

Shanty-Singing and the Irish Atlantic Identity and Hybridity in the Musical Imagination of Stan Hugill

Gerry Smyth

Professor of Irish Cultural History, Liverpool John Moores University

Introduction

Stan Hugill was born on 19 November 1906 in the old coastguard station in the small seaside village of Hoylake. After he went to sea in 1921, Stan went on to become a key figure within the international shanty tradition. Regularly cited as the last genuine shantyman working aboard a British ship, Stan eventually domiciled in the Welsh port of Aberdovey after the Second World War, where he became the centre of a great international research network focused on different aspects of the shanty tradition. He wrote three books (as well as hundreds of shorter articles) that remain at the heart of shanty research as well as the living shanty tradition as it is still practised in a variety of musical and folkloric contexts.

I have been particularly fascinated to discover that in each of his major works, Stan Hugill developed a peculiar understanding of the influence of Ireland and Irish music within the international shanty tradition. In this article I want to suggest that the characterisation of Irish music as central to the shanty tradition has important implications for an understanding of the category of Ireland and Irishness at a key moment of its modern evolution; and further, that Stan's work draws on and contributes to the history of what might be described as the 'Irish Atlantic'.

Shanties and Shanty Singing: A Brief History

The shanty tradition with which we are familiar today emerged at a particular time and from a very particular set of circumstances. Most authorities acknowledge that whereas some form of co-ordinated singing has probably existed since prehistory, the modern shanty tradition only commenced after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. The expansion of transatlantic trade and travel necessitated the development of a particular type of ship: the large-capacity, high-speed, multi-masted deep-water vessel. All commentators are likewise adamant that the shanty singing which developed soon after the commencement of this commercial opportunity was practiced only aboard merchant vessels; the British and American navies operated according to a different system in which efficiency and discipline were based on the strict observation of a specialised system of signals, codes and protocols.

A.L. Lloyd pinpoints the moment of 'take-off': it was in 1816 – the year after Waterloo – that

Isaac Wright & Co's Black Ball Line began their regular run between New York and Liverpool, sailing on the first of each month, irrespective of weather or amount of cargo loaded, twenty-three days for the eastward trip, about forty coming back.

Other 'lines' followed soon after: Swallowtail, Red Cross, Dramatic, Black Cross. Tonnage and yardage increased throughout the middle decades of the century; more ships, more passages, more commerce.

One thing that did not necessarily increase, however, was crew size; fewer men working harder and longer made commercial sense. Work on board the typical 'packet' ship following the routes between Britain and the Americas consisted in large part of a variety of hauling and heaving tasks – raising the anchor, raising and adjusting sails, pumping bilge water, and so forth. It was soon observed that sailors operated more efficiently when working to a rhythm that was sympathetic to the task in hand; and it was in this context that the benefits of the call-and-response, co-ordinated work song was recognised. The shantyman who organised this activity took on a recognised role; a strong voice and an ability to improvise content could earn a sailor a bonus on top of his normal pay.

A series of song forms thus emerged, each designed to aid one or other of the onboard chores necessary for the efficient running of these bigger, faster vessels. Stan describes two main types and their sub-divisions:

The capstan song and the halyard song. The capstan song was subdivided into: a) the windlass, or anchor capstan shanty, b) the capstan song, sung when doing a job-o-work other than heaving the anchor ... The halyard shanty, used for hoisting sails, was subdivided into: a) long pulls; b) foresheeters; c) bunt-stowers ... For pumping it was considered any old sea-song would do, so long as it had a good grand chorus.

Although A.L. Lloyd points out that 'tight categories are misleading', he too acknowledges that 'in the earlier, formative years of the modern shanty, the nature of the job in hand and the gestures needed to fulfil it were important, even decisive, in shaping the melody, rhythm, metre and tempo of the songs.'

The practice of shanty-singing as we know it best emerged during the American-dominated packet-ships of, roughly, 1830-50, and reached its peak in the British-dominated clipper-ship era of 1855-70. As a living tradition it was all but dead by about 1875 in the face of competition from steam.

