SIX TO GO: IRISH NATIONALISM

AND THE POGUES

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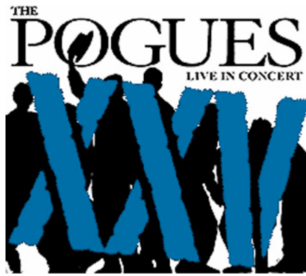
Introduction



At a time when Bono is regarded as a Nobel Peace Prize contender (USA Today, 2005), when *Riverdance* has made the jigs and reels of Irish dance so recognizable that they can be safely parodied in American fast food commercials (YouTube, 2007), and when one can order an "Irish car bomb" (Drinknation, 2007) in an American bar without running afoul of antiterrorist legislation, it may be difficult to recall that it was not so long ago that broad public awareness of Irish culture was largely confined to shamrocks and leprechauns, "Danny Boy" and Guinness, or gun toting men in black ski masks blowing up buildings. The upheavals roiling Irish and Anglo-Irish relations in the 1970s and 1980s -- hunger strikes, assassinations, explosions, protests, military occupation, etc. – make the current fascination with all things Ireland intriguing, since from the vantage point of that period, the prospects of an Irish revival in so short a time seem fairly daunting indeed. Yet both the transformation of Ireland from economic backwater to the envy of the European Union and the globalization of Irish culture are grounded in that period (Foster, 2007). In the following I am going to argue that at least part of the resurgence of interest in "Irishness" can be traced to the Pogues, a London-based Anglo-Irish folk-punk band that is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

I hope to demonstrate that through their music they resuscitated and sustained a version of Irish nationalism at a time in Irish history when it was particularly risky yet particularly essential to do so. Or to put it another way, the emergence and success of the Pogues provided an early indication that the Celtic Tiger was slumbering both in Ireland and among the Irish émigré communities scattered across the globe. Through their albums and live performances the Pogues helped to connect the disparate elements of the Irish diaspora and reinvigorate a pride of ownership in Irish identity, first in these emigrant populations and then on the island. My discussion begins with a brief overview of the band, of nationalism in general and the role of music in Irish nationalism in particular. The ensuing sections of the paper then explore the way in which the music of the Pogues draws on and incorporates essential elements of the Irish nation – language, literature, culture, and politics – to fashion a consistent and coherent vision of "Ireland."

From left: Shane MacGowan, the Pogues, Shane, Shane and Spider, the Pogues

Battle March Medley

Before I begin my study, I suppose I first need to answer the question: "The Pogues?" Actually, this formulation masks two questions: first, the question in the sense of identifying the band, and second, why should this band merit this kind of study? So, as for the former, the Pogues were a London based band composed of some first and second generation Irish émigrés to England that formed in 1982, recorded from 1984 to 1993, and, after a ten-year hiatus, re-

grouped and have been touring again. Their instrumentation included traditional elements of both rock (electric guitars, bass, and percussion) and folk (mandolin, banjo, tin whistle, acoustic guitar) at a time when punk had largely run its commercial course and bland synthesizer bands were ruling the airwaves. They sounded like no one else at the time. In that span they had 20 top 100 singles, 4 top 10 singles, and 3 top 5 singles on the UK charts including "Fairytale of New York," a song widely regarded as one of the best Christmas songs of all time (it peaked at #2 when it was released [unable to overtake a lame Pet Shop Boys Elvis Presley cover], but more recently has topped VH-1's annual online audience poll three years running, from 2004-2006, for "Best Christmas song"). Despite the accolades and success in Europe, the band may be unfamiliar to the American audience because they were unable to match their European chart success over here; cracking the top 100 just once and just barely, reaching #94 with "Tuesday Morning," a song off their penultimate studio release. Of course, it is this lack of commercial success in the U.S. that raises the second question; namely, why should we spend time on this particular band? To answer that arguably more important question it is helpful to think of the Pogues in the context of other bands that have been influential if not commercially successful.

