

Makem, Thomas ('Tommy')

by Lawrence William White

Makem, Thomas ('Tommy') (1932–2007), folk singer, was born 4 November 1932 in Keady, Co. Armagh, youngest of five children of Peter Makem and his wife Sarah (née Boyle). Though Peter Makem was a fiddler and flautist, Tommy derived his musical interests and talent primarily through the maternal line. His mother's maternal family, 'the singing Greenes of Keady', had produced several generations of notable singers and musicians. Sarah Makem (1900–85) was a fluent-voiced parlour singer, with a repertoire of some 500 songs. As a centre of the linen industry – Tommy and both his parents worked at times in local linen mills – and a market town serving the surrounding small-farming community, Keady was a musical melting pot of English-language Ulster folk song drawing on the Irish, Scottish and English traditions. The Makem domicile was an open 'céilí house', vibrant with music, conversation and story, frequented by extended family, neighbours, itinerant musicians and assorted visitors. Though Sarah Makem never performed publicly apart from the odd local social event, in the 1950s she was recorded by several British and American folk-song collectors; her rendition of 'As I roved out' was the opening theme song of the long-running BBC folk-music programme of that name, on which her recorded singing was often featured. Several LP and CD albums of her singing have been issued.

Tommy Makem was educated in a local Christian Brothers' school, which he left at age 14, and worked in linen mills and at other odd employments. Taught to play the tin whistle by his eldest brother, Jack – a talented multi-instrumentalist and whistler – he also learned the bagpipes. His musical influences were eclectic: 'I was weaned on folk music, nourished on Gregorian chant, and rushed headlong through my teens performing a potpourri of folk, #pop#, and country and western songs with wild abandon to the strains of a local dance band' (*Tommy Makem sings Tommy Makem*, liner notes). A recording visit to his home by the American collector Jean Ritchie inspired him to roam the locality himself learning songs. In summer 1955 he met Liam Clancy (1935–2009), from Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipperary, who arrived at his Keady home assisting the American song collector Diane (Guggenheim) Hamilton; recordings of Tommy and his mother were included on an album produced by Hamilton and released in the USA, *The lark in the morning* (1956). Clancy witnessed an early example of Makem's confident and compelling stage presence: invited on stage by a céilí band at a bustling dancehall in Armagh town, Makem pulled up a chair and silently mimed the motions of mending his shoe; as the audience took notice and fell silent, Makem suddenly broke out: 'Oh, me name is Dick Darby, I'm a cobbler'; before he ended the first stanza, the entire hall was rapt.

In December 1955 Makem emigrated to the USA, joining maternal relatives in Dover, New Hampshire (a magnet for Keady people seeking work in textile mills).

Employed in a printing works, within months he suffered severe injuries on catching his left hand in a press, and underwent several reconstructive operations. Disabled temporarily for physical work (and musicianship), he visited fellow émigré Liam Clancy in New York city, and joined him and his two brothers, Tom (qv) and Paddy (qv), in recording an album of Irish rebel songs, *The rising of the moon* (1956), on the newly launched Tradition label, managed by the brothers and financed by Hamilton; the album's fourteen tracks were performed to spare harmonica accompaniment by Paddy Clancy. (The same songs were later re-recorded by the foursome to accompaniment by guitar, harp, tin whistle and drum, and re-released in 1959). Makem's contributions adumbrated the range of material of his later career: the mournfully romantic 'The wind that shakes the barley'; a rousing 'The men of the west'; and the satiric 'Nell Flaherty's drake' (a nineteenth-century broadside ballad, in which a litany of curses is hurled at the murderer of the eponymous fowl, interpreted as a coded reference to Robert Emmet (qv)).