In terms of the characteristic themes of the shanty, it is difficult to generalise, as lyrics were often occasional and improvised. The more physically difficult the onboard task, the less sense required; 'songs' could descend into a series of grunts and nonsense images (some of them borrowed from 'foreign' languages such as Gaelic). Longer, more tedious tasks, on the other hand, could afford to be more expansive (both in structural and in lyrical terms) in order to engage the sailor's attention as well as his effort. There is plenty of evidence, for example, of some of narrative folk songs being adapted specifically for work gang purposes. There was also a stock of 'floating' formulations (references to particular ports, officer types, food quality, women's names, and so on) which could be readily adapted for any task at any time.

It's also interesting to remember that most of the shanty lyrics were so sexually explicit that the earliest collectors could not see their way clear to committing them to paper. Even an old salt such as Stan Hugill danced around innuendo and refrained from citing words that he feared might offend his more delicate readers. Colourful characters coping with difficult circumstances was one thing, it seems; obscenity and indecency (as defined by late Victorian and early twentieth-century publishers) was something else again. Editorial intervention thus played as important a role in the emergence of a shanty canon as it did in the formation of other elements of the 'folk revival'.

There is of course a world of difference between the original singing context and the various contexts within which the shanty subsequently fetched up – everything from folk clubs to popular adaptations to classical settings. 'Some shantymen were bawlers', according to Lloyd, 'others used a delicate intimate voice. Some sang their solo lines in strict tempo, others preferred a rubato that at times ... was quite elaborate.' Harmony and ornamentation were unusual but not entirely unknown. Such considerations were somewhat beside the point, however – as Stan complained: '[shore] singers of shanties rarely manage to get the right "atmosphere" into their offerings; they are not raucous or strident enough.'

According to Lloyd, the later shanty material (ca. 1850-1875) reveals the seaman's increasing awareness that he represented 'an exploited floating proletariat rather than a proud if battered seadog.' The shanties tell of 'bully' seamen and 'bucko' mates, the rigours of work and weather, the prowess of the ship and the line, and so on; the port songs tell of pubs and drinking sessions, women (invariably false), and 'crimping' – the elaborate system developed worldwide to part the sailor from his pay and get him back to sea as quickly as possible.

Where did these songs come from? Lloyd points out that

the musical accents of many places went into the composition of the shanties. The melodies are a fine jumble of pentatonic phrases that may have derived originally from Gaelic or African culture, modal formulas from the English countryside, and modern commonplaces from stage hits of the first half of Victoria's reign. Similarly the poetic improvisations of the shantymen are incrustated with bits of traditional imagery that first sparked in the Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Negro mind, along with tags invented by the yelping comedians of the time on both sides of the Atlantic.

Stan describes an eclectic range of sources and influences, including long-established hauling cries, dance tunes, folk songs and ballads (American and European as well as British), adapted art music, including custom-composed martial music of varying kinds; hymns, and popular songs. By far the two most important influences on the development of the shanty, however, were African-American sources (including work songs associated with the southern American Gulf Ports, as well as West Indian and Latin American contributions), and, most consistently from Stan's perspective, Ireland.

Liverpool, Irish, Liverpool-Irish

There was a significant amount of traffic (both in goods and people) between Ireland and Liverpool since the latter received its charter from King John in 1207. That traffic developed in size and significance throughout the medieval and early modern period. As Britain's imperial fortunes grew throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, Ireland languished in political and economic stagnation.

Either as a transit port or as a final destination, Liverpool continued to loom large in the Irish imagination throughout the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. In 1841, the city was already home to nearly 50,000 Irish-born people – roughly one-seventh of the population. That figure was soon to rocket. The historian John Belchem quotes a local stipendiary magistrate who calculated that '296,331 persons landed at Liverpool from Ireland between 13 January and 13 December 1847, of whom 116,000 were "half naked and starving"'. Many more were to follow, as *an Gorta Mór* – the 'Great Hunger' – extended to the end of the decade and beyond. The majority of those fleeing the horror back in Ireland were passing through in search of better chances in various far-flung destinations; exhausted and traumatised, however, many stayed where they fetched up – in the warren of streets that grew up around the docking sites, before slowly moving out into the burgeoning city itself.

