

Clancy, Liam

by Lawrence William White

Clancy, Liam (1935–2009), folk singer, was born William ('Willie') Clancy on 2 September 1935 in William Street, Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary, youngest child among four sons and seven daughters of Robert Joseph Clancy, insurance agent, and Johanna Clancy (née McGrath). His father had studied accountancy by night while working in Cleeve's toffee factory in Carrick, and by Liam's birth was brokering insurance from the family home. 'The shakin's of the bag', born when his mother was 47, Liam was six years younger than his nearest sibling (the two eldest of which, sisters, had died by his early infancy). His immediate and extended family were steeped in music; the daily life of the household was accompanied by constant song.

Early life in Ireland Clancy's memoirs describe the sheltered, innocent, materially frugal upbringing typical of the small-town, provincial Ireland of his generation, immersed in family, community, and catholic religiosity and morality: 'one foot in the middle ages and the other just touching the waters of the twentieth century' (*Yellow Bittern*). Receiving primary and secondary education locally from the Christian Brothers to leaving certificate level, he developed deep interests in literature, drama and music. Fascinated by the letters home of his two eldest brothers, Paddy (qv) and Tom (qv), relating their experiences as aspirant actors in America, and by the recorded discs and tapes of folk music and blues they posted from New York, he dreamed of acting as a career, hoping to compensate for his extreme shyness by losing himself in characters.

Lacking any definite plan toward realising such dreams, shortly after leaving school he acceded to his father's expectations and became a trainee broker with Zurich Insurance in Dublin. Hurling himself into the city's cultural life, he took night classes in acting and painting, and haunted theatres, cinemas and the National Library. Obtaining a walk-on part in a highly acclaimed Gaiety Theatre production of 'The playboy of the western world' (1953), starring Siobhán McKenna (qv) and Cyril Cusack (qv), on the latter's advice he dropped the forename 'Willie' for the more elegant and Gaelic 'Liam'. Quitting the insurance company after six months, he remained in Dublin till his dole money ran out before returning to Carrick bearing a second-hand guitar. While cycling the sixteen miles each way to a job with Hibernian Insurance in Waterford city, he produced, directed and acted (as Christy Mahon) in an amateur production in Carrick of the 'Playboy', casting as Pegeen Mike his sister Peg Power (thus launching her lengthy acting career); the troupe he gathered went on to found the town's enduring Brewery Lane Theatre.

In August 1955 his elder brothers' bohemian world of Greenwich Village folk clubs and theatre suddenly landed on Liam's doorstep in the person of Diane Hamilton (1924–91), a moneyed American folk music enthusiast and collector, who on

Paddy's and Tom's recommendation called to the Clancy home to obtain songs from their mother. On Hamilton's invitation, Liam joined the remainder of her round-Ireland music-collecting tour, followed by a similar tour of Scotland, lugging the heavy, cumbersome recording equipment used on location. In Keady, Co. Armagh, they recorded the accomplished parlour singer Sarah Makem, with whose son Tommy (qv) Liam struck an instant rapport as a kindred spirit with similar interests and aspirations.

A wayward member of the wealthy Jewish-American Guggenheim family, Hamilton – 32 years old, twice divorced, with a daughter by her second marriage – had a restless, impulsive, reckless nature, prone to erratic emotions and mental instability. Forming an intense amorous interest in Liam, she offered to pay his passage and fund his film studies in New York.

New York: folk music and theatre Sailing to America in January 1956, and joining his two brothers in Greenwich Village, Liam was feted about town by Hamilton, who secured him work assisting a photographer and movie cameramen. Young, innocent and deeply religious, he was flattered by Hamilton's attentions, attracted by the opportunities she was opening for him, but confused and overwhelmed by the force of her personality, and frightened by the violence of her moods. Ever evading her assertive sexuality, he never consummated the relationship.