After two years of moving between New Hampshire and New York, Makem remained permanently in the city from March 1958, maintaining a precarious and penurious existence while pursuing aspirations toward an acting career, obtaining occasional parts off Broadway, in summer stock, and in live television drama. He appeared with Liam Clancy as two young priests in 'Shadow and substance' by Paul Vincent Carroll (qv) with the Irish Players at the Tara Theatre (1959–60), replacing Malachy McCourt in the role. Other stage credits included 'Guests of the nation', an adaptation of the story by Frank O'Connor (qv), and 'The playboy of the western world'. He appeared with all three Clancys as pirates in a live television adaptation of 'Treasure Island' (5 March 1960). Makem also sang publicly, solo and with one or more of the Clancys, initially in non-professional and informal settings: parties, tavern singsongs, coffee-house hootenannies. Such performances attracted attention to the four men in New York's simmering folk-music scene, centred on Greenwich Village, which was magnified by the re-release of their first album and by a second album, *Come fill your glass with us* (1959), a collection of Irish drinking songs. Admirers included the veteran folkie Pete Seeger and (after his arrival in New York in 1961) the youthfully aspirant Bob Dylan. Makem appeared at the inaugural Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island (1959); at one of the early Newport festivals Makem and Joan Baez were chosen the most promising male and female newcomers. By 1960 Makem and the Clancys were securing professional singing engagements in folk clubs in New York and other cities, at considerably more lucrative wages than they derived from the theatre. Engaged to play the Gate of Horn in Chicago, they attempted without success to agree on a name for the group, and arrived at the venue to discover that the club owner had billed them on his marquee as the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, a name that stuck.

They hired a manager, the astute Marty Erlichman, who advised them on developing a more dynamic performance style, garbed them in Aran sweaters (a folksy and Irish variation of the prevailing convention that vocal combinations in any genre of popular music be dressed in identical attire), and booked them into a swish uptown

New York nightclub, the Blue Angel. In 1961 they were signed to a contract with Columbia records by John Hammond, the legendary jazz, folk and rock promoter and producer; their first Columbia album, *A spontaneous performance recording!*, recreated the ambience of their club shows, and featured Seeger on accompanying banjo; the LP received a Grammy nomination for best folk album of the year. One week after the recording session, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem came to national attention by appearing on Ed Sullivan's popular television variety show (12 March 1961). Engagements in New York's Carnegie Hall and Town Hall soon followed, along with numerous nightclub gigs and further television and radio appearances. Their last album on the Tradition label, *The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem* (1961), included Makem's performance of 'The bard of Armagh', a broadside ballad that became his signature tune, and the title of which a sobriquet. Makem released a solo album on Tradition, *Songs of Tommy Makem* (1961), the tracks including 'The Irish rover' and 'The butcher boy'.

Having arrived on the New York scene when the American 'folk revival' was largely a bohemian, counter-cultural phenomenon, marginalised by the raw ruralism of the music and its association with leftist radicalism, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem were in the forefront of moving the revival into the mainstream of American popular music amid the greater political and social liberalism of the early 1960s. They subverted the standard Irish-American repertoire with an iconoclastic trove of drinking and rebel songs, work songs and sea shanties, ballads celebrating highwaymen, rapparees, and assorted freebooters and chancers. Neither approaching traditional material with a purist, reverential deference, nor with sanitised arrangements to mollify mainstream taste, they belted out their songs with brash, boisterous gusto, spiced with a devilish ribaldry. Drawing on their collective thespian experience, they devised polished and theatrical stage shows, achieving a studied and rehearsed informality. They recorded twelve live and studio albums for Columbia (1961–9), and appeared with other artists on a two-disc commemorative album in the CBS Legacy series, *The Irish uprising 1916–1922* (1966); highlights of Makem's contribution to the latter were a reading of the poem 'The rebel' by Patrick Pearse (qv) and a satirical anti-recruitment song by Sean O'Casey (qv), 'The grand old dame Britannia'. (The Irish rebel songs that featured prominently in the group's repertoire not only addressed the long-distance nationalism of Irish America, but slotted into the 'protest songs' that were integral to the folk revival, while Makem's bitter rendition of 'Johnny, I hardly knew ye' appealed to anti-war sentiments.)

