

IRISH AMERICA

October/November 2009

Canada \$4.95 U.S. \$3.95

1969:
A CRAZY
YEAR IN
IRISH
AMERICA

**Finian's
Rainbow**
LIGHTS UP BROADWAY

**WILLIAM
TREVOR:**
A SCULPTOR
OF WORDS

CELEBRATING

25

YEARS WITH
OUTTAKES FROM
25 INTERVIEWS



**MOVING
TRIBUTES TO**
Frank McCourt
& Ted Kennedy



"A Fervent Melody Struggling to Be Heard"

THE LEGACY OF DANNY CASSIDY

By Peter Quinn

*Our voices carry; and though
slumber-bound,
Some few half awake...
Give tongue, proclaim their hidden name...*
W.B. Yeats

At one point in *Quinn's Book*, the fourth novel in William Kennedy's masterful "Albany Cycle," a trainload of Famine immigrants passes through Albany. Witnessing this sad procession, narrator Daniel Quinn is told by a companion, "Pay heed to these people and remember what you see." Yet it's quickly apparent that listening is as important as seeing:

"A man of middle years, his shirt in tatters, a half-eaten chicken leg in his hand, stood alone on the steps of the train and began a song in Gaelic, that strange tongue rendered brilliant by the man's plaintive voice. Silence came onto the crowd and we listened to the minstrel, I with a growing wonder in my heart at all the joy and misery that simultaneously commanded so many lives. The train whistle interrupted the sound of the song but not the singer, and as the cars moved out, his voice reached us in fragments, audible between the whistle blasts, a fervent melody struggling to be heard. And then it was gone."

On the evening of St. Patrick's Day 2008, at the State Museum in Albany, Danny Cassidy, author of *How the Irish Invented Slang*, began his presentation by reading that scene. It took the imaginative genius of a novelist like Kennedy, Cassidy said, to perceive what historians had so often overlooked: the intimate relationship between large numbers of the rural masses who fled the Famine and their language. (The same point might be made about two brilliant recent novels, *Star of the Sea*, by Joseph O'Connor, and *Law of Dreams*, by Peter Behrens.)

Whether they congregated in crossroad cities like New York, Albany, Boston, St. Louis, etc. or spread through the country laying track and digging canals, these immigrants took their music and language with them. For many, Irish was their primary or only tongue; many more had both Irish and English. In their struggle to survive and adjust to a frequently punishing, often hostile environment, they were quick to make English their priority. Yet the Irish didn't simply discard their language. Instead, they changed its clothes, slipping it into everyday American work duds.

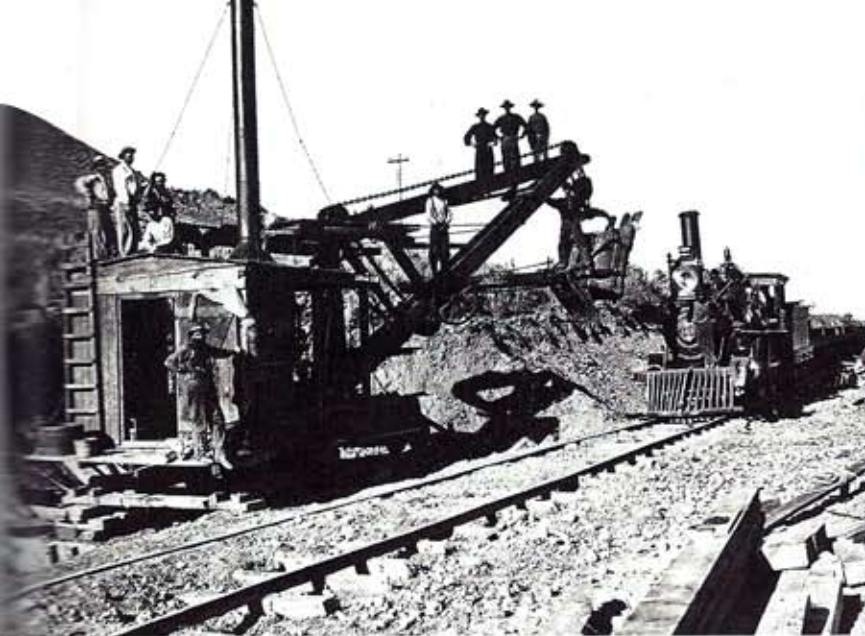
In fact, Cassidy maintained, if you listened carefully to American slang, if you twigged to the sounds of Irish, you'd hear what Kennedy's character in *Quinn's Book* heard, a "voice reach[ing] us in fragments, audible between the whistle blasts, a



fervent melody struggling to be heard."

