

Kelly, Luke

by Lawrence William White

Kelly, Luke (1940–84), folk singer, was born 17 November 1940 in Lattimore Cottages, Sheriff Street, Dublin, second child (and second son) among four sons and two daughters of Luke Kelly (1904–67), a factory worker with Jacob's biscuit manufacturers, and Julia Kelly (née Fleming). In boyhood his father had been wounded when British troops fired on a crowd that was stoning them on Bachelor's Walk after the 1914 Howth gunrunning. On the demolition of Lattimore Cottages in 1942, the Kellys were re-housed in St Laurence O'Toole flats, Mayor Street; when their flat was destroyed by fire in 1953, they secured a house on Glencloy Road, Whitehall. Kelly was educated at St Laurence O'Toole's national school, Seville Place. Though a good student, he left at age 13 to pursue a motley series of casual jobs: errand boy, van assistant, housepainter, docker, builder's labourer, and factory worker with Jacob's and Unidare in Finglas. A skilled youth soccer player for Home Farm, he also played Gaelic football with the O'Connell Boys' Club.

At age 17 (1958) Kelly emigrated to the Isle of Man, and thence to Britain, working odd jobs (and sometimes out of work) in the English midlands. Attracted to the linked interests of folk music and leftist politics, he began busking and performing spontaneously in folk clubs, strumming chords on the five-string banjo to accompany his singing. He joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Young Communist League, and the Irish socialist republican Connolly Association. While based for eighteen months in Birmingham, he developed a reputation in folk and Irish clubs throughout England (often sharing the stage with Dominic Behan (qv)), sang at political fundraisers, and frequented the weekly sessions in the Singers' Club, inaugurated in London by Ewan MacColl (progenitor of the British folk revival).

Returning to Dublin (1962), Kelly fell in with the set of singers and musicians playing informal sessions in the backroom of O'Donoghue's pub, Merrion Row, foremost of whom was singer and guitarist Ronnie Drew (1935–2008), who sporadically performed Dublin street ballads as a warm-up or interval act in the Gate theatre and other city venues. Kelly joined Drew and others in the Gate's highly successful 'Ballad tour of Ireland' show, which demonstrated the commercial potential of the ballad genre. Though for some time the lineup remained fluid, a core combination evolved of Kelly, Drew, banjo virtuoso Barney McKenna (1939–2012), and Ciarán Bourke (1936–88) on vocals and tin whistle; usually billed as the Ronnie Drew Ballad Group, they performed in organised ballad sessions in the Abbey Tavern, Howth, and the weekly 'Ballads at midnight' shows in the Grafton Street cinema. After a row over fees, they moved their Howth sessions to the Royal Hotel, commencing a hugely popular weekly residency, and also played to packed houses at another weekly residency in the Embankment pub, Tallaght. During 1963 they re-christened themselves 'The Dubliners'; the familiar account, that Kelly proposed the name from

the title of the book by James Joyce (qv) that he was reading, may be apocryphal. Their performance at the Edinburgh International Festival (autumn 1963) led to further British gigs and the recording of their first album, *The Dubliners* (1964).

Before the album's release, Kelly left the group and moved to London for eighteen months (1964–5), accompanied by his partner, Deirdre O'Connell (qv), an American-born actress and singer, who conducted classes in Stanislavski method acting in Dublin's Pocket theatre, Ely Place, and participated in the nearby ballad sessions in O'Donoghue's backroom. The couple gigged together on the British folk circuit, and recorded for the Topic label. Disconcerted by The Dubliners' burgeoning commercial success, ambivalent about his role as member of a band, Kelly resumed his self-described 'apprenticeship' within MacColl's musical circle (a loose 'gathering' called the Critics), expanding his repertoire of political and workers' songs, and honing his vocal technique. He appeared under solo billing with the Dubliners and other artists on the LP *Irish night out* (1964).

On their return to Dublin, Kelly and O'Connell married (21 June 1965). Within months he rejoined the Dubliners. Turning fully professional, and adding a fifth member, fiddler John Sheahan (b. 1939), the band soared to the peak of their popularity in the late 1960s, the leading and defining practitioners of the Irish 'ballad boom'. Their first album as a fivesome was *Finnegan wakes* (1966), a live recording of their eponymous stage show, which enjoyed a ten-week run at the Gate theatre, during which they famously produced on stage the stone head from the statue atop Nelson's pillar in O'Connell Street, blown up the previous night. Their celebrated single 'Seven drunken nights' – a version of a song recorded in Irish some years before by Seosamh Ó hÉanaí (qv) – was released 17 March 1967 and promptly banned by RTÉ as offensive to public decency. Receiving saturation airplay on the pirate Radio Caroline, the single was an instant hit in both Ireland and the UK, receiving the record industry's Silver Disc award for sales upwards of 250,000 units, reaching number five on the British pop charts, and meriting the band an appearance on BBC television's *Top of the pops*. Recording two albums per year in 1967–9, The Dubliners embarked on regular tours of Ireland, Britain, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. In the USA – where a version of Irish vocal folk music, arranged for group performance, had been popularised in the early 1960s by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem (see Thomas Clancy (qv)) – The Dubliners appeared on the Ed Sullivan coast-to-coast television variety show on St Patrick's night 1968, but failed to garner a mass American following, being perceived as too rowdy, urban, and political. In Britain, they were frequent guests on leading radio programmes and television variety shows, headlined the pop proms in London's Royal Albert Hall (July 1969), and first appeared at the Cambridge Folk Festival in August 1969. Their six-programme series for RTÉ television topped the ratings (June–July 1970).

