

Laments in Transition: The Irish-Australian songs of Sally Sloane (1894–1982)

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Irish music in Australia has a strong tradition though it is less thoroughly documented and less frequently the subject of scholarly inquiry than in Ireland, the British Isles and North America. From the earliest days of white settlement in Australia, the Irish represented a significant proportion of total immigrants. One in three convicts transported to Australia from Great Britain after 1798 was Irish. About 20 per cent of these were connected with political and agrarian unrest in England and Ireland and many who survived transportation and incarceration continued rebellious activities directed at the ruling class in Australia. Irish immigration continued to increase in the nineteenth century as a result not only of the famine of the 1840s, but also because of growing persecution from English landlords who raised rents to levels resulting in mass evictions. After 1840, emigration became a vast, relentless national phenomenon. Between 1789 and 1921 about half a million Irish people set sail for Australia.¹ Those leaving Ireland turned towards an unknown future half a world away beyond perilous oceans, not expecting to see their homeland again. Oliver MacDonagh, in his book *Sharing the Green: A modern Irish history for Australians*, asks:

How was it to know that ‘home’ was much too distant to be seen again, or that one now lived in an expanse into which more than a thousand Irelands could be fitted, or to find the legendary rhythm of the seasons on which so many of the European patterns rested no longer formed the framework of the year?²

The answer to MacDonagh’s question can be found in the music that developed in Australia, sung by colonial singers within the Irish diaspora, dating from the songs brought by the convicts and sailors who travelled to Australia on the First Fleet. Transportation ballads, which were often published as broadsides (printed on unfolded sheets of paper that could be pasted upon walls or carried easily), were the earliest of these songs, with titles such as ‘The Convict Maid’, ‘The Transport’s Lament’ and ‘The Black Velvet Band’. These were laments

1 Reid, Richard (Senior Curator), *Not Just Ned*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, viewed 18 August 2012, <http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/irish_in_australia/family_history/irish_convicts>

2 MacDonagh, Oliver 1996, *Sharing the Green: A modern Irish history for Australians*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, p. 5.

with lyrics protesting the innocence of the narrator against the vicissitudes of cruel fate. With so much left behind in the shape of family and the homeland itself, music was the portable, intangible, infinitely expandable mesh in which immigrants carried memories of their cultural identity.

As MacDonagh asserts, the concept of diaspora encompasses more than one homeland and this duality facilitates the development of new songs grafted onto old musical rootstock. Longing for family and 'home' in Ireland is a sentiment regularly voiced today by Australian musicians for sympathetic audiences who are four or more generations removed from their Irish roots, so enduring is the residual dislocation from the mother culture. Songs of protest that travelled with Irish political prisoners transported to Australia were adapted and lived on in the new country, sung as songs of complaint about injustices perpetrated by the colonial government and wealthy landowners. They are still sung, sometimes with modernised lyrics, to equate a contemporary situation with that of the past.

This essay examines laments in transition through the case study of Sally Sloane (1894–1982), a traditional Australian singer whose performance style and repertoire were strongly influenced by the songs she learned, by ear, passed down by her Irish grandmother and mother. These original Irish ballads remained in her repertoire as well as English and Scottish traditional songs, bush ballads and popular music-hall songs learned from the musicians she met throughout her life. Sloane was interviewed and recorded by a number of folk-music collectors—John Meredith, Edgar Waters and Peter Hamilton, Warren Fahey and Graham Seal, Emily Lyle and Chris Sullivan—from the 1950s until the late 1970s.

The case study of Sally Sloane is derived from my doctoral dissertation, titled 'Redefining the tradition: the role of women in the evolution and transmission of Australian folk music'.³ Methodology for this research had four strands: examination of archival field recordings (1950–99) held in the Oral History and Folklore Collections of the National Library of Australia; interviews with four generations of women in one family to examine transmission of repertoire from mother to daughter; examination of handwritten and published music collections of traditional music belonging to women musicians; and my own performance of particular traditional songs to investigate how singing enables the singer to embody and communicate the narrative—that is, to unlock meaning in the song through the physical and mental disciplines involved in re-creating traditional music.