A particular form of 'Irishness' emerged in the wake of the Famine exodus, formed of a combination of original ethnicity, stereotyping by the resident population, and a useful ability to adapt to new circumstances – Belchem again:

Liverpool 'Irishness' was in part an imposed and host-invented stigma, but was also a creative response, an act of migrant self-imagination to facilitate adjustment to new surroundings.

'Scouse' culture is frequently approached with reference to this strong post-Famine strain of Irishness; and one of the most significant elements of that culture is music. As popular music historian Paul du Noyer puts it: 'The Irish shaped many facets of Scouse character, but their greatest contribution was the view of music as one of life's necessities.' Such a contribution tends to feature strongly in autobiographical accounts, such as Tommy Walsh's *Being Irish in Liverpool* (Liverpool, 2011), in which music is represented as central to the Liverpool-Irish community within which he grew up.

It seems clear, then, that Ireland features strongly in Liverpool's self-image. 'Emblematic of the Liverpool struggle against adversity, misperception and misrepresentation', writes John Belchem, 'the Liverpool-Irish slummy was inscribed as the prototypical "scouser"'. It's true that the Famine Irish contributed significantly to unprecedented levels of poverty, crime, drunkenness, disease and death in Liverpool; the moral outrage of the established population in the face of this apparent onslaught was considerable, and has continued to feed reactionary, betimes racist, attitudes concerning immigration in general, and the Irish in particular, down to the present day. But the Irish also brought a great variety of attitudes and practices that have become embedded within the fabric of the city. There can be no doubt that the Great Famine was *the* defining event of modern Irish history – the basis of a recurring traumatic memory that profoundly influenced all subsequent developments, political as well as cultural. But it was also responsible for the consolidation of Liverpool as an indelible part of the Irish geo-cultural and psycho-spatial imagination – a development which in turn fed the notion of Liverpool as an exceptional city, a place apart.

Stan Hugill's Irishman

Stan Hugill considered himself to be a 'Liverpool man'; it was the port where he first took ship, and where he was registered as a sailor. If the evidence of his work is to be credited, Liverpool remained at the centre of his imagination throughout his life. When he came to describe the great 'sailortowns' of the world, Liverpool took precedence over the likes of London, San Francisco and Hamburg. Growing up in a village near a great port that was so identified with Ireland and Irishness, it's perhaps not surprising that Stan was primed to engage with the Irish elements in the social and cultural of life of Liverpool – particularly insofar as they pertained to the musical and maritime elements which featured so strongly in his own experience.

This Irish influence may be observed throughout Stan's work in a number of respects. He suggests, for example, that a significant proportion of the international deep-water song repertoire were of Irish origin:

Many shanties had Irish tunes – dance, folk, and march – and not only were the words and phrases of many of the shanties of Irish origin but in some cases it was customary for the shantyman to sing the shanties with an imitative Irish brogue. The Packet Rats of the Western Ocean Packets were almost one hundred per cent Irish, either from County this or that, or from Liverpool's Scotland Road or New York's Bowery and West Side, and as these seamen were responsible for many of our finest shanties it was only natural for them to choose tunes and words from Irish sources when they made up these songs. Nearly all the forebitters are of Irish origin and many of these were used as capstan and pump songs on account of their stirring choruses.

Many of these songs incorporated macaronic Gaelic terms left over from their original language, and this underpinned another claim: that the shanties associated with traffic between Liverpool and the eastern American seaboard were, irrespective of their provenance or of the singer's ethnicity, usually sung in 'an imitative Irish brogue'. Most tellingly, Stan claims that Irish songs and melodies were subject to an ongoing 'folk' process in which they were adapted for use by different people in a wide range of contexts.