I think the Pogues can be compared to a group like The Velvet Underground, the seminal American rock band of the 1960s and 1970s; that is, like the Velvet Underground, the Pogues had an influence on music beyond what might be expected from the records sold. Just as The Velvet Underground laid the foundation for much of contemporary punk and alternative music, the Pogues were the one of the first bands to forge a link between punk and folk music, and they've influenced both genres. Today, artists like the Dropkick Murphys, the Tossers, Flogging Molly, Black 47, Gael Force, the Prodigals, the Saw Doctors, Ducky Boys, the Real MacKen-

zies, as well as a raft of bands on the Irish festival circuit owe their existence to the groundbreaking work of the Pogues; and on the folk side, some songs from the Pogues catalog have made it into the trad music repertoire (stripped of their punkish elements of course), and trad Irish music itself has become more popular since the Pogues hit the scene. As NPR commentator Terry Gross noted in a January 2007 profile marking the reissue of the Pogues back catalog, Ireland was one of the few countries whose folk music *gained* in popularity at the end of the century, and she attributed that in no small measure to the work of the Pogues. As reporter Ed Ward noted in the conclusion of the story, after the Pogues, “Irish folk music would never be the same again” (Gross and Ward, 2007)

The respective influence of each band is no doubt due in part to the fact that each counts at least one, and perhaps more, musical geniuses in their number. So where The Velvet Underground had Lou Reed and John Cale, the Pogues have Shane MacGowan and Terry Woods. MacGowan has been the subject of two film documentaries (Connolly, 1997; Share, 2001) and three biographies (O’Doherty, 1995; Merrick, 2001; Stanage, 2001); the band as a whole has been the subject of two biographies (Clerk, 2006; Scanlon, 1988) and MacGowan solo and the band as a whole have been profiled in a plethora of magazine and newspaper interviews (see the press clipping sections of DzM, 2007; and of Madden, Knetsch, and Schmitz 2007; for the extensive literature on the Velvet Underground see Landemaine, 2007). MacGowan’s songs have been covered by a variety of artists, and his lyrics have been collected and published on their own (MacGowan, 1990) and in anthologies of Irish poetry. Woods was an early member of Sweeney’s Men, a short-lived but influential 1960s Irish group whose members (Terry Woods, Andy Irvine and Johnny Moynihan) went on to form some of the most important trad and folk bands of the

1970s and 1980s (*e.g.,* Steeleye Span, Planxty, Patrick Street, and De Dannan). All of which is to say, I believe the band warrants an extended academic study.

Obviously, the literature covering the idea of "the nation" and "national identity" is enormous and largely beyond the purview of this paper. For present purposes we will work with Thiesse's mainstream observation that a "nation" consists of several essential symbolic and material elements, including "a history establishing its continuity through the ages, a set of heroes embodying its national values, a language, cultural monuments, folklore, historic sites, distinctive geographical features, a specific mentality and a number of picturesque labels such as costume, national dishes or an animal emblem" (Thiesse, 1999). In the remainder of this essay I will address the various ways in which the Pogues incorporate most of the elements into their music, but before we begin I want to address one last preliminary point and that is the centrality of music within the idea of the Irish nation.

Thiesse's list of the basic components of nationhood does not specifically mention music, yet it is precisely this artifact of culture that, for the Irish at least, has played perhaps the most central role of any in forging and preserving a sense of Irish identity (Kavana, 2007; Smyth, 2004; Zuk, 2004). As Burke (1872; p. 370) astutely noted over a hundred years ago, "Ireland alone, amongst all the nations of the earth, has, for her national emblem, a musical instrument [the harp]." The observation still holds today. Indeed, very early in their long occupation of Ireland, the English themselves recognized the crucial role that music played in Irish identity:

> "On January 28th, 1603, a proclamation was issued by the Lord President of Munster, by the terms of which the Marshal of the Province was strictly charged 'to exterminate by marshal law all manner of Bards, Harpers,' etc. Within ten days after said proclamation, Queen Elizabeth herself ordered Lord Barrymore 'to hang

> the harpers wherever found, and destroy their instruments'"
> (Flood, 1905).

