

## **Towards a Regional Understanding of Irish Traditional Music<sup>1</sup>**

Daithí Kearney

University College Cork

Irish traditional music is a tradition with great regional diversity that remains underexplored. Influenced by American geographer George Carney's study of bluegrass music, this paper uses his framework to consider a regional understanding of Irish traditional music and its development. In this paper I draw upon two main works. The first is *Baseball, Barns and Bluegrass: A Study of American Folklife*, a collection of papers concerning folk culture in America including architecture, food and music.<sup>2</sup> The second *Blas: The Local Accent in Traditional Irish Music*<sup>3</sup> is a collection of papers delivered at a conference held in 1995 of the same title described by editor Thérèse Smith as 'the first international conference of the 1990s held in Ireland which focused exclusively on traditional Irish music in its many manifestations, both at home and abroad'.<sup>4</sup> The concept of regions and regional difference in Irish traditional music is a recurring theme of the papers in the *Blas* collection. These writings, while dealing with different cultures, compliment each other in their conceptual framework.

In consideration of folk cultures, Carney attempts to identify cultural hearths, places from which musical traditions are diffused. Carney aims to define the musical sound

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is developed from a paper of the same title presented at the Society for Musicology in Ireland's 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Postgraduate Students' Conference held at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009. The author is a Government of Ireland Scholar (2005-2007) and the research presented here is supported by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> George O. Carney, *Baseball, Barns and Bluegrass: A Geography of American Folklife* (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin and Thérèse Smith, eds, *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music* (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Thérèse Smith, 'From the Local to the Global and Back', in Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin and Thérèse Smith, eds, *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music* (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997), 1-8: 1.

of the region and trace how musical style evolves over time. Understanding regions as a process is an integral element in developing a geographical understanding of Irish traditional music. The sounds and style of Irish traditional music have changed at different rates in different places amongst different social networks influenced by a variety of socio-political contexts. In *Blas*, articles by Fintan Vallely and Niall Keegan consider the concept of style and regional style in Irish traditional music; Vallely in particular showing an awareness for the social and economic contexts for musical style.<sup>5</sup> Peter Browne and Caoimhín Mac Aoidh focus on the particular regions of Sliabh Luachra and Donegal respectively in a process that, as highlighted in this paper, reinforces the connection between Irish traditional music and often isolated, rural regions in the west of Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

There is a particular emphasis on the role of individuals as innovators of change evident in Carney's framework. Individuals are also identified as important forces of change and the development of style in Irish traditional music. Individual musicians have been innovators of musical style and are often associated with particular regions, most notably Pádraig O'Keeffe with Sliabh Luachra, John Doherty with Donegal and Michael Coleman with South Sligo. These associations are somewhat subjective and can sometimes mask the complex social network of the many people in a musical region. For example, O'Keeffe demonstrated a knowledge and liking for the music of Coleman. Coleman himself spent most of his life in America, though he continues to be celebrated as an icon of south Sligo musical traditions. Travelling piper Johnny Doran, as well as Dublin based teacher Leo Rowsome, were significant influences on Willie Clancy, an integral character in the musical narratives of West Clare who

---

<sup>5</sup> Fintan Vallely, 'The Migrant, The Tourist, The Voyeur, The Leprechaun...' in Micheál Ó Suilleabháin and Thérèse Smith, eds., *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music* (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997), 107-115; Niall Keegan, 'The Verbal Context of style in traditional Irish music' in Micheál Ó Suilleabháin and Thérèse Smith, eds., (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997), 116-122.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Browne, 'Sliabh Luachra: A Personal View' in Micheál Ó Suilleabháin and Thérèse Smith, eds., (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997), 64-66; Caoimhín Mac Aoidh, 'Donegal: A Voice in the Wilderness or the Voice of Reason' in Micheál Ó Suilleabháin and Thérèse Smith, eds., (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997), 67-72.

learned much music in Dublin.<sup>7</sup> A difficulty in developing an understanding of regions in Irish traditional music is the consolidation of the role of the individual within a regional narrative and social network.

