

Clancy, Thomas ('Tom')

by Desmond McCabe and Lawrence William White

Clancy, Thomas ('Tom') (1924–90), folk singer and actor, was born 29 October 1924 on William St., Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary, seventh child and second son among four sons and seven daughters of Robert Joseph Clancy, accountant, and Johanna Clancy (née McGrath), from a family of publicans on Main St., Carrick-on-Suir. His father, formerly a factory worker who had studied accountancy by night, later became an insurance broker. His mother was a fine parlour singer, with a vast store of traditional song. Educated locally by the Christian Brothers until age fourteen, Tom then worked as an apprentice baker. Enlisting in the RAF during the second world war (1943), he served as a wireless operator on bombing missions over Germany. With his eldest brother, Paddy (see below), he emigrated to Canada (1947), and from there to Cleveland, Ohio, USA, where he joined relatives and worked in an automobile manufacturing plant. Interested in acting, in his spare time he performed in repertory theatre at the Cleveland Playhouse. During a period back in Ireland (1950), he toured in the fit-up theatre companies of Anew McMaster (qv) and Geoffrey Kendal. Returning to America, he moved with Paddy to New York city, where they lived in the artists' enclave of Greenwich Village. Supporting themselves at various jobs, they found intermittent work in theatres on and off Broadway, and in summer stock. By the mid 1950s Tom Clancy was appearing frequently in television drama, and attracting notice as an interpreter of Eugene O'Neill and Sean O'Casey (qv). He acted in the adaptation of *Finnegans wake* by James Joyce (qv) staged by Mary Manning (qv) in the Poets' Theatre, Cambridge, Mass. (1955), and performed with the Provincetown Players on Cape Cod. He appeared in NY with Siobhan McKenna (qv) in 'Saint Joan' by George Bernard Shaw (qv) (1956); with Orson Welles in a Broadway production of 'Othello' (1957); and in another Joyce adaptation, 'Ulysses in Nighttown', with Zero Mostel and Carroll O'Connor (1958).

Tom and Paddy began singing informally in bars, at parties, and in hired halls, often passing the hat to raise money for rent and other expenses. In January 1956 they were joined in NY by their youngest sibling, Liam (b. 1935). With backing from an American folk-music enthusiast, Diane Hamilton (a member of the wealthy Guggenheim family), the three brothers launched Tradition Records, and combined with Liam's friend Tommy Makem (1932–2007), from Keady, Co. Armagh, to record a collection of Irish rebel songs, issued as *The rising of the moon* (1956), with an award-winning jacket designed by Louis Le Brocquy. Continuing to sing at spontaneous sessions in Greenwich Village bars (especially the White Horse Tavern, Hudson St., celebrated for its Dylan Thomas associations), the quartet steadily attracted a following in the city's emerging folk-music scene, leading to paid engagements in clubs and coffee houses. Gradually expanding their base beyond NY to other centres of Irish-American population, they recorded two more albums

on their Tradition label, *Come fill your glass with us* (1959) and *The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem* (1961).

With such modest success eclipsing their acting careers, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem suddenly vaulted into immense popularity with an appearance on the Ed Sullivan television show (5 March 1961), their set extended to sixteen minutes when the headlined performer fell ill and pulled out. Signed to a recording contract with Columbia Records, they made thirteen albums in 1961–9. Uniformed in trademark white bainín Aran sweaters, and benefiting from the interest in America in all things Irish during the presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917–63), they developed a modernised, highly rhythmic style of Irish song and ballad, influenced by contemporary American folk and African-American blues, sung by the group in solo turns and ensemble, accompanied by guitar, banjo, tin whistle, and harmonica. Their robust, virile vocal delivery, and themes of rebellion, hard drinking, and blackguarding, excited an American audience for whom 'Irish music' had come to mean saccharine Tin-Pan-Alley compositions and hackneyed renditions of old standards. Representative highlights of their repertoire included 'Brennan on the moor', 'Young Roddy McCorley', and 'The leaving of Liverpool'. Their concert programmes included recitations from such authors as Joyce and William Butler Yeats (qv). Tom Clancy in particular was noted for the theatricality of his performance, drawn from his acting experience.