Backed financially by Hamilton, the three Clancy brothers launched a record label, Tradition, which, managed by Paddy Clancy, issued some fifty albums from 1956 to 1961, specialising in folk music from North America, Ireland and Britain, and in the spoken word. Liam edited recorded material for release, working in the label's New York office or in Hamilton's renovated farmhouse in rural Connecticut. He performed a small role on the label's first issue, a studio recording of *The Countess Cathleen*, the play by W. B. Yeats (qv), featuring Siobhán McKenna (opposite whom Tom Clancy had recently acted on the NY stage). Another early release was a selection of the music Hamilton had recorded in Ireland, *The lark in the morning* (1956), including Liam's singing on several tracks. Along with Tommy Makem – also a recent émigré – the three Clancys recorded an album of Irish rebel songs, *The rising of the moon* (1956). Liam engaged Irish artist Louis le Brocquy (1916–2012) to execute the jacket art on the latter two releases. He made a field trip with Hamilton to western Virginia and North Carolina for an album of southern Appalachian instrumental music. His relationship with Hamilton came to a crisis when at her country home in autumn 1956 he forcefully repelled a sexual advance, whereupon she attempted suicide, was hospitalised, and on recovery was committed for a period to a psychiatric institution.

Clancy's acting ambitions received a major boost when he appeared in 'The Countess Cathleen' at the Poets' Theatre (managed by Mary Manning (qv)) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in spring 1957; he returned to the venue that autumn with parts in three one-act Yeats plays. Over the next several years he performed

frequently in stage plays, television dramas and short films, often working with noted directors and established or emerging star actors, including Walter Matthau, Robert Redford and Dirk Bogarde. He played Ferdinand in Shakespeare's 'The tempest' with Basil Langton in Richmond, Virginia (summer 1957), and reprised the role in Langton's lavish, open-air production in Bermuda (1959). Alongside his brothers and Makem, he appeared in an off-Broadway stage adaptation (May 1958) of 'Guests of the nation' by Frank O'Connor (qv). His most conspicuous role was a small part in the live NBC television play 'Little moon of Alban' (broadcast 24 March 1958) by the Irish-American screenwriter James Costigan (1926?–2007), an adaptation of the Deirdre legend set during the Irish war of independence, starring Julie Harris as a nursing nun, George Peppard as a young IRA man, and Christopher Plummer as a British officer; the critically lauded production won four Emmy awards, and led to Clancy's obtaining more parts in live television drama and work as a reader on arts programmes. He appeared in a stage adaptation of 'Little moon' that had a brief Broadway run (1960), and in a recorded television production (early 1960s). He played Johnny Boyle in a television film of 'Juno and the Paycock' (1960), and produced the cycle of Yeats's five Cuchulainn plays in the Poetry Center, NY (March 1960).

Having landed in New York a virgin and teetotaler, he was pursuing a feverishly promiscuous sexual life, despite living for six years (1958–64) with a woman named in his memoir as 'Tina', by whom he fathered a daughter, Anya (Aine), in 1964. An habitu  of the Greenwich Village scene of folk and jazz singers and musicians, writers, actors and artists, he took part – singly, or partnering his brothers or Makem in various impromptu combinations – in informal, late-night sing-songs (hootenannies) in the famed White Horse tavern, and in the other Village bars, folk clubs and coffee houses in which the American folk music revival was simmering.

In the late 1950s the folk revival moved from being a niche interest into the American musical mainstream, following the commercial success of the Kingston Trio, whose hit recording of the traditional folk song 'Tom Dooley' (1958) created a vogue for vocal groups performing harmonised and polyphonic treatments of folk song. In 1959, a Village folk club, the Fifth Peg, impressed by audience reactions to the hootenanny singing of Liam and Tommy Makem, offered them a paid gig for \$125 per week, three times the going rate for actors. The three Clancys and Makem attracted further attention as singers, and spread their reputation beyond New York to other American cities, by the re-recording of their first album to richer instrumentation, and the release of an acclaimed second album, also on their Tradition label, of Irish drinking songs, *Come fill your glass with us* (1959).

In 1960 the foursome opened in a NY club for the folk and blues singer Josh White (esteemed by Liam as his foremost mentor in the art of stagecraft). Their performances impressed White's manager, Marty Erlichman, whose offer to manage them 'opened doors where no one knew doors existed' (*Memoirs*, 252). Besides advising on repertoire, musical arrangement and performance technique, Erlichman

crafted an image for the group. Under his guidance, they developed a characteristic style of hearty, rousing and virile ensemble singing, punctuated by softer, down-tempo numbers with delicate melodies and harmonies, in which Liam's mellow, lyrical tenor came to the fore. (A lion's share of their early material being mined from Sarah Makem's vast repertoire, there was a pronounced Ulster and Scottish slant to their song list.) Erlichman secured them paid dates throughout the Village folk circuit, and further afield to such centres of the folk revival as Boston, Chicago and San Francisco, and into the north-east college circuit. As the group dithered over a name for their act, a Chicago impresario billed them under the name that stuck, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. When the brothers returned from a Christmas 1960 visit home sporting white fishermen's sweaters woven by their mother, Erlichman immediately seized on them as image-making stage attire.