A professional musician who'd played Carnegie Hall and worked as the opening act for George Carlin, Cassidy was a consummate performer. All his skills were on display that evening. He played the guitar, sang, lectured, read, mixed schtick and scholarship, intimate details of his own family's immigrant saga and the broad narratives of academic history, transforming what could have been a dry, if enlightening, discourse on an erudite topic into a riveting exploration of the dynamics of slang and its importance to the hybrid soul of our syncretic, kinetic nation.

I was lucky to hear Cassidy on several occasions. Each time he put everything he had into his talk—hard-won insights, artistic craftsmanship, long years of research and teaching, an innate comfort on stage, a Brooklyn-bred contempt for snobbery and pedantry, a love of mongrels, rebels and heretics. As he poured himself into explaining his fascination with the Irish-American



experience and what led him to write *How the Irish Invented Slang*, speaker and subject, like dancer and dance, became one: Cassidy was the Irish-American experience.

His presentation at the State Museum brought him a standing ovation, which was not unusual—I'd seen it happen before—but the special intensity and vehemence of his eloquence suggested to me that Danny Cassidy felt a new urgency in what he was doing. Unfortunately, that urgency wasn't misplaced. His performance in Albany proved his *nunc dimittis*. Within three weeks, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He died at home, in San Francisco, on October 11, 2008, with his beloved wife Clare at his bedside.

After his talk, Cassidy inadvertently left behind the notes he spoke from. When I offered to mail them, he said not to bother. He'd used the plane ride back to the West Coast to distill what he'd said in Albany and was happy with what he had. I not only kept his notes, I studied them, especially the finale, in which Cassidy analyzed the American folk song "Paddy Works the Railway."

Cassidy devotes several pages in *How the Irish Invented Slang* to a discussion of the song. The longer he'd thought about the song and the more he'd performed it, he told me, the more crucial he believed it was to grasping the subtlety with which Irish, in what was really a centuries long process, had seeped into English and stayed on the tongues of people who no longer spoke it.

Published under various titles—"Paddy Works on the Erie," "Poor Paddy Works on the Railway," etc.—the song appeared in Carl Sandburg's 1927 collection, *American Songbag*, and is the seventh song in Alan and John Lomax's 1934 work, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. In *How the Irish Invented Slang*, Cassidy pointed out that "the song's lyrics varied widely, with local versions scattered all across the mid-19th century diaspora, New York, Liverpool, San Francisco, Melbourne, wherever Paddy bent his back and laid a track."

The song is thought to have first become popular in the Albany area, which was both a railroad hub and the eastern terminus of the Erie Canal. The city filled up rapidly with Irish laborers, many of whom moved on to help meet the manpower needs of the boom in railroad construction preceding the Civil War. In the scene from *Quinn's Book*, William Kennedy captures the confused, disoriented situation these immigrants often found themselves in as they moved from the tradition-bound confines of

ABOVE LEFT: Steam shovel at Hanging Rock, Echo Canyon. Summer, 1869. ABOVE RIGHT: Joining of the rails – east & west, May 10, 1869. OPPOSITE PAGE: Danny Cassidy, author of *How the Irish Invented Slang*.

rural Irish society to the wide-open spaces of America and the free-for-all of its capitalist economy.

It's not hard to picture—or to hear—Kennedy's Gaelic-speaking "minstrel," in tattered shirt, half-consumed chicken leg in hand, as he turns his "plaintive voice" from traditional Irish laments to the immediate concerns of his fellow Paddies as they confront the requirements of work and survival:

*"In eighteen hundred and forty-two
I left the old world for the new,
Bad cess to the luck that brought me through
To work upon the railway,
Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay
Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay
Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay
To work upon the railway."*

On the most obvious level, the song is a hymn to the Irish immigrant's belief in work as the First Commandment. Work came before honesty, truth-telling, the law, because it had to. Everything else depended on work and the ability to feed oneself and one's family. If you couldn't fulfill this most basic requirement, as millions had learned during the Famine, then the abyss could/would swallow you whole, and all the prayers to the Almighty, whether in heaven or the Great House, would be of no avail.

No matter how dull, taxing or backbreaking, work was at the center of it all. Weary or not, you swung a pick, wielded a shovel, pushed your wheelbarrow, laid track, leveled hills, filled vales, carried bricks. The song itself echoed the repetitive nature of that work: "Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay/Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay/Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay."

In almost every version of the song, the verses chronicle the hard years Paddy and his kind endured after they left Famine-ravaged Ireland and began the work of making their way in America:

*"In eighteen hundred and forty-seven
Sweet Biddy Magee, she went to heaven
If she left one child, she left eleven
To work upon the railway."*

Cassidy, however, wasn't interested in "Paddy Works the Railway" merely as a musical Baedeker to the travails of Famine immigrants. He pondered what was between the lines—literally—the punctuating chorus of supposedly meaningless nonsense syllables to which no one gave much thought or attention.