3 Gall, Jennifer 2008, *Redefining the tradition: the role of women in the evolution and transmission of Australian folk music*, Doctoral thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra.

For many colonial families, an itinerant lifestyle in Australia replaced the seasonal patterns and cultural practices reinforced by close-knit communities of European life. Sally Sloane experienced such a lifestyle as a child, accompanying her father as he pursued work, and continuing to move around with her itinerant labouring husband in her adult years. This peripatetic existence encouraged her enthusiasm for learning songs from travelling musicians she encountered socially. The songs learned represented a thread of continuity and created a virtual community of relationships kept alive through the song narratives in her memory. Many songs in her repertoire are laments not just because of the content in the narrative, but because they recall the absence of the person they were learned from.

Another strand of music used by Irish emigrants to maintain a sense of cultural connection to their homeland, and which is well represented in the repertoire of Sally Sloane, was the commercially published sheet music and albums of popular Irish vocal and dance music that reached Australia in considerable quantities. Popular music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries learned from gramophone recordings or borrowed sheet music provided material for colonial singers who appropriated 'hit' songs, performing them sometimes in a traditional unaccompanied style (for example, Sally Sloane's performance of 'The Cruiskeen Lawn').⁴ Musicians of the Irish diaspora were concerned both with maintaining their traditional repertoire and with keeping up to date with Irish music being published 'at home'. The fear of losing contact with the latest musical fashions was kept at bay through purchase of imported musical scores and phonogram records. Irish musicians now living in Australia helped sustain a market for musical nostalgia and nationalistic pieces. Popular and sentimental Irish musical settings were potent in their ability to sustain Irish-Australian families and communities within Australian society through singalongs at home in extended Irish families, where each family member performed their party piece.⁵

Irish music festivals, like those organised by the Roman Catholic Church in Lismore, northern New South Wales, in the early years of the twentieth century, featured sentimental vocal solos such as 'Kathleen Mavourneen', quite probably learned from a version published by J. R. Clarke in Sydney about 1853.⁶ The symbolism and linguistic frameworks of the genre have provided shared consolation for groups of Irish emigrants down the generations to the present day. Australian author and social reformer Dame Mary Gilmore (1865–1962) in her chapter, 'The singing years', described the cathartic power of these popular

4 Meredith, John 1953–61, Folklore field recordings, ORAL TRC 4/17A, National Library of Australia, Canberra [hereinafter NLA].

5 Interview with Nancy Shaldars by Jennifer Gall, 14 August 2004.

6 'Kathleen Mavourneen', Poetry written by Mrs Crawford, Music composed by F. N. Crouch, Sydney, J. R. Clarke, NLA MUS: N., Snell, A, GE118853, <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.mus-an6552590>>

ballads: 'They were an outlet for the un-let emotions and in many cases were texts of life and an actual help enabling people to carry on. In the idealized, people lived for a moment beyond themselves and above what was sordid about them.'⁷

As banal as 'Danny Boy' sung to the 'Londonderry Air' may sound to jaded ears in the twenty-first century, the lyrics still function as a true lament for many self-identified Irish Australians. 'Danny Boy' deals with the eternal themes of loss and longing; its ability to move listeners to tears is reliable and that is why it is so often requested, because the music liberates the fear of abandonment in individuals, which, once voiced, can be reconciled with present reality. The song describes the departure of a loved one from home, painting a vision of a tragic end for the one who waits should the wanderer delay return.