Their recordings introduced to Ireland in 1962 by broadcaster Ciarán Mac Mathúna (1925–2009), the group attained immediate and massive popularity, touring the country later that year to sold-out venues. In a period when the popular music market was dominated by the 45 rpm single, it was reputed that the group accounted for one-third of the LPs sold in Ireland in 1964. Their *Live in Ireland* album, recorded in the Ulster Hall, Belfast, in August 1965, was the first stereo album ever recorded in Ireland. Their example inspired other performers, and ignited the Irish 'ballad boom'; though not the first artists to introduce instrumental accompaniment to Irish

ballad singing, they did, under the influence of American folk music, introduce guitar and banjo accompaniment. Appealing to Irish émigré audiences in Britain, they sold out London's Albert Hall, played the Edinburgh Festival, and performed at the inaugural Cambridge Folk Festival (1965), a seminal event in the development of the English folk revival. Though their style was not emulated by exponents of the Irish 'trad revival' of the 1970s, it was through their music that most trad musicians were introduced to the Irish folk tradition. Though purists accused them of adulterating the Irish tradition to appeal to American audiences and under commercial pressures, it can be argued that Irish traditional music and song, in common with all folk traditions, had always adapted to new influences, and that the style created by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem was another such adaptation: a fusion of the Irish tradition with the ongoing adaptation of the American folk tradition to a commercialised popular music disseminated by mass electronic media to large audiences of mixed social class and ethnicities in an urbanised and industrialised modern society.

Makem brought to the foursome a bluff, irreverent stage persona, peppered with witty asides and bons mots (most of them premeditated and rehearsed). An accomplished stage raconteur, he sang in a strong baritone voice with crisp, clearly articulated, Ulster-accented phrasing, marked by a distinctive yelping of the first syllable of each lyric line or stanza. Learning to play the long-necked five-string banjo from Pete Seeger's instructional manual, he also played guitar, tin whistle and piccolo. Having begun to write songs for performance with the group, he released a second solo album, *Tommy Makem sings Tommy Makem* (1968), consisting entirely of his own compositions, in a fusion of folk, country and blues, and with a richer instrumentation than on his recordings with the Clancys. Seeking to develop this new direction, he left the group in April 1969 and embarked on a solo career. Commencing with a sell-out concert at the Felt Forum in Madison Square Garden, he made several tours of America, Australia (selling out Sydney Opera House), Britain and Ireland, and recorded eight solo LPs from 1969 to 1975, performing original material and traditional Irish, British and American folk songs, with backing musicians; the last two albums were produced by Donal Lunny. Makem was thus a seminal force in the new genre of composing original popular songs in a modern Irish folk idiom, and influenced a cohort of singer-songwriters performing both traditional Irish song and original compositions. His most famous composition was 'Four green fields', which employs the traditional trope of an old woman as allegory for Ireland; written and recorded (with the Clancys) in 1967, the song predates not only the Northern Ireland troubles of the 1970s but also the civil-rights movement. (Though hailing, as he sometimes put it, from 'the republic of south Armagh', Makem performed material from the Ulster protestant tradition, such as 'The old Orange flute' and 'William Bloat'.) Other of his compositions included 'Rambles of spring', 'Farewell to Carlingford', and 'Gentle Annie'.

In July 1975 Makem and Liam Clancy both appeared at a folk festival in Cleveland, Ohio; though booked separately, they performed one set together to a thunderous

reception. Soon thereafter, Makem appeared as a guest on Clancy's series on Canadian television. Formally reuniting, they performed together as the duo Makem and Clancy for thirteen years (1975–88), with a repertoire of old Clancy Brothers' material, newly reclaimed folk songs from the Irish and other traditions, covers of folk and popular songs by contemporary songwriters, and Makem's original compositions. Though never attaining the fame of the 1960s' foursome, they enjoyed a healthy and consistent popularity throughout the English-speaking world, performing in concert halls, universities, clubs, and folk and Irish festivals. They were ideal stage foils, Makem's flinty and deflating Ulster irony contrasting with Clancy's mellow lyricism. They recorded six albums, some of which attained platinum and gold status, and had several singles in the Irish charts. Live albums were recorded in Dublin at the Gaiety Theatre (1977) and the National Concert Hall (1983). Their eponymous thirteen-part television series for New Hampshire Public Television (1977–8) received a Boston/New England regional Emmy nomination. Makem released a solo album, *Lonesome waters* (1985). In the mid 1980s, the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem reunited for a concert at New York's Lincoln Center (20 May 1984), after which they released an album of the concert (1984), and undertook a reunion tour (1984–5).