Stardom: the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem Playing a series of shows in the Blue Angel, a fashionable uptown NY nightclub, the group was spotted by talent scouts for Ed Sullivan's weekly television variety show. Their appearance on Sullivan's show (12 March 1961), just after signing a contract with Columbia records, gave them national exposure before an estimated audience of 80 million. Thereupon, their career took off, hurling them into a decade-long whirlwind of concert tours, nightclub residencies, recording sessions and broadcast performances. Throughout the 1960s they played twice yearly at Carnegie Hall; a live recording, *In person at Carnegie Hall* (1963), was one of their most successful LPs. They undertook a sell-out tour of Ireland in 1962, performed before President Kennedy in the White House in 1963, and toured Canada, Britain and Australia in addition to their USA tours. For all their success, the group had a complicated relationship with Irish America. Their material and vocal style subverted mainstream, Tin Pan Alley conceptions of 'Irish music', as well as aspects of Irish-American conceptions of the 'auld sod' their forebears left behind. Furthermore, the group's emergence from the left-leaning, multi-racial, counter-cultural folk revival aroused suspicions within sections of Irish America. Thus, the group's appeal among Irish-Americans was largely to the younger and more politically and culturally progressive sectors of the demographic, excited that Irish music and culture could be part of the broader folk music scene.

The youngest and best looking of the foursome, with fresh, cherubic features, Liam had the softest, most mellifluous voice amongst them, and took the lead on most of the slow airs, love songs and laments, the more mournful ballads, and the 'sad verse' within an ensemble number. Highlights included 'The castle of Dromore' (harmoniously duetted with Makem), 'Eileen aroon', and 'The parting glass', rebel songs like 'The minstrel boy', 'The croppy boy', and 'The valley of Knockanure', and the fiercely anti-war 'The patriot game', written by Dominic Behan (qv) during the 1950s IRA border campaign. Liam provided guitar accompaniment to the group's live performances, and generally took lead vocal on Irish-language songs, such as 'Port Lairge' and 'An poc ar buile'. He recorded a solo album in 1965, sharing vocals on one track, 'The rocky road to Dublin', with Luke Kelly (qv) of the

Dubliners, foremost among the Irish-based ballad groups inspired by the Clancy Brothers' style. Liam's sensitive, meticulously phrased singing was widely admired; Bob Dylan, who knew the group from their Greenwich Village days, and derived the melodies of some of his own compositions from songs in their repertoire, described Liam as 'just the best ballad singer I'd ever heard in my life. Still is, probably' (quoted in *NY Times* obituary).

By the late 1960s pressures upon and tensions within the group were extreme, with the hectic performing lifestyle, disagreements over musical direction and finances, and an insidious sense of performing and personal stagnation, intensified by inter-familial animosities and rivalries. When Makem left to pursue a solo career in 1969, he was replaced for two years by the third brother within the Clancy family, Bobby (1927–2002), who departed in 1971 after quarrelling with Liam, to be replaced for three years by Geordie singer Louis Killen. By the early 1970s, the group was mired in tax problems with the US authorities. Liam was especially aggrieved when Tom broke a touring commitment to accept a Hollywood acting role, and by a general sense of his lowly place within the group and family pecking order as the baby brother.