What might be described as the 'Irishification' of the Atlantic trade routes commenced in earnest after the Famine, with crews culled from expatriate Irish communities on either side of the ocean. And with these crews came a particular repertoire of music, songs and performance styles – many of the shanties and ballads that were to become canonical, well-known pieces such as

'The Liverpool Judies', 'Paddy Lay Back', 'Paddy West', 'The Banks of Newfoundland', 'The Liverpool Packet' and so on, many of which were used as capstan shanties. They were responsible too for the following windlass, halyard, pumping and sheet shanties: 'Leave Her, Johnny, Leave Her' (first sung as 'Across the Rocky Mountains' and 'Across the Western Ocean'), 'Blow the Man Down', 'The Blackball Line', 'Time for Us to Go' or 'A Hundred Years Ago', and many others. Some of these forebitters and shanties have airs reminiscent of those of Erin's Isle, and 'Can't Ye Dance the Polka?' unmistakably has the air of 'Larry Doolan', a well-known Irish song.

Stan identifies two processes simultaneously at work: a growing Irish influence (in terms of repertoire and singing style), especially in the period after the Great Famine; and the hybridisation of that influence in the context of increasingly speedy, highly mobile, transatlantic trade.

The former process may be observed in relation to a song such as 'The Irish Emigrant' (also known as 'We're All Bound to Go'), an outward-bound windlass shanty. With its jig tune and its story of a young Irish emigrant (sometimes male, sometimes female) in Liverpool looking for passage to the New World, this song, Stan writes, 'is Irish to its very bones':

As I walked out one morning down by the Clarence Dock,
I heard a bully Irish boy conversing with Tapscott;
'Good morning, Mister Tapscott, would ye be arter telling me,
If ye've got a ship bound for New York in the state of Amerikee?'

This is a song of a particular type – a narrative 'come-all-ye', identified in this instance by its characteristic opening line: 'As I walked out ...'. A.L. Lloyd suggests that this form emerged in Ireland in the eighteenth century, but came to prominence across Britain in the wake of the Great Famine, with the influx of Irish people into the great industrial centres. 'The Irish Emigrant' represents a typical adaptation of the form within a British – or more precisely, a migrant – context.

In this transcription, Stan attempts to reproduce the sounds and locutions of an Irish accent. We find the word 'Amerikee', for example, scattered throughout the Anglophone shanty canon; along with the equally popular 'Amerikay', it was used for rhyming purposes, but also in hopeful imitation of an Irish pronunciation of the word 'America'. Stan also points out that the Irish pronunciation of the word 'meal' was responsible for the common misapprehension that emigrants travelled on 'mail' ships. Such words represent a particular form of language (Hiberno-Irish) that was at this time itself undergoing rapid change by language users who were negotiating the profoundly traumatic experience of alienation – both from the land of their birth and from the language of their ancestors.

We find a classic use (or misuse, as it happens) of one of those locutions in line three of the verse quoted above. Because there is no verb 'to have' in Gaelic, the perfect and pluperfect past tenses of 'to have' is formed with parts of the verb 'to be' in conjunction with the preposition *tar éis* – meaning 'after'. So, in Gaelic, one might say: *Tá mé tar éis mo dhinnér a ithe* – which in Standard English would mean something like 'I've just eaten my dinner', but actually translates as 'I am after eating my dinner'. As Gaelic began to

disappear, that particular locution became widely used in Hiberno-Irish; and as it did so, it becomes an easily reproducible way of invoking an Irish identity.

In fact, the locution is mis-applied by Stan (or by his source) in this particular example. The Irish emigrant who is conversing with Mr Tapscott (an actual agent based in Liverpool in the years after the Famine) means to say something like: 'Could you tell me if you've got a ship bound for New York'. There's no meaningful sense in which the locution 'after' (or 'arter') might be employed in this context, other than for the purpose of invoking a stereotypical Irish identity, which is itself the pretext for the narrative. As such, it works perfectly well.

