

“The Boys of the Lough/The Humours of Ennistymon”-- Michael Coleman (1922)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Fiona Ritchie (guest post)*



Michael Coleman

Michael Coleman was born into a musical household in 1891, in Killavil, County Sligo, an area of Ireland famed for its fiddle players. The family home, locally nicknamed “Jamesy Coleman’s Music Hall,” was a well-known gathering place for traditional music sessions. For all its regional renown, no-one who shared fine tunes and good cheer under the Coleman roof in the late 19th century, could possibly have imagined that a replica of that very house would be preserved nearby today,** nor that the youngest child in the family would become the most influential Irish fiddler since the rise of the recording era.

Michael Coleman grew up surrounded by first-rate fiddlers, skilled in the ornamented Sligo style. They included his older brother, Jim, while their father was a well-known flute player. When James Coleman took his sons to country dances, however, it was uilleann pipers that made the strongest impression on young Michael. After hearing the travelling piper Johnny Gorman of County Roscommon, he began to incorporate some of Gorman’s piping techniques into his fiddle playing. Coleman learned to play many reels, jigs, hornpipes, polkas, slides, and set dances from an early age. Tunes that were popular with pipers became a staple of his fiddle repertoire.

Michael Coleman was already an accomplished musician and step dancer when he crossed the ocean in 1914 to spend the rest of his life in the United States. Before settling in New York, the 23-year old travelled to many American cities as a fiddler and dancer on the vaudeville circuit. He enjoyed success on the stage, but it was as a pioneer recording artist that Coleman would make his name. By the turn of the century, Columbia and Victor were making Edison wax cylinders and Berliner flat discs commercially available for the first time. Early sound recordings reveal a rich world of traditional music-making among the Irish diaspora in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Boston-based uilleann piper William F. “Billy” Hannafin, also a fiddler, was one of the first Irish musicians to be recorded on wax cylinder in 1898. Back across the Atlantic, the Scottish Victorian dance master, fiddler and composer, “Strathspey King” James Scott Skinner, was recorded in Glasgow in 1899. He made a number of recordings on a Stroh violin, designed to allow bowed notes to record directly onto wax cylinder. Such treasured artefacts offer wonderful glimpses into this musical era, but the technology of the day could not begin to capture the tone of the fiddle nor the flourishes of a master’s style.

As early as 1901, vaudevillian virtuoso uilleann piper Patrick J. "Patsy" Touhey ran a mail order Irish music service from his home in New York. Customers could select a title from a list of 150 airs and dance melodies which Touhey would then record onto wax cylinders using his home phonograph machine. Having also created a collection of wax cylinder recordings with his friend, the Irish music collector and Chicago Chief of Police, Francis O'Neill, Touhey is the earliest traditional musician to leave such a compilation of recorded work.***

Cylinders and discs were in competition as music recording media. Flat discs emerged as the more practical to ship and store, and the market quickly grew for 10" double-sided 78 rpm records. Meanwhile, fledgling recording companies in the United States were becoming aware that a catalog of ethnic music would appeal to the growing immigrant communities. With a large Irish diaspora right on its doorstep, New York-based labels saw a ready market. In 1919, the Victor Talking Machine Company invited fiddler Patrick Clancy to record four Irish melodies.

By 1921, advances had been made in recording technology and Michael Coleman was at the height of his powers. 78s of Irish music were quite suddenly in high demand when he launched his recording career, first with the Shannon label and then for Vocalion, which was able to achieve a standard in audio fidelity and pressing quality considered good for the time. Patsy Touhey had already recorded the pipe reel "The Boys of the Lough" in 1919. Always with an ear for the piper's repertoire, this was the tune Coleman chose for his Vocalion recording, released on a 10" 78 in June, 1922. The label on the disc identifies the tune as "The Boys At The Lough" a "reel medley (traditional)," crediting Michael Coleman on violin, J. Muller on piano accompaniment and noting the suggested retail price: 75 cents in the US and 85 cents in Canada. Coleman's rhythmic bowing with Muller's added jaunty piano would have struck a chord with the Irish-American community.