Burke (1872, 394) relates a similar account of the Elizabethan era, summarizing Elizabeth's policy by attributing to her the remark "We can never conquer Ireland and never make Ireland Protestant as long as the minstrels are there." As waves of emigration, particularly that brought on by the catastrophe of the Great Hunger in the nineteenth century (see Kineally, 1995), carried the Irish across the globe, music played a crucial role in terms of bonding the members of that émigré community to each other and to the homeland:

> "It was during the nineteenth century that music began to perform important sociopolitical functions in Irish life, both at home and amongst the diaspora. Music was both a private, affective action and a public, social ritual whereby the subject could 'act out' his or her Irish identity, secure in the knowledge that each individual musical act—be it a composition or a performance or simply listening to a piece of music—was in some way part of an age-old, ongoing tradition, a tradition which confirmed (and, with each new act, reconfirmed) the validity of both the individual and the nation. Irishness and musicality remained locked together following the political revolution of the early twentieth century" (Smyth, 5; also see McCarthy 2004).

Recognizing the close connection between music and "Irishness" helps, I think, allay some doubts that it may be farfetched to place much emphasis on a musical group in the revival of a national identity in the late twentieth century. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the central role of music in Irish identity, the academic study of that relationship has been undeveloped (Campbell, 2004; Smyth, 2004; Zuk, 2004). The studies that do examine the role of popular music in recent Irish history generally point out that beyond Christie Moore, most mainstream Irish acts (e.g., megastars U2) shied away from political statements during the height of the Troubles and the Irish punk bands of the day (e.g., the Undertones, Stiff Little Fingers) were not much of an

exception. As Rolston (2001) observes, "the substance of punk's lyrics on the Irish conflict was sometimes much less radical than the form" (p.60). Somewhat paradoxically, it was the Irish folk tradition, with its vast reservoir of songs celebrating, commemorating, or denouncing all manner of heroes and villains in Ireland's long struggle for independence, which provided a much more overtly political and fairly radical resource to address the current struggle. All of which is to say that examining the connection between Irish nationalism and the music of the Pogues is a worthwhile pursuit, or at least not a waste of time and effort (see, for instance, Keohane, 1990).[1]

A Sláinte Joe and an Erin Go

We begin our discussion with the name of the band itself, The Pogues, for it was not the ensemble's original choice insofar as they first performed and recorded under the name Pogue Mahone. In fact their first single, "Dark Streets of London," was played on BBC radio and the band was identified on the air as "Pogue Mahone" before a staffer reported to the powers that be that listeners had been calling the station to complain. It seems no one in programming realized that "Pogue Mahone" was an anglicized version of the Gaelic *póg mo thoín* – "kiss my arse." At this point in the band's history, none of its members lived in Ireland; all were part of the Irish émigré population living in London but by using the Gaelic in its name the band was establishing a link with the homeland. More importantly, "pogue mahone" was a graphic statement of defiance in the face of widespread discrimination against the Irish in England during this phase of "The Troubles," and a statement made all the more powerful because of its exclusivity. That is,

[1] For more on the idea of exploring the political uses of popular music see Henderson 1996; Pratt, 1990; Riesman, 1950.

only those in the effected community understood its meaning. Of course use of the name was short-lived since the BBC threatened to banish the band from the airwaves unless the name was changed. When confronted with that possibility, the band's management suggested the shortened version of the name that stuck: the Pogues. But even this abbreviated form the name retains a connection to Gaelic, and it was an inspired choice.

From the 17th century onward a succession of English governments attempted to eradicate the native Irish language such that its preservation was an important part of the republican movement that brought about the 1916 Rising and ultimately the independence of the twenty-six counties in the south of the island (see Foster, 1988). Since independence, Ireland has made Gaelic one of its two official languages (the other, of course, being English), and the political parties -- *Fianna Fáil*, *Fine Gael*, *Sinn Féin* etc. – continue to use Gaelic names to identify themselves, and all official government documents are published in both languages. Clearly the political and cultural elite recognize the importance of preserving and protecting the native tongue as an expression of national identity (all the more important when the alternative is speaking the language of the conquerors, a constant reminder of the centuries of subjugation). A similar recognition of the importance of language hold in the north, where learning Gaelic is one of the activities promoted by *Sinn Féin* among the Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners interred by the British (see Bell, 1993; Beresford, 1987; Coogan, 1996, O'Hearn, 2006). It is not that uncommon to find prisoners rejecting their English names and reclaiming an Irish one to strike a modest blow for self-determination. Bobby Sands, for example, took to signing his name as Roibeard Gearóid Ó Seachnasaigh. For the prisoners, the instruction in Gaelic had both a theoretical and practical significance; on the one hand it helped promote the sense of an "Irish nation" among

those imprisoned for fighting to establish just such a nation; and more practically it allowed the prisoners to communicate with each other even if under surveillance by the prison guards since the guards could not speak the language.