Makem owned a bar and restaurant, Tommy Makem's Irish Pavilion, in New York (1982–98), in which he frequently performed. Splitting amicably with Liam Clancy in 1988, he resumed a solo career, recording seven albums from 1989 to 1998. He made television series and specials in the USA, Canada and Britain, most notably for WMHT, a public station in Schenectady, New York. His last public performance with any of the Clancys was as a special guest with the Clancy Brothers line-up of the period (Tom Clancy had died in 1990) at the Bob Dylan thirtieth-anniversary concert in Madison Square Garden (October 1992). He wrote a book, *Tommy Makem's secret Ireland* (1997), and devised and performed a one-person show, 'Invasions and legacies', based on Irish myth, at the Irish Repertory Theatre, New York (1999). He received a lifetime achievement award from the World Folk Music Association (1999), and honorary degrees from the universities of New Hampshire (1998), Limerick (2001) and Ulster (2007), the latter conferred four weeks before his death. In 2000 he established the Tommy Makem International Festival of Song at venues in south Armagh.

Makem married Mary Shanahan (d. 2001), a Chicago native; they had one daughter and three sons. After residing for a time between New York and Ireland, Makem settled with his family in 1972 in Dover, New Hampshire. Notwithstanding the many drinking songs of his repertoire and his long association with drinking establishments as performance venues, he was a lifelong teetotaler, and abandoned smoking in his middle years. Suffering with lung cancer, he died 1 August 2007 in Dover, where he was buried. A new bridge in Dover over the Cocheco River was named after Makem and his wife (2010), both of whom were deeply active in the civic life of the city.

His eldest brother, Jack Makem (1920–90), recorded an album with his two sons in 1981. Tommy Makem's three sons performed from the early 1990s as the Makem Brothers, and in 2002 formed three-fifths of the Makem and Spain Brothers. Two nephews of Tommy Makem, Jimmy and Tom Sweeney, were members of the group Barley Bree (1970s–90s). Makem's grandniece, singer Stéphanie Makem, has performed and recorded with her husband, uilleann piper Tiarnán Ó Duinnchinn.

Joy Graeme (ed.), *The Irish songbook: collected, adapted, written and sung by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem* (1969), esp.: foreword by Pete Hamill; Liam Clancy, *Memoirs of an Irish troubadour* (2002); 'Honour for Tommy Makem, the #bard of Armagh#', University of Ulster: news archive, 4 July 2007, www.ulster.ac.uk; *Foster's Daily Democrat* (Dover, NH), 2–3, 7–10 Aug. 2007; 29 July 2010; *Ir. Times*, 3–4, 9–10 Aug. 2007; *Guardian*, *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent* (London), *Belfast Telegraph*, *NY Times*, 3 Aug. 2007; *Portsmouth Herald* (NH), 3, 9, 14 Aug. 2007; *The yellow bittern: the life and times of Liam Clancy* (film, 2009; dir., Alan Gilsean; DVD ed. includes Makem interview); Julie Henigan, review of Sarah Makem, *As I roved out* (CD) (16 Dec. 2011), www.mtrecords.co.uk/reviews/makem.htm; The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, www.theballadeers.com/cbtlm; The Makem and Spain Brothers: the tradition continues, www.makem.com; 'Biographies of famous singers: Sarah Makem', Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann, Tom Finucane Branch, www.irishrochester.org; UNH online nominations service, nominations.unh.edu; University of Limerick: honorary conferrings, www.ul.ie; Irish Repertory Theatre: history, www.irishrep.org (internet material accessed June 2013); information (obtained by Carolyn Gamtso) from Linda Howe, New Hampshire Public Television; Jill D. Jones, National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences [USA], Boston/New England Chapter; Katie Makem-Boucher (daughter)