In the keynote address to *Blas*, Peter Cooke highlighted the processes of institutionalisation.<sup>8</sup> Institutionalisation is integral to the changing geography of Irish traditional music and the construction and imagination of regions. Carney stresses the role of social institutions which involve politics of power and identity.<sup>9</sup> Organisations, festivals, radio stations and record companies shape the diffusion and evolution of musical traditions. Noticing the changing places that come to the fore in histories of Irish traditional music, Allen Feldman notes the emergence of the popularity of musicians from County Sligo in the 1920s and 1930s and the shift towards music and musicians from County Clare in the 1960s and 1970s, partly due to the development of recording and the radio and the privileging of regional identities.<sup>10</sup> Mac Aoidh suggests a hierarchy in a regional understanding of Irish traditional music that places County Clare at the top and owes much to the tourist industry.<sup>11</sup> The work of Séamus Ennis and Breandán Breathnach in diffusing knowledge of regional diversity is also significant. Both were Dublin based but with connections to the Connemara Gaeltacht and County Clare.

To date, studies of regions in Irish traditional music have invariably focused on regions in the west of Ireland, influenced by what Seán Corcoran termed ‘filters of

---

<sup>7</sup> Fintan Vallely, ‘Clancy, Willie’ in Fintan Vallely ed. *The Companion to Irish traditional music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 71-72; Helen O’Shea, *The Making of Irish traditional music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Cooke, ‘Cultural Greyout or Survival of the Species? - "The Threat"’ in Micheál Ó Suilleabháin and Therése Smith, eds, *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music* (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997), 9-24.

<sup>9</sup> Carney, *Baseball, Barns and Bluegrass: A Geography of American Folklife*, 145.

<sup>10</sup> Allen Feldman, ‘Music of the Border: The Northern Fiddler Project, Media Provenance and the Nationalization of Irish Music’ in *Radharc* Vol. 3 (2002), 97-122.

<sup>11</sup> Mac Aoidh, ‘Donegal: A Voice in the Wilderness or the Voice of Reason’ in *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music*, 67.

mediation'<sup>12</sup> and identified by an analysis of musical style without an acknowledgement of the complex processes and power geometries involved in the identification and representation of regions. In extending the parameters for a regional understanding of Irish traditional music, I propose that the complex geography of Irish traditional music can lead to a greater appreciation of the diversity of sounds and environments, as well as stages in the development of the tradition throughout the island.

### **An Ireland of Regions**

Ireland presents a complex subject for the regional geographer, not only in terms of music but in relation to the physical and cultural environments that exist on the island. Commenting on the relationship between culture and the topography of Ireland, William J. Smyth notes:

No other European country has such a fragmented peripheral arrangement of mountain land all along its borders. This has enriched Ireland with a diversified scenic heritage but the complicated distribution of massifs presented severe difficulties to would-be conquerors. Likewise, the topography has meant that the richer lowland regions are scattered and fragmented all over the island, facilitating the evolution of strong regional subcultures. In turn the hills and boglands came to serve as territorial bases for local lordships and, with later phases of conquest and colonization, often became regions of retreat and refuge.<sup>13</sup>

Smyth presents a historical perspective for understanding modern Ireland that emerges between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The identity of many regions in Ireland develops during this period. It is also during that period that Irish traditional music evolved into what we identify it as today. The musical traditions of this island and the regional diversity therein are closely connected to the social, political and economic upheavals that have occurred over the past five centuries.

---

<sup>12</sup> Seán Corcoran, 'Concepts of Regionalism in Irish Traditional Music', in Micheál Ó Súilleabháin and Therése Smith eds., *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music* (Limerick: Irish World Music Centre / Folk Music Society of Ireland, 1997), 28.

<sup>13</sup> William J. Smyth, 'The Making of Ireland: Agendas and Perspectives in Cultural Geography', in Brian Graham and LJ Proudfoot, eds, *An Historical Geography of Ireland* (London: Academic Press 1993), 399-438, 402.