So in taking on a Gaelic name, the Pogues were making a fairly explicit political point, and at least giving a sympathetic nod to the Republican cause. This is not too surprising since two of the founding members of the band – MacGowan and tin whistle player Spider Stacy – began their musical collaboration playing covers of Irish rebel songs in London pubs, a brave act in itself considering the tenor of the times (see Bell, 1993; O'Brien, 1993), and it was that partnership which soon morphed into Pogue Mahone.

Of course, in using an English transcription of the name rather than its authentic Gaelic spelling, the band was also showing that it was not ignoring its English roots; they were an emigrant band. By emphasizing the Gaelic basis of the name I do not mean to suggest that the language figured prominently in their music. In fact despite the Gaelic name, the band did not include much of the language beyond occasionally dropping a few relatively common phrases or words. For instance, "Kitty," a song on their first album ("Red Roses for Me"), includes "*a stor*" ("my treasure") and "*mo mhuirnín*" ("my darling") two fairly well known terms of endearment; and "Body of an American" (from their "Poguetry in Motion" ep) includes the line "With a sláinte Joe and an erin go/My love's in Amerikay", where "*Sláinte*" is Gaelic for "health" and in this context is being used as a toast (like "cheers" in English), and "Erin go" is short for "*Erin go brách*" a phrase meaning "Ireland Forever."

But the fact that Gaelic does not feature prominently in their lyrics does not diminish the significance of the Gaelic name. After all, as I indicated above, the Irish political parties all duti-

fully identify themselves with Gaelic names, but when it comes to actual debate in the *Dáil* (the Irish parliament) or in public speeches, it is much more common to hear little more than a smattering of Gaelic before lapsing into English than it is to hear a full speech delivered in the native tongue. So on this score, the band would be fully in line with most of the Irish public (exclusive, perhaps, of those in the *Gaeltacht*, the few remaining Irish-speaking parts of the island) in asserting for themselves a small piece of linguistic nationalism. It provides a subtle, but important statement about national identity, not unlike the "*Erin go Brach*" decorations that are plastered about in bars, schools, and shopping malls across the U.S around every Saint Patrick's Day.

The Sick Bed of Cuchulainn

A second key ingredient to a sense of nation is the cultivation of the heroes who embody and become part of the national ethos. On this score, Pogues songs are rife with references to fabled leaders, historical and contemporary patriots, and literary and musical giants from the pantheon of Irish greats (see Moran, 2007). More often than not the allusions are made with no explicit connection or indication as to their significance or even elaboration as to their identities. As was the case with the original name it chose for itself, the band simply takes for granted that the audience is either in on the references or will make the effort to discover them. So, for instance, their second album ("Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash") includes the rocking and rollicking jig "The Sick Bed of Cuchulainn":

McCormack and Richard Tauber are singing by the bed
There's a glass of punch below your feet and an angel at your head
There's devils on each side of you with bottles in their hands
You need one more drop of poison and you'll dream of foreign lands

When you pissed yourself in Frankfurt and got syph down in Cologne
And you heard the rattling death trains as you lay there all alone
Frank Ryan bought you whiskey in a brothel in Madrid
And you decked some fucking blackshirt who was cursing all the Yids
At the sick bed of Cuchulainn we'll kneel and say a prayer
And the ghosts are rattling at the door and the devil's in the chair

And in the Euston Tavern you screamed it was your shout
But they wouldn't give you service so you kicked the windows out
They took you out into the street and kicked you in the brains
So you walked back in through a bolted door and did it all again
At the sick bed of Cuchulainn we'll kneel and say a prayer
And the ghosts are rattling at the door and the devil's in the chair

You remember that foul evening when you heard the banshees howl
There was lousy drunken bastards singing "Billy In The Bowl"
They took you up to midnight mass and left you in the lurch
So you dropped a button in the plate and spewed up in the church