The more he pondered, the clearer he heard what had gone

unheard for a very long time. "Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay" wasn't rhythmic filler. It was the soul of the song: the English phonetic spelling of the Irish phrase "filleadh mé uair éirithe (pron. fill'ah mæ úr í-ríh), meaning "time to get up, I go back."

In Cassidy's words: "I saw with amazement that 'Paddy Works the Railway,' with its rousing tune and 6/8 jig time, wasn't just another widely known American folk song. It was also a sanas-laoi (pron. sanas læ, a secret song) of the crossroads, a key to understanding how this ancient language—the oldest written language in Europe next to Latin

was as if it stayed hidden in plain sight because we were conditioned not to see it," she said. Ms. O'Hara became an invaluable resource to Cassidy in the compilation of *How the Irish Invented Slang*.

Others have been far less receptive. Though no American university or college offers a degree in etymology and few American etymologists have even a slight understanding of Irish, a cadre of soi-disant professional etymologists has done its best to deride, dismiss and, whenever possible, ignore Cassidy's work. In the year since his death, relieved of his insistent challenge to their blank refusal to consider the evidence of the influence of Irish on American slang, the "dictionary dudes" (that was Cassidy's term for them) have happily returned to their policy of benign neglect. I have no doubt that their fervent hope is that his thesis will wither from

usage of Scots Gaelic in America well before the arrival of the Famine Irish, a fact that Cassidy had touched on in his own book. As Calloway puts it:

"Gaelic was easily the third most common spoken European language (after English and French) in British North America in 1815. Even after it was no longer spoken, it still influenced speech patterns in the Cape Fear region of North Carolina into the early twentieth century."

More importantly, Cassidy felt that Calloway had put his finger on the very process of cultural/linguistic adaptation and hybridization that created slang:

"Contrary to popular expectations that other peoples' cultures are 'real' or 'authentic' only if they have survived without change, cultures survive only if they do change. People do not pass their culture from generation to generation as a complete package; they select, rearrange, and reemphasize different pieces of it as time and circumstance change."

Cassidy believed very strongly that his work was only a start and that much more remained to be done. He knew it would be questioned and tested, which he felt was all to the good. As he once told me, the sheer novelty and revolutionary nature of

his challenge to the orthodoxies of the Oxford English Dictionary guaranteed Newton's Third Law would go into effect: "To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."

The evening he spoke at the State Museum, Cassidy was introduced by none other than Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist William Kennedy. Equally impressed by the ground-breaking nature of Cassidy's book and by the force and persuasiveness of his argument, Kennedy took note of the critics. Time would eventually decide who was right, Kennedy

said, and time is on Cassidy's side.

The truth that Danny Cassidy worked so long and hard to disinter, laboring in obscurity, spending his own resources, bearing the ridicule and scorn of the smug and tenured, isn't going to be re-interred. The singer may be gone, but not his song. His voice will continue to reach us, whether in fragments or whole, audible between the blasts and blather of the dictionary dudes, a fervent melody, a persistent verse. It will be heard. Danny Cassidy's legacy will endure.

Fil-i-me-oo-re-i-re-ay.



LEFT: Irish emigrants embarking at Queenstown (now Cobh).
BELOW: Mining gold: Head of Auburn Ravine, 1852.



and Greek, the beating heart of Irish culture for over a millennium—made a place for itself in a brave and often brutal New World. Slang, that most pliable and subversive of linguistic tools, the language of laborers, itinerants, touts, chorus girls, barmen—the country's working stiffs—became the instrument of its survival."

(Note: in *How the Irish Invented Slang*, Cassidy posits that our word stiff, meaning common working man or woman, a "regular Joe" or "Jane," a migratory worker, a hobo and also a dead person, is derived from the Irish word staf, staif, pl. n., a burly person, a strong, husky, muscular person, a broad-shouldered person, a "big lug." Also, staf an bais (pron. staf n bash), the stiffness caused by death, fig. "a stiff.")

Hettie O'Hara, a native Irish speaker and a woman of penetrating intelligence who teaches Irish at the University of California at Berkeley, once told me that when Cassidy first came to her with his radical insight into "Paddy Works the Railway," she found it hard to credit. How could something so obvious, she wondered, have been so obscured? "It

inattention and quietly blow away.

I sincerely doubt it. The central insight of Cassidy's work and the evidence he marshaled in its support is now part of the record, and despite his sickness, he continued his research right up until the end. A few weeks before he died, he called me to share his enthusiasm for a book he was reading entitled *White People, Indians and Colonial Encounters in Scotland and America* (Oxford U. Press, 2008), by Dartmouth professor Colin Calloway.

Cassidy pointed out to me that Professor Calloway established the wide