The Clancys and Makem first played Carnegie Hall in 1963, and performed before President Kennedy in the White House on St Patrick's day, 1963. Their music was introduced to Ireland in 1962 by broadcaster Ciarán Mac Mathúna, and they first performed in Ireland in 1963. Though purists were critical of the American and commercial influences on their vocal style and arrangements, and on their editing of many lyrics, the group attained huge success in Ireland, and ignited the 1960s 'ballad boom', inspiring scores of native-based performers such as the Dubliners. They played London's Royal Albert Hall, and topped the bill at the first Cambridge folk festival (1965). In the late 1960s their commercial success declined amid the waning of the American folk revival, overproduced arrangements on their own recordings, and the emergence in Ireland of a new generation of traditional musicians, led by the Chieftains and Planxty, that emphasised musicianship and a less adulterated Irish style. In 1969 Makem departed on a solo career, and was replaced until 1970 by the fourth Clancy brother, Robert ('Bobby') (1927–2002), who had remained in Carrick-on-Suir to manage the family insurance business, and then by Tyneside singer Louis Killen. After disbanding for several years, the Clancy Brothers reformed in 1977 with Tom, Paddy, Bobby, and their nephew Robbie O'Connell, but failed to match the contemporaneous success of the duo of Makem and Liam Clancy, the two most accomplished members of the original quartet. In 1984 the original lineup reunited for several Irish appearances and a sold-out show in Lincoln Centre, NY, followed by a live album, and full tour.

Tom Clancy revived his acting career in the mid 1970s with an acclaimed Broadway performance, alongside Jason Robards and Colleen Dewhurst, in Eugene O'Neill's 'A moon for the misbegotten'. Moving to Hollywood, he appeared in the 1976 film *Swashbuckler*, with Robert Shaw, and played character roles in such popular TV series as 'Starsky and Hutch', 'Charlie's angels', and 'Little house on the prairie'. Returning to Ireland in 1985, he lived in semi-retirement in Ring, Co. Waterford. Thrice married, he had two daughters and one son by his first two marriages; with his third wife, Joan, he had three daughters. He died 7 November 1990 of stomach cancer in Mercy hospital, Cork city.

His eldest brother, Patrick ('Paddy') Clancy (1922–98), was born 7 March 1922 on William Street, Carrick-on-Suir, the sixth child of Robert and Johanna Clancy. He also worked as a baker before serving in the RAF during the second world war, based in India. After emigrating to America with Tom, he likewise worked in theatre, but was less persistent in pursuing an acting career. After the brothers' move to NY he became involved in the music business, working for Folkways and Elektra Records. In the late 1950s he was president and day-to-day manager of Tradition Records. Under his direction the label compiled an impressive catalogue of folk music and spoken word, and made a major contribution to the American folk revival with recordings of artists such as Odetta, Etta Baker, Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger, Alan Lomax, Jean Ritchie, and Mary O'Hara. Returning to Ireland during the Clancy Brothers' hiatus of the mid 1970s, Paddy Clancy farmed land that he had bought at Cregg, outside Carrick-on-Suir, raising Charolais cattle and various exotic breeds. During Tom's terminal illness, the Clancy Brothers were rejoined by Liam; they reunited with Makem for the Bob Dylan thirtieth anniversary concert, in Madison Square Garden, NY (1992). After Liam and Robbie O'Connell withdrew in 1996, Paddy and Bobby continued to perform as the Clancy Brothers with Bobby's son Finbar; the trio's last performance was in Carrick-on-Suir during the 1998 Tour de France festival. Paddy Clancy had two sons and three daughters by two marriages, firstly (1950s) to Betty, and secondly to Mary. Ill with a brain tumour and lung cancer, he died 11 November 1998 at his home.

The Clancy brothers' youngest sister, Peg Power, pursued a lengthy acting career, appearing in amateur dramatics, with such professional companies as the Abbey and Druid, and in television drama (notably on the RTÉ series *Fair city*).

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GRO (birth certs); *The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem song book* (1969); Joy Graeme (ed.), *The Irish songbook: collected, adapted, written, and sung by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem* (1979), pp iii–vi; *Ir. Times, Ir. Press, Ir. Independent*, 8, 10 Nov. 1990; *Nationalist* (Clonmel), 10, 17 Nov. 1990; *Times*, 15 Nov. 1990; John Coughlan, (ed.), *The swingin' sixties* (1990), 86–7; Brian Carthy, *The A–Z of Irish country and Irish stars* (1991), 61–6; Nuala O'Connor, *Bringing*

*it all back home: the influence of Irish music* (1991), 103–15; *Ir. Times*, 12, 14 Nov. 1998; *Nationalist*, 14, 21 Nov. 1998; *Times*, 21 Nov. 1998; *Ir. Times*, 17 Mar. 1999; Liam Clancy, *Memoirs of an Irish troubador* (2002); *The legend of Liam Clancy* (Crossing the Line Productions documentary film for RTÉ television) (2006); Rykodisc catalogue, [www.rykodisc.com](http://www.rykodisc.com); Paddy Clancy Memorial Scholarship Fund, [www.ul.ie/~iwmc/paddy-clancy](http://www.ul.ie/~iwmc/paddy-clancy); 'The balladeers', [www.theballadeers.com/CBTM](http://www.theballadeers.com/CBTM); 'Liam Clancy: a world of music', [www.liamclancy.com](http://www.liamclancy.com); Internet movie database, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) (all websites accessed 26–7 Jan. 2006)

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