Now you'll sing a song of liberty for blacks and paks and jocks
And they'll take you from this dump you're in and stick you in a box
Then they'll take you to Cloughprior and shove you in the ground
But you'll stick your head back out and shout "We'll have another round"
At the graveside of Cuchulainn we'll kneel around and pray
And God is in His heaven, and Billy's down by the bay

In many ways this is a typical Pogues song in that at first listen (or read) it appears to be little more than a raucous account of the barroom fights that inevitably accompany epic drinking binges. But upon closer inspection the song brims with barely disguised literary, historical, and cultural references from beginning to end. For instance, right from the start we have the reference to Cuchulainn, the central figure in the "Ulster Cycle" of poems that is roughly the Irish equivalent of the Arthurian legends in England. One of the poems in the cycle is "*Serglige Con Culaind & Oenét Emire*," or "The Wasting Sickness of Cuchulainn" (Gantz, 1981). In most of the poems, Cuchulainn is depicted as a mighty warrior, but in “Sickbed” he is shown wasting away on what could be his deathbed (he eventually recovers after a triumphant battle with some

spirits). In the Pogues song, the first stanza introduces us to an unnamed man also on his deathbed, who seems to be reflecting on his battles waged. Initially, the comparison to the mythic warrior seems farfetched because the battles recounted in the song are mere barroom brawls rather than epic struggles of good and evil, but upon closer inspection that is precisely what they turn out to be. The references to McCormack and Tauber right at the start help to establish the historical and political contexts of the song. John McCormack and Richard Tauber were two of the most recorded artists in mid-twentieth century classical music. McCormack was one of the leading Irish tenors of the period, and Tauber was born in Austria but eventually fled both Austria and Germany during the rise of Nazism to escape persecution (he was Jewish), before ending up in London to continue his recording and performing career.

Frank Ryan, the next person mentioned in the song, was a member of the IRA, coming from the James Connolly (i.e., socialist) wing of the Irish Republican movement. During the Irish Civil War, he fought with DeValera on the pro-Republican (and anti-Free State) side, and in 1936 as the Spanish Civil War erupted, he led a contingent of 200 Irish soldiers who fought on the Spanish Republican side of the conflict. He was eventually captured by Franco's forces and received a death sentence, which was commuted and he was instead turned over to the Nazis under whose custody he died in Berlin in 1944. The unnamed subject of the song joins Ryan in a barroom brawl with fascists in Madrid, and the last verse sums up a lifetime of fighting for the disadvantaged and discriminated against – blacks, Pakistanis, and Scots. Throughout the Pogues catalog, we find similar expressions of support and sympathy for the downtrodden of the world, and not just ethnic groups like those listed above or the Irish and Catholic populations in the UK

or the north, but also more broadly disadvantaged groups like drug addicts, drunks, the unemployed, and the working class.

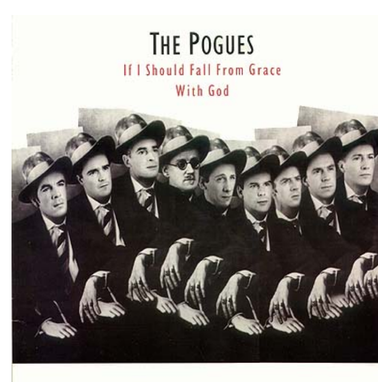
The whole gamut of Irish leaders and political figures who fought or sacrificed for Irish freedom over the nation's history – from Brian Boru to the Birmingham Six -- appears in the Pogues catalog, whether in original tunes or in covers of traditional songs. Hugh O'Neill, Red Hugh O'Donnell, "Young Ned of the Hill" (see Cashman, 2000), Patrick Sarsfield, Napper Tandy (see Doyle and Folan, 1988), and Daniel O'Connell (see Foster, 1988) are either mentioned or featured somewhere in their official releases. Thus throughout the Pogues catalog, we find references to cover every major instance of Irish resistance to outside tyranny, from Cromwell (O'Neill, O'Donnell, and Young Ned), to William of Orange (Sarsfield), to the Rising of '98 (Napper Tandy) to the movement for Catholic emancipation and Home Rule (Daniel O'Connell) to the then current "Troubles" (Birminham Six, Guildford Four).[2]

I Dreamt I Met with Behan

While the Irish political pantheon is well represented in the Pogues catalog, it probably is not an overstatement to say it pales in comparison to the literary references and allusions interwoven in the songs. Just about every major Irish writer of the twentieth century – Samuel Beckett, Brendan Behan, Christy Brown, J.P. Donleavy, James Joyce, Flann

[2] Padraig Pearse, James Connolly, Michael Collins and other heroes of the 1916 Easter Rising are noticeable by their absence in the Pogues repertoire.

