea of "authenticity" and "tradition" in performed Irish traditional music, see Spencer (2009). For a discussion of regional style, see O'Shea (2008).

[15] https://archives.irishfest.com/dunn-family-collection/Music/Cylinders1.htm

[16] A letter from O'Neill to a friend in Ireland suggests that he may have procured a phonograph specifically in response to Touhey's mail order business: "The Edison cylinder phonograph which I purchased to hear Touhey's tunes on is at a friend's house" *An Píobaire* (1975: 2).

[17] Mitchell and Small (1986: 10), republished in *An Píobaire* (1974: 5–6). It should be noted that the name of the recipient of the letter is taken from Mitchell and Small (1986), as it is not noted in *An Píobaire*. The letter is not dated in either publication, but it was probably written in late 1911 or early 1912.

[18] On ideas surrounding collecting and possession of tunes, see O'Malley (2022), Ch. 6; McCann (2001).

[19] On Selena O'Neill feigning deafness see the entry in the companion website to O'Malley's book *The Beat Cop* (2022), at *https://thebeatcop.com/page/community*

[20] On West, see O'Neill (1910): 40-41.

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