This paper examines the role of laments in the repertoire of an Australian-born woman singer of Irish lineage. Certain of Sally Sloane's songs represent the transition of the traditional definition of laments such as 'Green Bushes' and 'Molly Baun' to include politically important songs like the Australian-penned ballad 'Ben Hall' and even popular songs such as 'In the Luggage Van Ahead', published in 1898. Sally's traditional unaccompanied performance style used expansive phrasing to reproduce the narrative with great fluency and intensity. This skill enabled her to interpret both old-world and new-world music with authority.

Sally Sloane was born in Parkes, New South Wales, in 1894, the youngest of 10 children. Her grandmother Sarah Alexander sailed to Australia in 1838 from County Kerry, Ireland, at the age of twenty-two. She died in 1889. Family tradition maintained the story that Sarah was a trained singer performing 'Adieu My Lovely Nancy' in a concert for the ship's captain on the voyage out. Sarah's first daughter was also named Sarah and grew up playing concertina, button accordion, jew's harp and piano as well as singing many of her mother's Irish songs.

Sally's family situation was a complex one and this influenced the nature of her repertoire and indeed the importance of music as a thread of continuity linking the generations of women. Sally's birth father, Tom Frost, was a driver for Cobb and Co. Coaches. While Sally was still young, her mother divorced Frost and lived with William Clegg, first a goldminer, then an itinerant worker on the railways. The family moved regularly, following employment. Sally adopted Clegg as her surname and this is the name that appears on her marriage certificate and that of her sister Bertha. This suggests a changing dynamic between Sally and

7 Gilmore, Mary 1935, *More Recollections*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, p. 161.

the two most important men in her early life—the loss of her biological father through her parents’ separation and the new father who took responsibility for the daughter he gained through the relationship with Sally’s mother.

Loss and belonging in relation to significant male figures are important themes in her life. Originally married to John Mountford (m. 1911) with whom she had four children, Sally remarried in the late 1940s. Her second husband, Fred Sloane, forbade her mentioning the name of her ex-husband.⁸ Separation and remarriage continue a family pattern begun by Sally’s mother, a pattern reflected in the narrative of the song significant for the number of performances recorded in Sally’s repertoire: ‘Green Bushes.’ The narrative in this song is a serpentine tale of two young men: a stranger and the betrothed, who are wooing a girl waiting near the Green Bushes. The stranger manages to persuade her not to wait for her tardy betrothed; the girl’s justification for going is that the new lover has been ready to act on his pledge to marry her.

After listening to the considerable number of field recordings of her performances, I conclude that certain of Sally’s songs central to her repertoire, especially ‘Green Bushes’ and ‘Ben Hall’, may be viewed as ritualistic; the connection between her life experiences and the song narrative is evident. When Sally sings the words that have been sung many times before, she creates an intensely intimate, emotionally charged episode, as Christopher Small explains:

During the enactment of the ritual, time is concentrated in a heightened intensity of experience. During that time, relationships are brought into existence between the participants and the model, in metaphoric form... In this way the participants not only *learn about* those relationships but actually *experience* them in their bodies...sometimes to the point where the psychic boundary between the mundane and the supernatural world breaks down so that they leave behind their everyday identity.⁹

The tale of loss that is recorded in the narrative is re-enacted by singing the song. The ‘un-making’ at the heart of Sally’s laments is repaired with each performance. The intensity of Sally’s focus can be heard in a phrase from ‘Green Bushes’ (see audio example 1¹⁰).

Sally’s early exposure to many different musicians and the influence of her musically talented mother gave her versatility and a breadth of repertoire.

8 Lowe, Valda, ‘Who is Sally Sloane’, viewed 18 August 2012, <<http://simplyaustralia.net/article-vl-sloane.html>>

9 Small, Christopher 1998, *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*, Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut, p. 96.