The emergence of tourism as an important economic engine across the island of Ireland has also impacted on the identity and perceptions of regions. Attracted in part by the scenic heritage referred to by Smyth, Irish traditional music is also cited as a prominent tourist attraction. The politics and economics of tourism have motivated the expansion and development of the cultural landscape of Irish traditional music but this may also have a negative impact on the representation of the tradition. In his study of tourism from a geographical perspective, Stephen Williams states: ‘Sanitized, simplified and staged representations of places, histories, cultures and societies match the superficiality of the tourist gaze and meet tourist demands for entertaining and digestible experiences, yet they provide only partial representations of reality.’<sup>14</sup> Mac Aoidh highlights the impact of the tourist gaze when asking:

‘How many times have you cringed at the sight of harp-bearing green-gowned lassies cavorting with lads in knee britches in ‘cultural displays’ for tourists? For the larger portion of practising traditional musicians this is not Irish traditional culture, but a Frankenstein-like nightmare’.<sup>15</sup>

Regional identities are thus under pressure from the economic machines of the tourist industry that attempts to market them and, in doing so, further shapes their development.<sup>16</sup> Helen O’Shea explores the impact of tourism, particularly in relation to the promotion of regional identities in Irish traditional music, acknowledging the development of an East Clare regional musical identity in opposition to the more crowded music spaces of West Clare and with the support of marketing initiatives in the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> O’Shea is observing a phenomenon outlined elsewhere by John Urry who suggests that the trends in tourism have moved away from the preference for mass tourism and towards a desire to experience something different, to get away from the beaten track and engage with a community. Urry labels this the ‘end of tourism’.<sup>18</sup> Tourism involves people, technology, finance, images and ideologies, each of which can impact on the music, traditions and identity of a region.

---

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Williams, *Tourism Geography*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Caoimhín Mac Aoidh, *Between the Jigs and the Reels: The Donegal Fiddle Tradition* (Co. Leitrim: Drumlin Publications, 1994), 36.

<sup>16</sup> Helen O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 63.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995), 147.

This paper is influenced by my own childhood growing up in Tralee, County Kerry where I was a member of *Siamsa Tíre*, performing for a primarily tourist market each summer of my teenage years. I was aware of a strong regional music identity to the east in Sliabh Luachra that I have since explored as part of my postgraduate research at University College Cork. More recently I have lived in the town of Youghal in East Cork. The present day reputation of Sliabh Luachra as a region with a rich musical heritage is in contrast with the association of Youghal with historical figures such as Sir Walter Raleigh and Oliver Cromwell, yet places such as Youghal also have regional stories and traditions that include a rich musical heritage. Breathnach reminds us that Irish traditional music includes ‘not only the older songs and melodies of the Gael [...] but also the Anglo-Irish and English ballads of the countryside and the extraordinarily rich vein of dance music which belongs exclusively neither to Gaeltacht nor Galltacht’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed the area around Ballymacoda near Youghal received favourable mention in Seán Ó Riada’s *Our Musical Heritage* but reference to Sliabh Luachra was only in passing and not by name – Ó Riada referred briefly to a region on the Cork-Kerry border when discussing fiddle styles.<sup>20</sup> While anxiety over the disappearance of regional traditions has led to a heightened awareness of a number of regions that are to the fore of studies of regional styles in Irish traditional music,<sup>21</sup> attempts at discovering and rediscovering regions that have been largely ignored present a more complex challenge to a regional understanding of Irish traditional music.

---

<sup>19</sup> Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*, (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1971), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Seán Ó Riada, in *Our Musical Heritage*, Thomas Kinsella and Tomás Ó Canainn, eds. (Fundúireacht an Riadaigh i gcomhar le The Dolmen Press, Mountrath, Portlaoise, Ireland, 1982). (This book was compiled from the programme series, *Our Musical Heritage*, presented by Seán Ó Riada on Radio Éireann, 7th July to 13th October, 1962).

<sup>21</sup> O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional music*, 56.

Figure 1: Regions explored in *Our Musical Heritage*<sup>22</sup>



<sup>22</sup> Figure 1 is a subjective representation by the author loosely demonstrating the regions referred to, if even briefly, by Seán Ó Riada in the radio series *Our Musical Heritage* (1962).