O'Brien, Sean O'Casey – receives at least some mention or allusion in the records. For example, the title of their first release, "Red Roses for Me," is taken from a play of the same name by Sean O'Casey.[3] Among the songs included on the album is a cover of Brendan Behan's "Auld Triangle" and Behan is also mentioned in the opening lines of "Streams of Whiskey": "*Last night as I slept/I dreamt I met with Behan*." The chorus of that same song includes the memorable refrain "*I am going, I am going/Where streams of whiskey are flowing*, " a phrase that alludes to Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth* (originally published in 1941 in Gaelic as "*An Béal Bocht*" by O'Brien using the pseudonym "Myles na Gopaleen").[4] Likewise, "Transmetropolitan," another song "Red Roses for Me, " includes the lines: "*Going transmetropolitan/ From Surey Docks to Somers Town/With a K.M.R.I.A*." K.M.R.I.A. – an acronym for "Kiss My Royal Irish Arse" both echoes the band's name and, more importantly for present purposes, refers to a short subsection of the same name in Joyce's *Ulysses* (Part II, chapter 7, lines 990-994).



[3] *nee* John Casey, he was born in Dublin to Protestant parents and then Gaelicized his name as he became involved in Irish republican politics.

[4] Flann O'Brien was itself a pseudonym for Brian O'Nolan (*nee* Brian O Nuallain). He was born in Strabane, county Tyrone to a Gaelic speaking family. For his first novel (*At Swim-Two-Birds* [1939]) he adopted the name Flann O'Brien and it stuck for his subsequent writings (except for those in Gaelic, where he used the alias Myles na Gopaleen). *The Poor Mouth* includes a description of Hunger-stack Mountain whose summit contains a cave with not one but two streams of whiskey: one of which flowed freely and provided sustenance while the other was afire and provided warmth and light in the cave

This pattern continues throughout the Pogues catalog. Indeed, the title of what is very probably their best known song – “Fairytale of New York” – is taken from a J.P. Donleavy novel of the same name.

Incorporating all of these literary references in what were at the time punk albums may seem out of place, except within the broader context of reasserting an identity for a victimized group. That is, the references become a subtle but potent rallying point for the Irish community in confronting the daily prejudices and bigotry typical of being a member of a conquered people. The references help to show the world, at a time when news from Ireland was given over to explosions, knee-capping, and primal hatreds, that the same culture also produced some of the century’s highest cultural achievements despite the centuries of subjugation. It was reaffirmation of a culture and a nation worthy of defending.

The Proud Land of Our Fathers

The problem of geography looms large in questions of the Irish nation. The Troubles of the past 25 years and attempts to bring peace to the island revolve around the issue of whether the six counties in the north of the island belong to Ireland or Britain. One way to reinforce the idea of a single nation on the island is to incorporate the geography of the northern counties into the culture of the Irish republic. That strategy is clearly visible in the traditional songs that the Pogues covered. For instance, the chorus of “Star of the County Down,” a song released originally as a b-side on a single but a regular fixture of their stage shows, is:

From Bantry Bay up to Derry Quay
And from Galway to Dublin town
No maid I've seen like the brown colleen

That I met in the County Down

County Down is one of the six occupied counties of the north, but in the song lyric the four geographic points named are telling for they traverse the entire island. Galway to Dublin would take one across the middle of the island from west to east, and Bantry Bay to Derry Quay from south to north. The use of "Derry" is doubly significant since the English refer to the city as "Londonderry," not "Derry." In that same vein, one of the verses makes the territorial claim explicit, incorporating the county as part of a single nation:

As she onward sped sure I scratched my head
And I looked with a feeling rare
And I says, says I, to a passer-by
"Who's the maid with the nut-brown hair?"
He smiled at me, and he says says he
"That's the gem of Ireland's crown
Young Rosie McCann from the banks of the Bann,
She's the Star of the County Down."