Bearded and hirsute to a man – Kelly's chiselled facial features were framed by an unruly shock of blazing red hair and red goatee beard – The Dubliners in image,

repertoire, and delivery were irreverent and iconoclastic. Drawing on the tradition of Dublin street song and popular poetry – unsentimental, wittily satiric, and macabre – they established such material as a valid constituent of Irish musical culture, amid the contemporary revival and commercialisation of Irish traditional and folk music. Kelly's contributions to the band's repertoire ranged over numerous folk genres, including not only rowdy Dublin street song ('Monto') and Irish rebel songs, but traditional love ballads of Ireland, England, and Scotland; work songs from fishing boats, factories, railways, and mines; contemporary and historic political protest songs about war, the arms race, racism, and trade-union struggles. He recorded MacColl's 'Dirty old town', the American Wobbly anthem 'Joe Hill', and Robert Burns's Jacobite song 'Parcel of rogues'. With clear, powerful voice, and meticulous diction, he sang with passion and deep conviction. After hearing him singing informally in the Bailey pub, poet Patrick Kavanagh (qv) requested that Kelly interpret his poem 'Raglan Road'. Remaining a committed socialist, Kelly was especially associated with CND, and the anti-Vietnam-war and anti-apartheid movements. Both individually and with The Dubliners, he gave numerous benefit performances on such issues as travellers' rights, public housing, trade-union organising, and civil rights in Northern Ireland. His bitter polemical poem, 'For what died the sons of Róisín?', was recorded, recited at concerts, and published as a broadsheet (1970). Outspoken and charismatic, he was the foremost exemplar in Ireland of the idealism and left-wing political radicalism that characterised much of the popular music of the 1960s.

Amid the deepening crisis in Northern Ireland, the Dubliners released the provocatively titled LP *Revolution* (autumn 1970); produced by Derry-born Phil Coulter, who introduced piano and bass guitar to some of the arrangements, the album aroused controversy both for its politics and production values. The 1971 single 'Free the people', an anti-internment anthem co-written by Coulter, reached number two on the Irish charts. The Dubliners were refused permission to stage a concert at Long Kesh internment camp (December 1971), and cancelled a concert in Lancashire when they refused to delete two Irish rebel songs from their repertoire (1972). The continuing collaboration with Coulter resulted in another album, *Plain and simple* (1973), and two of Kelly's most moving recordings: 'The town I loved so well' (written for him by Coulter), and 'Scorn not his simplicity', Coulter's tribute to his own handicapped child, which Kelly only once performed in public, regarding Dubliners' concerts as too raucous for such a deeply felt personal statement.

Kelly acted in the 1969 Dublin theatre festival, playing the role of Sergeant Kite in 'The Mullingar recruits', an adaptation of the 1706 comedy 'The recruiting officer' by George Farquhar (qv). In the 1972 festival, The Dubliners joined the Abbey theatre company in 'Richard's cork leg', a pastiche compiled from an unfinished play and other unpublished works by Brendan Behan (qv); though slated by most critics, the production enjoyed healthy runs in Dublin, Cork, and London. In March 1973 in the Gaiety theatre Kelly had the first of several stints as King Herod in the musical 'Jesus Christ superstar'. His wife, Deirdre O'Connell, opened the Focus theatre

(1967), of which Kelly was a founding member and a major financial backer. He himself studied the Stanislavski method as a technique useful to him as a singer, instilling discipline, relaxation, and concentration in performance. The couple, who had no children, separated by 1970. Kelly's partner from 1976 was Madeleine Seiler of Heidelberg, Germany, with whom he resided in Ranelagh. A voracious reader of books, newspapers, and magazines, he played golf for recreation, and enjoyed all the arts.

In the 1970s, as their mainstream popularity waned in Ireland and Britain, The Dubliners developed a large following in continental Europe; pioneering the continental interest in Irish traditional and folk music, they were especially successful in Germany, Holland, and Scandinavia. Bourke fell ill with a brain aneurysm in April 1974, the complications of which eventually rendered him partially paralysed, and reduced him to a marginal involvement with the band. Drew, wearied of the constant touring, departed to pursue a solo career for five years (1974–9), and was replaced by Jim McCann. By the later 1970s Kelly's singing voice was showing the strains of his alcoholism, heavy smoking, the incessant touring, and his generally erratic lifestyle. On 30 June 1980 he took ill and left the stage during a performance in Cork Opera House. Diagnosed with a brain tumour, he underwent an immediate emergency operation. An attempted comeback was abandoned when he returned home from an autumn 1980 European tour. Replaced by Sean Cannon in 1982, Kelly continued part-time with the band, occasionally appearing on stage for several numbers, even after a second operation in March 1983. Two days after admission to the Richmond hospital for emergency treatment, he died 30 January 1984. The new bridge over the Tolka River at Ballybough was named in his memory (30 May 1984).

Mary Hardy, *The Dubliners scrapbook* (1978); *Ir. Press, Ir. Times*, 31 Jan.–3 Feb. 1984; *Sunday Independent*, 5 Feb. 1984; *Ir. Times*, 30 Jan. 1994; Des Geraghty, *Luke Kelly: a memoir* (1994); Fintan Vallely (ed.), *Companion to Irish traditional music* (1999); 'Luke Kelly (1940–1985)', Rambling House, www.iol.ie/~ronolan/luke_kelly; The Dubliners at the Balladeers, www.theballadeers.com/dubs_01 (includes discography) (websites accessed 1 May 2007)