## Regionalising Ireland

The popularity of regional studies and the concept of regions in Irish traditional music have developed over the past fifty years. The recognition of regions of Irish traditional music is relatively recent; Seán Ó Riada's *Our Musical Heritage* is arguably the first significant engagement with regional difference in Irish traditional music. The regions identified by Ó Riada (see fig. 1) and many subsequent observers are located on the west coast, influenced perhaps by cultural nationalism as much as actual musical activity. Ó Riada's focus on discernable regional styles became the model for studying regions in Irish traditional music. Such a model did not consider the totality of the region and the changing nature of culture and sounds in a region. Ó Riada's division of Irish traditional music was to influence his successors, though he himself acknowledged that he had merely highlighted a small number of regions and that many more existed.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst living in Dublin, Ó Riada was influenced by musicians from various parts of the country migrating to and becoming part of a Dublin social and musical network.<sup>24</sup> These musicians brought with them tunes and ways of playing that were to become part of a national repertoire in a process, fuelled in particular by the development of radio and recordings that diluted regional difference, particularly in the context of musical style. Questions concerning the relevance of regional styles and the relationship between musical styles and their regions of origins in Irish traditional music today undermine attempts at a regional understanding of Irish traditional music based on the concept of regional styles alone. Indeed, some critics of the concept of regions in Irish traditional music have gone as far as suggesting that the study of regional style is a 'dead geography'.<sup>25</sup> However, there has been a resurgence of

---

<sup>23</sup> In a typed script for *Our Musical Heritage*, Ó Riada has written: 'If, in these programmes, I have neglected one region or another, it is because I felt that the regions I covered included all the most important features of the sean-nos as it still exists.' (BL/PP/OR/554/9). See also in relation to fiddle styles, Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, 51, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Niall Keegan, *Language and Power in Traditional Irish Music*, Seán Ó Riada Memorial Lecture 16 (Cork: The Irish Traditional Music Society, University College Cork, 2006), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Francis Morton, *Performing the Session: Enacted Spaces of Irish Traditional Music* (MRes diss., University of Strathclyde, 2001), 51.

interest in local studies in the face of globalisation and an immersion in local cultures.<sup>26</sup> Regional styles are increasingly performed as a conscious choice on the part of a musician rather than as a result of belonging to a particular regional community.<sup>27</sup> Regional styles are considered old and thus ‘authentic’ and satisfy particular desires within the folk revival community. However, regional styles may also flourish at a geographical distance from their source,<sup>28</sup> often seeking to maintain and preserve the historical aspects of the tradition. While it may be possible for regional styles of Irish traditional music to be transferred to another location, it is important to note how music in the region evolves. It is noteworthy that the Sligo style of fiddle playing epitomised by the playing of Michael Coleman and his contemporaries flourished in New York and is exemplified by performers including Andy McGann, Brian Conway and Patrick Mangan. In contrast, the flute has replaced the fiddle as the prominent instrument in the musical soundscape of Sligo.<sup>29</sup>

In his study of the geography of bluegrass music, Carney attempts to define the particular sound of the culture. Vallely has identified a number of elements present in the study of style in Irish traditional music including instruments, the way of playing, tune types, repertoire, the use of music, and characteristics of an individual performer.<sup>30</sup> Irish traditional music, like folk music in general, has evolved slowly but Carney acknowledges the need to examine changes in the sound of a musical culture and the role of individuals in influencing change. The musical soundscape of Ireland

---

<sup>26</sup> See Mike Featherstone, ‘Localism, Globalism and Cultural Identity’ in Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, eds, *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Mike Featherstone, ‘Global and Local Cultures’ in Jon Bird et al., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); John O’Brien, ‘Local Studies’ in Neil Buttimer et al, eds, *The Heritage of Ireland* (Cork: Collins Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Browne, ‘Sliabh Luachra: A Personal View’ in *Blas: The local accent in Irish traditional music*, 64-66; Nuala O’Connor, *Bringing it All Back Home: The Influence of Irish Music at Home and Overseas* (Dublin: Merlin, 2001), 73.