Demonstrating a striking bright tone, grace notes, and playing with freedom, Coleman's distinctive technique had the effect of energizing a standard traditional reel. Remember, Coleman was also a dancer. He was used to driving the tempo and being invigorated, in turn, by dancers' steps, so there is a skip and lift about his playing that calls you to the dance floor. The tune's title, combined with the upbeat melody, suggests the easy-going spirit of a group of lads, perhaps a gang of pals or workmates from a local lough, lake or stretch of water. Although the reel is also known by a number of other names ("Boys From the Lough," "The Rose of Castletown," "Johnstown Reel"), with over 12,000 lakes in Ireland, this was a melody and title with which any Irish listener, at home or abroad, could feel companionship.

On the disc's B side, Coleman paired the tune with "The Humours of Ennistymon," a traditional jig named for a market town in County Clare, nestled around a cascading river a couple of miles inland from the Atlantic. In his playing, the "humours" or airs and impressions of this beautiful Irish location would have evoked, for the homesick immigrant, the very landscapes for which they longed. The tune had actually already been recorded by piper Patsy Touhey in 1919, however being immortalized on the flip side of Coleman's disc ensured it would be recorded around 20 more times. In 1924, McConnell's Four Leaf Shamrock Orchestra recorded "The Boys of the Lough" for Victor and there have been over 120 recordings since. The Irish-Scottish traditional band named "The Boys of the Lough" has been actively recording and touring as a quartet since the 1970s, sharing the tune title with global audiences.

Coleman's records soon found their way back to Ireland, becoming as coveted there as they were in Irish-American households. In this way, the discs bridged a painful gap between scattered families and communities depleted by generations of emigration. They were the first exchanges in a transatlantic cultural conversation that continues today. Coleman varied his playing, even slightly, with each live performance, however his recordings had an immediate impact upon fiddlers in Ireland where younger players wanted to lock down Coleman's tune versions and copy his

technique. They now had a standard and style to emulate; tune variations and local playing styles became more blended, even stifled, with a strong Sligo flavor that was directly attributable to Coleman. While the loss of some regional varieties was to be lamented, music was now so accessible that at least it meant aspiring fiddlers were no longer dependent on the availability of teachers in the family circle. The masters themselves could be heard on record player and wireless by the hearth of many a home, and the number of players of all traditional instruments multiplied throughout the 20th century. Furthermore, the music was now seen as important. Coleman's records could sit by turntables alongside 78s by Louis Armstrong, Enrico Caruso, the Carter Family, Duke Ellington, Nellie Melba and Paul Robeson. Along with other Irish-American recording pioneers, Coleman bestowed a legitimacy on traditional music with an artistry that no one could deny.

Michael Coleman died in New York in 1945. He could barely have dreamed that his trailblazing recordings would forever change how traditional music is disseminated. Hemmed in by the time constraints of the 78 rpm disc, concise arrangements became the standard, along with new instrumental combinations. The repertoire, previously the preserve of local dances and intimate music gatherings, could now travel out from rural Ireland to reach homesick exiles, musicians and non-musicians the world over. In ten inches of spinning shellac, Michael Coleman moved Irish music towards a more polished performance art, worthy of céilí, session and stage. He thus paved the way for traditional artists to follow, setting in motion a nation's passionate need to engage with the business of valuing, preserving and promoting its rich musical heritage. A monument close to his birthplace in Ireland reads in part: "Michael Coleman. Saviour of Irish traditional music."

In March 2014, the Library of Congress chose Michael Coleman's 1922 Vocalion Records release of "The Boys of the Lough" and "The Humours of Ennistymon" for inclusion in the National Recording Registry.

Fiona Ritchie is a Scottish broadcaster, producer and writer, best known for her weekly radio show "The Thistle & Shamrock" on NPR stations. Her co-authored book, "Wayfaring Strangers," charts the musical voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia. (More information: thistleradio.com)

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress

** <https://www.colemanirishmusic.com/the-centre/the-history-of-michael-coleman/>

*** Patsy Touhey's waxcylinder recordings are held in the Busby-Carney collection in the Irish Traditional Music Archive and the Dunn Collection's Ward Irish Music Archive, in partnership with the Library of Congress.