

# Padraig Goes to Dublin

By Verlene Schermer

In 1813, Padraig O'Conaill had been an itinerant harper for about twelve years. He'd learned the magic of music's healing power in the land of fairy – yes, it was about twelve years ago... Last week, he was in a pub in Belfast, playing his harp and singing a song that came rather too close to the truth about the British oppression, when a very drunk and angry Tory came at him with an ax and murder in his eye. Well, the harp was smashed to bits, and Padraig was banged up pretty badly himself, but he managed to escape with his life by what may have been a clever trick, or a bit of fairy magic – but that's a story for another day.

Today, Padraig is on the road to Dublin, harpless, but not without heart. He'd heard about a harp maker, a Seamus O'Reilly, who lived in Dublin. O'Reilly's willow harps were beautiful to the ears and the eyes both, and they say his price is fair. All Padraig had to do was get to Dublin. Now, that wasn't going to be so easy – a harper with no harp! But he had been composing songs, and his sweet tenor voice had matured into a fine instrument. And after all, the music was in his heart, not just his fingers. So as long as he would compose and sing from his heart, he would have something quite of value to exchange for room and board along the way, and just enough extra to pay for a new harp.

So Padraig sang for his supper all the way from Belfast to Dublin. One town wanted a song to celebrate the completion of a new church building. In another town, a singer was needed for a wedding. In a third town, a baby was born, and Padraig composed a song that was a prophecy – and sure enough, the baby grew up to be the loving, well-loved young man that Padraig's song had proclaimed he would be – but that, too, is a story for another day.

For most of the journey, the songs were about life and love and common folks doing what common folks do – none of the political songs that almost cost him his life in Belfast.

As he drew nearer to Dublin, he was reminded that there is still injustice and a great need for healing in Ireland. When just a day's travel left to the city, he heard about a young lawyer who was doing great things for the Irish people. An old man he met in the roadhouse said, "Course you've heard of him, he's quite famous, and he shares your name – You're sure you're not related, are you?"

"I don't have any relatives. Oh, well, there was m' ma, but she died when I was four or five. M' father, I never met. He'd run off to join the Irish Brigade before he knew he'd made the likes of me."

"Well, isn't that just like an O'Connell. Dan's own father was one of the "Wild Geese" of Ireland, and Dan's uncles too – you could be cousins, you and Daniel O'Connell! You're about the same age."

As the old man spoke about the deeds of this man that could be Padraig's own family, Padraig began to compose a new kind of song – well, new for Padraig, but an ancient form – in the tradition of the old Irish bards – as song about a hero:

*He fights our wars without a sword  
Without a battle plan  
But with the law he wins 'em all  
Our man, Ireland, our Dan!*

*"Twas back in eighteen hundred-eight  
The bishops had agreed  
To give the English government  
The veto they would need  
To keep poor Irish Cath'lics  
As enslaved as we had been  
But Daniel won them to our side  
Our man, Ireland, our Dan!*

The old man continued to tell the story of how this young lawyer has been outsmarting the British and bringing the Catholic hierarchy into sympathy with the Irish people. And as Pdraig crawled into his bedroll that night – the last night of his journey to Dublin – the story continued to form within his head into a song:

*When five years passed, a new Relief Bill  
Came to Parliament  
But Dan could see it gave rights  
To the British government  
To supervise all documents  
And veto any good  
Our Dan defied the clergy  
And the Pope! We knew he would!*

*He fights our wars without a sword  
Without a battle plan  
But with the law he wins 'em all  
Our man, Ireland, our Dan!*

When Pdraig arrived in Dublin late the next day, he had no trouble finding the home of Seamus and Anne O'Reilly. Directed by strangers on the streets and the tugging in his heart toward the resonance of O'Reilly's willow harps, Pdraig was soon brought to the harp maker's doorstep. He sat down with Seamus and settled on the details of the harp (willow body, of course, brass strings, thirty of them, and so on). They settled on a quite reasonable price, and just as Pdraig was about to leave to find an inn for his stay in Dublin, the old craftsman pulled out a book of Celtic designs.

"For an additional fee, I can distinguish your harp with any of these fine carvings."

"Now I see how you do so well, old man. Yes, of course, these are beautiful."

They agreed on the design, and the additional fee – which meant that Pdraig would be staying with the O'Reilly's, helping Anne around the house in exchange for room and board.

Anne O'Reilly was a quiet woman. It's not that Pdraig minded doing women's work – in fact, he could see that baking bread was a lot like composing songs – but if only he could get Anne to talk with him – to pass the long hours.