What occurs when someone imitates (or tries to imitate) an accent – especially when that accent is associated with an identity different from the imitator? With which values, abilities, assumptions or powers does such an affectation traffic? You might argue that it represents a form of mockery, of domination through the mechanism of the stereotype; and indeed, the history of British popular culture has no shortage of examples of 'funny' accents (including the Irish) being used in precisely this way.

Another possibility might be to do with the fact that shanty singing has a strong performative dimension – it's a form of singing in which physical action is crucial – and this means that the sailors were in some senses 'playing a role' when they sang the shanties as an aid to onboard work. The use of an Irish accent could have been a means of stepping out of a present moment that was full of difficulty and danger, and adopting instead a provisional identity (Irishness) which possessed a range of stereotypical associations (drunkenness, belligerence, and an ability to cope with gruelling physical labour) that were extremely useful in the circumstances.

In any event, Stan's work testifies to the presence of a strong Irish influence on the mainstream shanty tradition. That influence is, however, extremely impure in terms of its background and scope; the shanty was in fact a thoroughly *hybrid* form, incorporating musical, lyrical and performative influences from a wide range of sources. As an example of this process, Stan cites the well-known shanty 'Clear the Track, Let the Bulgine Run':

Oooh the smartest packet ye can find
Ah ho! way-ho! are you mos' done?
Is the ol' 'Wild Cat' of the Swallowtail Line
Sooo, clear the track, let the bulgine run!

To me high rig-a-jig in a jaunтин' car
Ah ho! way-ho! are you mos' done?
Wid Eliza Lee all on my knee
Sooo, clear the track, let the bulgine run!

The lyric of the most popular version cited here moves the action from Liverpool to New York and back again, finishing with a proposal of marriage to 'Eliza Lee'. This shanty, Stan writes

was a capstan song, a favourite in the Yankee packets. It has almost the same tune as an Irish folk-song *Shule Agra* but the refrains have wording showing Negro influence. It was another typical mixture of Irish and Negro sentiments and is one of the many shanties that passed through the shanty mart of Mobile, in this case I should think the tune came from Ireland to Mobile, where the Negroes took it in hand and then at a later date it returned to sea with a few more alterations.

The 'folk' process Hugill proposes goes something like this: the ancient Irish song 'Siubhail A Gradh' (translating as something like 'Walk On, My Love') fetched up in Mobile, Alabama sometime during the Famine emigration of the 1840s and 1850s. The ballad may have been sung off-duty on the westward passage by expatriate Irish sailors, or the crew may have heard it being sung by emigrants in steerage. In any event, the melody was adapted by African-American and Irish work gangs on the railroad network that was springing up in the great hinterlands in the years before the American Civil War. ('Bulginie' was a slang term for a railway engine.) These versions made their way back to the port of Mobile where one such version was picked up by American and British crews plying the Atlantic trade routes. This version was in turn adapted for a variation on the 'flash packet' genre, celebrating the speed and prowess of the ships operating under one or another of the transatlantic Packet lines – in this case, Swallowtail. From ancient Gaelic love song to modern work shanty in a few easy moves!

'Clear the Track' is not Irish, English, American or African-American; it is, according to Stan, best described as 'transatlantic'. His life's work is testament to the fact that the process described here in relation to this particular example operates at large throughout the shanty canon, as different aspects (melody, language, accent, lyric, structure, performance, and so on) of one (Irish) musical tradition mutate when confronted with new circumstances. But what does this mean? How may we begin to map the significance of songs which only emerged as a freak product of capitalism, and only managed to survive in the first instance as an academic curiosity?

To answer these questions would take more time than is available here. But I think in conclusion that it's worth considering the idea that Stan Hugill's work testifies to the thoroughly hybridised nature of the emerging Atlantic world, and to the capital contribution of Irish migrant culture to that world. To propose an 'Irish Atlantic' in this way is to consider what Ireland and Irishness brings to the cradle of western capitalism, but also to insist that Irish culture only becomes truly meaningful in its confrontation with and thorough infusion with other people and other cultures.

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