10 View associated media files via the ANU E Press website <<http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/volume-xix-no-3-2013>>

The most striking characteristic of Sally's singing that Fahey, Seal and Meredith commented on was her different, distinctive performance voices. John Meredith describes two styles:

Rather amazingly Sally Sloane had two singing voices, which might conveniently be termed 'folk' and 'stage'. The first was used for all those lovely old Irish ballads Sal had inherited from her grandmother, through the medium of her mother, and this was a hard, clear, unemotional voice and style, very much in the Irish tradition. The other voice was reserved for those stage and art songs of probable music hall origins. It was a rich mezzo-soprano with a little vibrato and she used it for such songs as *The Deep Shades of Blue*, to give one example.¹¹

Graham Seal makes a similar comment:

She shifted her style to suit the song and was able to perform in a number of different styles. She sang to us as an audience,—she would close her eyes when she got going; she found a stillness once she got going. Most of the songs she sang sitting down were like this.¹²

The consistent characteristic of Sally's recorded vocal performances is her skill in communicating the narrative to the audience. Her performances command attention. Stylistic alterations of accent, timbre, use of vernacular expressions and phrasing all support this primary motivation. In some performances of 'Green Bushes', 'Ben Hall' and even music-hall songs like 'The Red Barn', Sally is almost keening. Her singing re-creates the action of the narrative, fusing past and present in the way she incorporates elements of her informants' stylistic qualities, predominantly their accent and phrasing.¹³ It is evident from the conversation in Fahey's interview with her that Sally's repertoire is linked to how she remembers events in her life and how she connects the past and present.¹⁴ The songs are inextricably woven through the activity of her daily life and fused with her imagination and memories. Ballads that are unremarkable when heard in Folk Revival recordings—for example, the bush-band versions of 'Ben Hall' when sung unaccompanied by Sally—transcend their immediate narrative to function as universally relevant laments. Alan Lomax refers to this as

[t]he authority of the singer...summed up for the Irish in the term 'blás', and ultimately, it seems to me, this authority depends upon the

11 Meredith, John 2004, 'Introduction', in Gay Scott (ed.), *The Sally Sloane Song Book: Australian traditional singer*, Sydney Bush Music Club Incorporated, Sydney, p. 4.

12 Seal, Graham, Telephone interview with Jennifer Gall, 30 October 2006.

13 Simon McDonald (interviewed by Norm and Pat O'Connor and Mary Jean Officer in Creswick, New South Wales, in the 1950s) shared this quality.

14 Sloane, Sally, Interviewed by Warren Fahey and Graham Seal, 4 May 1976, NLA TRC 5724/1-3.

emotional maturity or, at least, upon his [her] grasp of the content of the songs he [she] sings and the subtle hidden currents of emotion in these songs.¹⁵

Certainly Sally embodied Lomax's assertion that age enhances rather than detracts from a traditional singer's ability to perform traditional material:

In most cases, therefore, since so many of these songs are tragic and, in their way, art of a high order, a singer weathered by time and buffeted by the disappointments and tragedies which are normal to life, can more effectively realize this inner content. His 'blás' improves with age even though his voice may lose its youthful freshness.¹⁶

Sally performs as if she has a personal duty to defend the innocent women in a number of her songs—notably 'The Red Rose Top', 'The Old Oak Tree' and 'The Red Barn'. These songs are performed in the recordings as unaccompanied laments. In the fragment of the 'Red Barn' that she remembers, it is the murdered girl's mother who dreams of the whereabouts of her daughter's burial place, leading to the discovery of the body. Sally's exclamation at the conclusion of her performance illustrates her intense involvement in the narrative and her condemnation of the injustice and the brutality of the crime (see audio example 2¹⁷).