In other words fair Rosie, from a county in the north, is identified as "the gem of Ireland's crown." As a traditional song, "Start of the County Down" obviously predates partition of the island, but its inclusion is a potent reminder that that partitioning need not be permanent, and that history speaks of a united Ireland.

The technique turns up as well in Pogues originals. Thus "Down all the Days," a song about Irish artist and author Christy Brown, begins with the lines "*Christy Brown a clown around town/ Now he's a man of renown from Dingle to Down*." So as was the case with the traditional songs, we see the Pogues deploying geographic points as shorthand to convey the area encompassed by the claim. It was used to

its most blatant political effect in “Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six,” a brilliant song co-written by Terry Woods and Shane MacGowan addressing the injustice of six Irishman arrested by English police who were subsequently tortured and coerced into confessing involvement to a horrific bombing of a pub in Birmingham. The song includes the lines: "*In Ireland they'll put you away in the Maze/ In England they'll keep you for seven long days.*” The Maze is another name for Long Kesh prison, a facility then located at a British army headquarters southwest of Belfast. It was one of the primary internment facilities used by the British for IRA activists, suspected activists, sympathizers, and suspected sympathizers and at one time housed the largest population of guerilla fighters in the world. Yet since Belfast is still technically part of Britain, claiming it as being “in Ireland” provides another rather strong indication of the band's (or at least Shane's) Republican sensibilities, especially since the prison was used to punish precisely those who sought to insure that it was indeed "in Ireland." But in terms of reaffirming the idea that the whole of the island belongs to the Irish, their most succinct formulation turns up in “If I Should Fall from Grace with God”:

This land was always ours
Was the proud land of our fathers
It belongs to us and them
Not to any of the others

Yet since the Pogues are themselves an émigré band, they extend the technique to reach out to all parts of the Irish diaspora: Australia, Europe, and the United States. For example, “Jack’s Heroes,” the song they released to celebrate Ireland’s inclusion in the 1990 World Cup includes the verse:

"They'll come from Dublin
And from Cork, from dear old Donegal
From London, Boston & New York

From anywhere at all
From Parramatta to Fermoy
Strabane to Skibereen..."

Notice that the first two lines function exactly the same way as those in "County Down," in that you have the whole of the island covered by the triangulation of Dublin (southeast), Cork (southwest) and Donegal (northwest). But then the rest of the cities reach out to the diaspora, with the four cities mentioned in the last two lines referring to Australia (Parramatta), County Cork (Fermoy, Skibereen), and County Tyrone (Strabane), with Tyrone being the largest county in the occupied portion of Ulster.

The inclusion of London in the listing above reminds us that they use this same technique in discussing their home base. "Transmetropolitan," "Dark Streets of London," "London You're a Lady," "London Girl," "Hot Dogs with Everything," and "Old Main Drag" all involve to varying degrees treks across the city where streets, clubs, and other landmarks are mentioned, and the effect is much the same as the geographic details mentioned in the Irish songs; that is, it is way of claiming a place for oneself. "Darks Streets of London," for instance opens with:

"I like to walk in the summer breeze
Down Dalling Road by the dead old trees
And drink with my friends
In the Hammersmith Broadway
Dear dirty delightful old drunken old days"

The opening verse of "London Girl" does much the same thing:

The devil moon took me through the alley
Down by the Kardomah and the Centrale
To the Mews running through the backstreets
Where the Blacks sold fire and sleep
The devil moon took me out of Soho
Up to Camden where the cold north winds blow
Sucked along by a winter shower
To stand beside your shining tower

In each case, the effect is like saying “London is my (our) town too.” In the context of the politics of the period, that simple statement was itself a courageous act.

