Article:
Erraught, S orcid.org/0000-0003-1569-5063 (2020) Sounding Dissent: Rebel Songs, Resistance, and Irish Republicanism. Popular Music and Society, 43 (5). pp. 571-573. ISSN 0300-7766

https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2020.1800044

Sounding Dissent: Rebel Songs, Resistance, and Irish Republicanism.

Stephen R. Millar
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020
ISSBN: 978-0-472-13194-5
248 pages. Hardback $80

Music and Irish nationalism have a long, co-dependent history, one that, for some commentators, was not to the advantage of musical life in Ireland. For Harry White, the cultural nationalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries relegated music to the service of politics and entirely prevented the development of a nationally informed 'art' music as in other fledgling European nations. Music, when not ignored, was pressed into service as an agent of political consciousness raising: "insofar as music stimulated political feeling (…) its cultivation could be enthusiastically commended. Its redundancy otherwise was painfully apparent" (White: 1998, p. 9).

In the absence of 'serious' music, songs of various kinds, from the genteel poeticisms of Thomas Moore, in the early years of 19th century, to the anthems of Young Ireland in the 1840s and the *Fenian Songster* of 1866, constituted a shared songbook from which nationalisms of equally various kinds took inspiration.

In this excellent and original work, Stephen Millar looks at how this relationship plays out now in one of the heartlands of militant republicanism in Northern Ireland, working-class west Belfast. During 'the Troubles' (1969-1998) this was the area from which many of the combatants for the Provisional IRA and other, smaller groups emerged, and it was the first constituency to return a Sinn Féin MP to the House of Commons since the foundation of the Northern Irish state.

The book falls into two sections: the first looks at the history of the songs and song-making that constitutes the 'rebel' canon, allied with the history of 'physical force' nationalism and republicanism that provided the material for the songs and was also formed *by* those songs and that tradition. In some cases, the soldier and the songsmith were the same person: Wolfe Tone, the leader of the United Irishmen's rebellion of 1798, James Connolly, commander of the socialist Irish Citizens' Army in the 1916 rising, and Bobby Sands, the first of the 1981 republican hunger striker to die, all wrote songs that found their way into the canon. As Millar points out, many of these songs make a claim to historical authenticity that is often adjusted in order to better fit the conventions of the song-form: "Sean South", for example, alters significant facts about its eponymous hero and the quixotic attack on a police station in Fermanagh that claimed his life during the IRA border campaign of 1957.

At least some of the older songs ("the Rising of the Moon", "A Nation once Again", "Down by the Glenside" etc.) are well-known across Ireland and were once performed by musicians with an international profile such as the Clancy Brothers and the Dubliners, as they are still by amateurs at a thousand Irish weddings. In west Belfast, by contrast, the same songs, augmented with many, more explicit celebrations of recent militant republicanism ("My Little Armalite", "Go on Home, British Soldiers" are examples), mark out a culture quite distinct from mainstream society, north and south of the border. The root of this separation is political, but it is exacerbated by multiple indices of deprivation: west Belfast is the one of the very poorest parts of western Europe.

This second section is where the book comes alive: a closer look at the rebel music scene focussed on the Rock Bar in Andersonstown. The anonymisation of most of the musicians interviewed, as well as allowing them to talk frankly, and often critically, of the milieu they in which they perform, also serves to underline how much this culture is one in which the audience has a role as co-curator of a tradition that includes not just songs, but performance

practices and markers of authenticity, musical and extra-musical. Key to this is the ritual of the 'add-ins', shouted interjections that are inserted at fixed points between the lines of a song. The audience is not simply there to listen: it has a job to do, and needs to learn its lines. Knowing the 'add-ins' and being 'vouched for' are important, which brings in the second important point: although this is rebel music, it never directly confronts or provokes the enemy in the way the loyalist marching band staking out its territory adjacent to nationalist areas would. The enemies of militant republicanism – the British, the loyalist population of NI, and anti- republican forces south of the border rarely hear this music. The audience is composed of people who agree with certain basic tenets of republican *doxa,* although, as the movement has not been immune from splits, sometimes internecine conflict can split the audience. Christy Moore is quoted recalling been run out of a club in west Belfast for singing the 'wrong' song, which also demonstrates, as Millar observes, that fame is no protection against punishment for breaking the rules regarding repertoire or performance style.(41) A final point worth noting is that the enemy is almost always 'the Brits' and not the Protestant/ unionist population of NI: the songs are rarely overtly sectarian, although 'add-ins' are occasionally directed at 'Huns' (Protestants).

The strict control over repertoire, and the privileging of tradition and continuity leads to a certain stasis in the politics of working-class republicanism, as performed in venues such the Rock Bar. While this variety of nationalism leans leftwards, and self-consciously identifies with anti-colonial struggles in South Africa, in Palestine and in the Basque country, it rarely directly addresses social issues. As Millar notes, when writing of James Connolly earlier in the book, when it comes to a choice between the ambitions of national self-determination and socialism, the former always wins. Millar suggests that 'Rebel Sunday' in the Rock Bar is not a ritual of resistance so much as a prefigurative celebration of the republic to come: songs performed 'as if' the struggles they commemorate had come to triumphant fruition.

Interestingly, many of Millar's interviewees note that, as the struggle waxed, the music waned, particularly after events that resulted in unplanned civilian casualties such as the Enniskillen bombing of 1987 and Omagh in 1998. Now, more than 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement established a kind of peace to Northern Ireland, the music is, according to the performers Millar talks to, 'more popular than ever' (185).

Millar's book might be faulted in a few ways: the historical section, while accurate, is overlong. For most Irish readers, little of this will be new, and it is perhaps here that its origins in a PhD thesis are most evident. The narrow concentration on west Belfast might also be questioned: this music is performed much further afield and is especially strong in places such as west central Scotland, where Millar is from, and where its popularity is linked with Celtic football club and its fanbase. Sometimes, reading this, it feels like this music is peculiar to this setting, whereas in fact, it is this context that gives songs, many of which are widely performed through the Irish world, a particular and distinctive resonance, and perhaps a comparative study of how the same material works elsewhere might have added a valuable perspective. Nevertheless, the depth of primary research and the evidence of immersion in a closed world give this book an attractive energy and focus.

Works Cited:

White, Harry – *The Keeper's Recital*, Cork: Cork University Press and Field Day, 1998.

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