Later career: solo, duo and ensemble Departing the group in 1973, Liam endured a period of precarious finances, with scant income, spending winter 1973–4 with his wife and young family in poorly winterised rental accommodation at a seaside resort on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. At the invitation of in-laws, in early 1974 he moved his family to Calgary, Alberta, Canada. After performing a number of sell-out concerts in the region, he secured his own programme on a local television station, and released a second solo album, *Farewell to Tarwaithie* (1974; reissued as *The Dutchman* (1983), title of the album's most popular track). Now accompanying his singing with concertina as well as guitar, he concealed his balding pate under a floppy peaked cap, a trademark of his later career. In July 1975 he and Makem performed a set together at a music festival in Cleveland, Ohio, before an enthusiastic audience. Shortly thereafter, Makem appeared as a guest on Clancy's television programme; the transmission was awarded a Canadian Emmy, whereupon the pair were invited to record a twenty-six-part series on Canadian television. Out of this collaboration was formed the duo of Makem and Clancy, which, while never matching the success of the original foursome, remained together for thirteen years (1975–88), touring widely in concert halls, college campuses, pubs and music festivals, and recording six albums. They placed three records in the Irish singles charts, attaining a no. 1 hit with Liam's rendition of 'And the band played "Waltzing Matilda"' (1977), by Scottish-Australian singer-songwriter Eric Bogle; their repertoire included another anti-war Bogle composition, sung by Liam, 'Willie McBride'.

The original foursome came together for a reunion tour (1984–5) and live concert LP. Makem and Clancy having amicably ended their partnership in 1988, Liam replaced Tom Clancy during the latter's terminal illness, and remained after his

death, as a member of the Clancy Brothers and Robbie O'Connell, comprising Paddy and Bobby Clancy and a nephew (1990–96); a studio album, *Older but no wiser* (1995), included Liam's son Dónal (b. 1975) as a backing guitarist. From 1991 the group embarked on annual musical Caribbean cruises. Financial disputes about the cruises led to Liam's and O'Connell's departure from the group, whereupon they were joined by Dónal under the name Clancy, O'Connell and Clancy (1996–9). After that combination sundered amicably, Liam performed solo. His last album, *The wheels of life* (2008), included collaborations with Tom Paxton, Mary Black, Gemma Hayes and Donovan Leitch.

Post-1960s Irish critiques of Clancy's career as a solo and ensemble artist were coloured by the perceived stage-Irishry of elements of the act, the Americanisation of style and material, and the easy-listening kitsch of some of his late repertoire. Several documents of the last decade of his life occasioned a revival of interest in his career, and a reappraisal of the musical and cultural significance of the original group and Liam's contributions to it. The first was a frank autobiography, *Memoirs of an Irish troubadour* (2002; USA title, *The mountain of the women*), concentrating on his early life in Ireland and America, up to the group's 1961 breakthrough. Clancy was interviewed memorably by Martin Scorsese for the latter's television documentary about Bob Dylan, *No direction home* (2005), in which he sang Dylan's 'Girl from the north country'. A two-part television documentary by Alan Gilsenan, *The legend of Liam Clancy*, broadcast in RTÉ's *Arts lives* series (7, 14 Mar. 2006), was expanded into a feature film, *The yellow bittern* (2009); both films revealed not alone Clancy's talents as a singer, but also his storytelling skills and the considered but impassioned reflectiveness of his observations on his life and times.

Moving back permanently to Ireland in 1983, Clancy settled in Ring, Co. Waterford, where he lived in Ireland's first purpose-built solar-powered house, and built a recording studio, in which his later solo and group albums were recorded. With his wife Kim, from a Donegal Gaeltacht background, whom he married in New York (c.1970), Clancy had two sons and two daughters; two other sons were listed in death notices, as well as his eldest child, Anya. From the late 1960s, Clancy suffered periods of alcohol dependence, depression and nervous breakdown. Afflicted for some eighteen months with pulmonary fibrosis, necessitating daily periods on portable supplementary oxygen, he died on 4 December 2009 in the Bon Secours Hospital, Cork city. The funeral was from St Mary's Roman catholic church, Dungarvan, to Ring new cemetery.

GRO (birth, death certs.); Liam Clancy, *Memoirs of an Irish troubadour* (2002); *The yellow bittern: the life and times of Liam Clancy* (film, 2009; dir. Alan Gilsenan; DVD ed.); *Ir. Times*, 11, 12 Sept., 4, 5, 7, 8, 12 Dec. 2009; *Guardian* online (obit.), 4 Dec. 2009; *NY Times*, 5 Dec. 2009; *Sunday Independent*, 6 Dec. 2009; *Telegraph*, 6 Dec.

2009; *Independent* (London), 9 Dec. 2009; rip.ie; The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, www.theballadeers.com; www.liamclancy.com; Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com; Internet Broadway Database, www.ibdb.com; Lortel Archives: Internet Off-Broadway Database, www.lortel.org (internet material accessed Aug. 2016)

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