"Have you heard of this Daniel O'Connell?" Well, *those* were the magic words!

"Dan, our man! He will deliver us yet! Did y'hear about the Evening Post affair? Oh, that Magee (he's the owner of it, y'know) he's always published the truth about corruption – what he said about Westmoreland, and Camden, and now Richmond! He says the Duke of Richmond outmatched the worst of 'em. The government didn't like that 't'all – arrested 'im, they did. But Magee knew what to do – called on our Dan to defend him, and Dan made such a clamor! To be heard all over Ireland, sure..."

As she spoke on through the hours, Pdraig heard the music in his head:

*When John Magee was charged  
With speaking out against the Duke  
The bigots on the jury  
Would receive our Dan's rebuke  
The speech he made was passion filled  
It was his whole defense  
For John Magee did not deny  
He published such offense.*

*And then Magee wrote one last time  
To let the people know  
Our Dan has made the prosecutor  
Squirm, and even though  
He's lost this case, he still has won  
For all of Ireland  
Will hear about the great defender  
Dan, he'll take our stand!*

*He fights our wars without a sword  
Without a battle plan  
And for the cause he's never lost  
Our man, Ireland, our Dan!*

Between daily chores, Anne's stories, and the developing verses in Pdraig's song, the three months it took to make the harp passed quickly. Pdraig gathered up his possessions and paid the harp maker. Then he played his beautiful new harp.

"A sweet tone, and pure – Anne, I will call you 'Anne.'"

Anne O'Reilly giggled from the doorway, obviously flattered. But who's to say how many more of Seamus' harps bear the name 'Anne.' The O'Reilly's had no children to carry on their name, but there are O'Reilly harps throughout Ireland – we all seek immortality in our own ways... But that is a story for another day.

Now, here was Padraig in Dublin with a new harp and no commitments. Why leave town just yet? There might be a living to be made in this large and wealthy city! And more than anything now, Padraig wanted to meet his could-be-cousin.

He headed toward the merchant streets and found them strangely deserted. He was just wondering why, when he heard what must have been a very loud cheer, but it was some distance away.

“Well, that's where everybody is – some sort of sport, or festival.” He headed toward the source of the sound and found himself on the road to Kildare. Soon a crowd of people came joyously down the road toward him. As they passed, he heard bits and pieces about what had gone on:

“That old Orange ogre got just what he deserved.”

“Our Dan, he's not all just words y'know.”

“Where was D'Esterre's Corporation when he needed them, I ask.”

“They'll listen to Daniel O'Connell now, they will.”

“They have to!”

With the information he picked up, the last few verses of the song took shape:

*D'Esterre was offended  
When O'Connell made a claim:  
The Orange Dublin Corporation  
Beggars all, and shame!  
So then D'Esterre challenged him  
To fight a public duel.  
He thought to make a mockery  
Of Dan for being cruel.*

*But Dan arrived with multitudes  
To cheer the counselor  
The moment came, D'Esterre fell  
The crowd let out a roar!  
For Dan had overthrown  
The aristocracy at last  
Emancipation now would be  
About to come to pass!*

*He fights our wars with pistols, swords,  
And any way he can*

*Within the law he wins 'em all  
Our man, Ireland, our Dan!*

The next group that approached Padraig on the road surrounded a man who just had to be Daniel O'Connell. Cousin, sure, they might even be brothers! Daniel O'Connell stopped the moment he saw Padraig's harp.

"Harper, can you compose a song to declare the beginning of freedom for the Irish people?"

Padraig sang his song – the song he'd been composing for no real reason – except perhaps this meeting. When he finished, Daniel O'Connell wiped tears from his eyes and looked at Padraig's face for the first time.

"What is your name, harper?"

"Padraig O'Conaill, sir."

"Who is your father?"

"I wish I knew his Christian name, or where he came from, or what's become of him. I would be honored to learn that I am even remotely related to you."

With that Daniel embraced Padraig and said, "Even if you are not my father's brother's son, I will call you cousin – if not kin, then kindred spirit."

That was the only time Padraig ever spoke with Daniel O'Connell, but it was not the last time he sang the song he called "Counselor Daniel O'Connell."

He set out to carry news to all of Ireland about the new beginnings that were taking place in Dublin. He knew that the song would bring sorrow to the Tory in Belfast and others like him; comfort to the harp maker's wife and others like her; but most of all, it brought joy to Padraig himself. For the first time in twelve years, the fairy queen's hand touched him, healing his own longing to belong.