Oh mother dear I'm going to the red barn to meet my William dear
They will not know me on the road or when I do get there
Straight way she went to the old red barn and never more was seen
Three long weary weeks had passed when our mother dreamt a dream
She dreamt her daughter was murdered by the lad she loved so well
At the very corner of the red barn and there her body did dwell.
[Speaks] The coot mangled her all up and buried her.
They dug the ground and there they found her!¹⁸ [My transcription]

Sally's performance of 'Ben Hall' is a definitive example of an Irish-influenced Australian lament. Sally was personally connected to the Australian outlaw Ben Hall, and her singing demonstrates the process outlined in James Porter's Conceptual Performance Model, 'in which units of both cognitive and affective experience are embedded'.¹⁹ 'Ben Hall' works on a personal and a public level as a lament. In her interviews with both Meredith and Fahey, Sally recounted

15 Lomax, Alan 1959, 'Sleeve notes to Shirley Collins—False True Lovers', [fled3029], <<http://www.thebeesknees.com/bk-sc-sleeve-notes.html>>

16 Ibid.

17 View associated media files via the ANU E Press website <<http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/volume-xix-no-3-2013>>

18 Sloane, Sally, Interviewed by Warren Fahey and Graham Seal, 4 May 1976, NLA TRC 5724/2.

19 Porter, James 1976, 'Jeannie Robertson's "My Son David: A Conceptual Performance Model"', *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 89, no. 351 (January–March), p. 17.

the story about Ben Hall's sister, the midwife who was present at her birth and delivered her. This was Mrs Coobung Mick, whose husband betrayed Ben Hall to the troopers and who was carrying a child (said by some to be Ben Hall's) at the time of the bushranger's shooting:

[A]nd when the child was born it had thirty-two spots on it, and that child was exhibited throughout the length and breadth of Australia for show purposes [as the Leopard Boy]. The spots were supposed to correspond with the thirty-two bullet wounds in Ben Hall's body... Ben took to the bush then, and turned out to be a highwayman. When he found out what happened, his wife had gone, and his stock and everything was destroyed and he became a bushranger.²⁰

Sally received this story with the song from her mother. In a later interview, with Fahey and Seal, roughly 20 years after Meredith recorded 'Ben Hall', Sally performed all eight verses confidently although the quality of her voice was less melodious. There were minor modifications to the words, with some slips in the concluding verse particularly, but the verse structure remained the same as the original recording and the version that appears in *Folk Songs of Australia* (see audio example 3²¹).

An outcast from society, he was forced to take the road
All through his false and treacherous wife who sold off his abode,
He was hunted like a native dog from bush to hill, and dale,
He was hunted by his enemies and they could not find his trail.
O up with his companion's men bloody scorn to shed
He oft times stayed and lifted hands with vengeance on their head,
No petty mean or pilfering act he ever stopped to do,
But robbed the rich and hardy man and scorned the poor.
One night as he in ambush lay all on the Lachlan plain,
When thinking everything secure to ease himself at lay,
When to his consternation and to his great surprise
Without one moment's warning a bullet passed him fly.
Oh it was soon succeeded by a volley sharp and loud
With twelve revolving rifles all pointed at his head,
'Where are you Gilbert, where is Dunne?' he low down he did call,
It was all in vain they went up there to witness his downfall.
They riddled all his body as if they were afraid,
But in his dying moments he breathed curses on their head, [she sobs]
That cowardly hearted Cundell the sergeant of police,

20 Meredith, John and Anderson, Hugh 1979 [c. 1967], *Folksongs of Australia and the Men and Women Who Sang Them*, Ure Smith, Sydney, p. 165.

21 View associated media files via the ANU E Press website <<http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/volume-xix-no-3-2013>>

He crept and fired infamously till death did him release.
Although he had a lion's heart more braver than the brave,
Those cowards shot him like a dog no word of challenge gave,
Though many friends had poor Ben Hall his enemies were few,
Like the emblem of his native land his days were numbered too.
It's through Australia's sunny clime Ben Hall will range no more.
His name is spread both near and far to every distant shore.
From generation after this his parents will recall,
And rehearse to them the daring deeds committed by Ben Hall.
[My transcription]

