

Fleadh People

Geraldine Cotter: From tiny acorns

The annual Fleadh Cheoil celebrates the best music and musicians of a now world famous musical culture, however that was not always the case for Irish music in Clare says Dr Geraldine Cotter speaking to **Stuart Holly**.

THE Fleadh Cheoil has steadily grown into a festival of unrivalled proportions since its humble beginnings in Mullingar in 1951. This year, it's been predicted, will blow the rest of them out of the water with up to 400,000 people expected to pack into the county town. Ennis's strong association with trad and Clare's reputation as the home of Irish music lends to this expectation.

However, as recently as the late 1950s it was still a mark of shame to walk down O'Connell Street with a fiddle under your arms, according to local musician Dr Geraldine Cotter. The emergence of the town's grassroots trad movement changed all of this, a timeframe which is explored in Geraldine's new book *Transforming Tradition: Irish Traditional Music in Ennis, Co Clare 1950-1980*.

This change was generated thanks to progressive minded key individuals, organisations and institutions, who acting together not only sustained but also spread the practice that barely existed in the 1950s. Geraldine's book traces the reshaping of the identity of Ennis, from being a place largely devoid of traditional music to becoming an internationally recognised hub of the tradition.

Geraldine — who is a teacher and researcher, currently lecturing in Music Education at Mary Immaculate College — paints a picture of a vastly different Ennis from the one we see today where the pubs are packed with

traditional musicians all summer long. "They were having dances at Paddy Cons' hall where Maddens Furniture shop is now and one of the things I read was everybody knelt down to say a decade of the rosary at the dance and the national anthem was always played at the end. Catholicism and nationalism were big influences back then."

Geraldine, the eldest of seven children who grew up on the Clare Road, speaks fondly of this movement in which she was so immersed in growing up in Ennis. Her book explores a happy series of events which led to that class being set up and furthermore, Ennis's firm place in traditional music such as the first Fleadh in Ennis in 1956 and An Tóstal, a festival similar to The Gathering which celebrated Irish culture, along with the arrival of a Belgian composer named Ernest de Regge in the 50s, who was appointed musical director at St Flannan's College and established a choir in Ennis where he often took inspiration from traditional music.

Recounting her involvement the movement's beginnings, she says, "I was conscious that there wasn't a great interest in traditional music growing up. But a class had been started, a collaboration between Comhaltas and the VEC, in 1961 and myself and my brother and my sisters were sent to learn the tin whistle. That story of Ennis, the emergence of Ennis into the '70s in terms of traditional music, that

evolved through that class thought by Jack Mulcaire which was over in the TEC at the time."

The other significant event was the establishment of Shannon Airport. Local entrepreneur Brendan O'Regan had the brainwave to show tourists the area while their flights were refuelling in Shannon, going as far as organising entertainment for them in the form of trad sessions — players having been plucked from the VEC class — in old Irish thatched cottages around the county.

"I was one of the people, along with Kieran Hanrahan, Vinnie MacMahon my brother in law, my brother, sisters, Paul Roche, Dermot Lernihán, I could list them off forever. There was a heap of people there ready to be employed, and when we were young there were no summer jobs. We were picked up in mini-buses and brought around Clare, Corofin, Ballyvaughan, Carrigaholt," explains Geraldine.

"It was just the way all the strands came together. So then there was a big gang of young musicians living in Ennis that were socialising through traditional music."

Geraldine says that what happened in the years that followed was like a 'domino effect' which led to Ennis becoming a juggernaut of traditional Irish music, along with the arrival of the Fleadh Nua in 1974.

Geraldine explains, "Ennis is a Mecca for

people now, but that wasn't always the case. When I was in the Coláiste, not in a million years would I have walked through the town with a tin whistle. I used to hide it under my sleeve. But by the time the '70s came, that all changed. It became trendy then and Ennis was bubbling. There were incredible people in Ennis."

Fast forward forty years, Geraldine says Fleadh 16 will be 'amazing spectacle'.

"People have such fond memories of 1977, people I spoke to who aren't from the county. There'll be people at this Fleadh who probably haven't been to that many Fleadhs, but they'll have had happy memories of Ennis and they'll want to come back."

Geraldine's historical exploration is being launched by Dr Aileen Dillane, University of Limerick at Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy in an eBook format.

She is also giving the Breandán Breathnach lecture on Saturday, July 2 at 8pm following the official opening.

During Scoil Eigse, the week leading up to the Fleadh, it is expected Geraldine's book will be launched in print form by Kieran Hanrahan when she gives a presentation at Cois na hAbhna on Thurs, August 18.

Transforming Tradition will be available on eBook from this weekend at www.geraldinecotter.ie.

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