A Curse Upon You Oliver Cromwell

So what do we mean by “the politics of the period”? We’ll end the paper here with the way we began, by trying to reflect back to the period before the announcement of the IRA cease-fire, before the Good Friday Peace Accords, before Tony Blair. In the 1980s, when the Pogues formed and did the bulk of their recording and touring, the political situation in England and the north of Ireland, and to some extent the Republic of Ireland was much more volatile and much more anti-Irish, largely due to the sectarian violence brought on by the various armed factions on the Republican and Unionist sides and the policies of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. When the Pogues began to receive some notoriety and press attention, it did not take long for certain quarters of the media to take note of the political significance of the name (even in its “clean” form) and to the symbolic content of their songs. In early interviews, Shane and other band members go out of their way to downplay any overtly political elements of their music. For example, in a 1985 interview, tin whistle player Spider Stacey explained their position this way when asked about the alleged pro-IRA sensibilities of the band:

> Yeah, well, the first thing to say is that just because you sing Irish songs, that doesn't mean you have to side with one particular set of extremists. I mean, I reckon the best song written about the current troubles is Phil Coulter's 'Town I Love So Well.' That tackles the most important issue, which is the life of the ordinary people, stuck in the middle of fanatics from both sides. And I don't really feel that we have got a right to do songs like that cos we're not local boys. I mean, I come from bloody Eastbourne (McIlheney, 1985)

Yet this explanation would likely have done little to blunt the criticism for several reasons. For one, given the nature of the “Irish songs” they were performing, they need not have explicitly sided with either of the “extremist” sides since the general drift of the traditional songs they covered was for a united Ireland. This is reinforced if one examines the lyrics to the Coulter song Spider mentions. While he is correct to note that it describes the difficulties and sacrifices of living amidst the extremists, Coulter tips his hand on his own feelings early in the third verse with the line: *“There was music there in the Derry air/ Like a language that we could all understand.”* As I indicated above, officially, the British refer to the city as Londonderry; the Irish refer to it as Derry. In the same interview, MacGowan explains himself this way:

> "The thing is," says Shane, putting a quick end to such homespun philosophy, "the people who tar us with this big nationalist thing and the people who beat us up over it are really the ones with the problem. At the same time, I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I don't believe in a 32 county Irish Republic. But that's got absolutely nothing to do with The Pogues, or what happens when we are up on stage. It's nothing at all to do with the music. (McIlhenny, 1985).

At this early stage of their career, the band members tried to distance themselves from the violence then taking place in the north and in the UK and to downplay the political significance of the music. But as MacGowan makes clear, he was at least sympathetic to the broader aims of *Sinn Féin* in terms of a united Ireland.

By the release of their third album, “If I Should Fall from Grace with God” (1988), the crisis in the north had reached such proportions that the Thatcher government revised its own Prevention of Terrorism Act (originally implemented in 1976) to make it illegal for the BBC or the IBA (Independent Broadcaster’s Association) to air any spoken words by any member of a terrorist group (11 such paramilitary groups were identified in the ban) nor to broadcast anything

which may be considered supportive of any of the banned groups (Edgerton, 1996). So the Pogues' "Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six" became the first song banned under the new guidelines (NME, 1988). According to the press release accompanying the ban, the song contained "lyrics alleging that some convicted terrorists are not guilty and that Irish people in general are at a disadvantage in British courts of law" and that "We think these allegations might support, solicit or invite support for an organization provided by the Home Secretary's Notice" (NME, 1988).

Of course by 1988, the Pogues were already fairly critical of the Thatcher government. The video for "A Pair of Brown Eyes" (1985) directed by Alex Cox, for instance, had to be recut before it could be broadcast on the BBC in order to excise a scene of the band expectorating on a poster of the Prime Minister (Handelman, 1989).

Early on in its history, the band, largely for its own safety, needed to minimize the political edge of their repertoire. To that end, they cultivated an image and reputation as a hard drinking, hard partying, Irish "paddy" band (see, for instance, Rowley, 1991). Interview questions soon shifted from politics to alcohol consumption, and by the end of the band's creative run, half of its members had been in rehab; with leader MacGowan choosing to forego rehab to instead become a poster child for the drunken Irish genius man of letters wasting his talent (*Q Magazine*, 1996)

But that political edge was always present. As Jem Finer, the band's banjo player pointed out in an interview given during the band's popular and creative peak "Pogues music grew out of

a timeless tradition, drawing on the Irish folk tradition. Some of the songs we started out doing covers of were 250 years old. They're still as alive and punchy as anything you could write to-

day" (Hawkins, 1989). In breathing new life into those songs, in introducing that tradition to a new audience, and in crafting new songs that fit within and expanded that tradition, the Pogues reawakened the sense of pride in being "Irish" and gave the émigré community something to grab onto at a time when it was sorely needed.

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