Sally's vocal style suits the nature of the ballad as a lament and this late performance of the song is a fine example of '*blás*' as defined by Lomax. Her vocal style in some phrases is close to keening, and many listeners react to the singing by describing it as 'unpleasant'.²² This 'unpleasantness' is a result of the emotion she is communicating. Ben Hall's tragic death also had resonance for the antagonism many Australians of Sally's generation and social background felt towards representatives of authority: the police, magistrates, the Church of England and squatters. Sally's conversation in Meredith and Fahey's recording reveals her attachment to the song. Ben Hall's sister-in-law was the midwife at Sally's birth and she believed it was her duty to tell the tale and emphasise the injustice of Hall's punishment through her performance, as much as in her verbal explanation. The later rendition of the song has dropped roughly a tone from the version recorded by Meredith,²³ but retains the original power with which Sally sang.

The bushrangers, or outlaws, Ben Hall and Ned Kelly were the people's heroes, as Sally describes them:

S.S. I'd hate to hear his reputation—O God scandalized! He wasn't a bad fella!

W.F. No he got the rough end of the stick didn't he!

S.S. No—you're tellin' us! And the same with Ned Kelly,—his mother, they put her in jail when she was going to have one of her babies, every time there'd be any wrong—of course Ned was supposed to do it...It's a pity he didn't git a few more of them!²⁴

22 'Unpleasant' is the adjective chosen to describe Sloane's voice by Dale Dengate (Interviewed by Jenny Gall, May 2006 and July 2006, NLA TRC 5676).

23 The problems with pitch variation as a result of varying speed in the original recordings make it impossible to determine the exact pitch of the version.

24 Sloane, Sally, Interviewed by Warren Fahey and Graham Seal, 4 May 1976, NLA TRC 5724/1-3.

Conclusion

The definition of a lament as a song expressing deep grief or mourning can be applied to many of Sally Sloane's songs. Sally's early life was a hard one, constantly moving around the countryside with her father, stepfather and her husbands, preventing her from building a community of friends or a stable social life. In the 1976 interview conducted by Warren Fahey and Graham Seal, the continuous recording captures Sally's process of recollection. The associations of songs, events and characters form the web that constructs her pattern of response to Fahey's requests for information and music. There is synchronicity in the interview as the sound of a small clock ticking is audible in tape one and tape two and Sally refers to herself twice as a kind of wind-up musical timepiece: 'Oh I'm not wound up yet.'²⁵ And '[h]e must think I've got a main spring!'²⁶ She perceives herself as a pragmatic seer mediating between the present and past where the old songs that collectors seek are 'kept' in her memory: 'Oh they'll all come to me by and by.'²⁷ To reach back to the source requires a process of being 'wound up' by the action of recollection and musical performance. The sense of mourning is multi-layered: commemorating the old Ireland described in those transplanted songs she had learned via her mother, reflecting the complex emotional upheavals of her mother's and her own marriages, and echoing the numerous transient relationships through which Sally learned songs.

Sally Sloane's bushranger songs in particular represent an answer to the question *How was it to know that 'home' was much too distant to be seen again?* For they voice the quintessential pioneering spirit of a people determined to make a new order by defying what was perceived to be a brutal ruling class—to redress the injustices they had endured before leaving their homeland. Like 'The Wild Colonial Boy', 'Ben Hall' is a lament for a bold hero, but in Hall's death lies the hope of young Australians following his example to overturn, symbolically, the old order, to redistribute the wealth of a few to the many. The Mixolydian melody infuses the narrative with emotion, employing the modal ambiguity heard in great Irish laments such as '*Táimse im' chodhladh*'²⁸ in which the grave darkness of grief is pierced by the light of hope. The last phrase of Sally's version of 'Ben Hall' is triumphant:

For generations after this parents will to their children call,
And rehearse to them the daring deeds committed by Ben Hall.

25 NLA TRC 5724/2.

26 NLA TRC 5724/3.

27 NLA TRC 5724/1.

28 For a definitive performance of this air, see Ciara Walton's version at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYB9QQf900o>>

Bibliography

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