<sup>28</sup> O’Connor, *Bringing it All Back Home: The Influence of Irish Music at Home and Overseas*, 73; O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory Daly and PJ Hennon, Sleeve notes for *The Coleman Archive Volume 1: The Living Tradition*, Various Artists (Gurteen, Co. Sligo: Coleman Heritage Centre, 1999), CC5, Audio CD.

<sup>30</sup> Fintan Vallely, ‘Regional Style’ in *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*, 308-309.

has changed from one of pipers and harpers to fiddle and flute players. The arrival of the accordion and concertina had an enormous impact on some regions. More places were influenced by the increased accessibility to a wide range of musical sounds and instruments. In many studies of Irish traditional music, the processes of change in style and instrumentation are not considered in an investigation of the musical identity of the region. Simplified and often stereotypical representations of regional musical soundscapes become institutionalised – none more so than the imagination of Sliabh Luachra as a region of fiddle and accordion players performing slides and polkas, which ignores the role of the flute and concertina as well as the popularity of reels in the region.

Elements of regional uniqueness are often emphasised and elements that do not conform to the accepted identity of the region are often ignored. In contrast to the association of Sliabh Luachra with polkas with Sliabh Luachra, the musical traditions of north Connacht are primarily associated with the reel. A form of polkas may also be associated with this region, notably demonstrated by the Leitrim flute player John McKenna who included a number of polkas in his recordings. In the introduction to a collection of recordings by John McKenna, Jackie Small notes that polkas were much more widely popular throughout the country in the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Regions are often presented as isolated and relatively free from outside influence.<sup>32</sup> However, Corcoran points out that the distinctiveness of Donegal music is not, as proposed by Feldman, due to its isolation and remoteness ‘but to its intimate interaction with urban centres (Scotland) and its love-affair with the 78 record’.<sup>33</sup> In her consideration of regional styles in Irish traditional music, O’Shea notes the selectivity of Feldman and O’Doherty when they were collecting music in northern counties<sup>34</sup> while in contrast Martin Tourish notes the presence of polkas in a manuscript collection of Donegal music, suggesting the presence of a more diverse repertoire in the soundscape of that region in the past than is typically imagined and

---

<sup>31</sup> Jackie Small, Sleeve notes for *Leitrim’s Master of the Concert Flute*, John McKenna (Drumkeerin, Co. Leitrim: The John McKenna Traditional Society, 1982), Audio Cassette, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Allen Feldman and Éamonn O’Doherty, *The Northern Fiddler* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1979), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Corcoran, ‘Concepts of regionalism in Irish traditional music’ in *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 56.

represented in the present.<sup>35</sup> An understanding of regions in Irish traditional music must understand the diversity and the multitude of influences from both within and beyond the region on the musical soundscape of the region.

A significant factor in the study of regions in Irish traditional music has been the increased diffusion and deterritorialization of Irish traditional music in the twentieth century. Facing the challenge concerning the relevance of a regional understanding of Irish traditional music, I borrow from the work of Emile Durkheim who, in response to his own critique of regionalism at the end of the nineteenth century, stated:

We do not mean that the territorial divisions are destined to disappear entirely, but only that they will become of less importance. The old institutions never vanish before the new leaving some trace of themselves. They persist, not only through sheer force of survival, but because there still persists something of the needs they once answered. The material neighbourhood will always constitute a bond between men; consequently, political and social organization with a territorial base will certainly exist. Only, they will not have their present predominance, precisely because this bond has lost its force.<sup>36</sup>

Irish traditional music continues to depend on social organisation even if the necessity of local social activity has been replaced by greater mobility and communication. The region is developed from the social fabric of the people that live there. Social relationships are integral to processes that construct place.<sup>37</sup> Music is part of the social culture of an area.<sup>38</sup> Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin emphasises the social aspect of music making in Irish traditional music stating: “Traditional music has to come out of an actual meeting of bodies in space, you know, people communicating and I think it

---

<sup>35</sup> Martin Tourish, ‘The James Tourish Collection: Its Stylistic Significance within its Cultural Context’, paper presented at the Society for Musicology in Ireland’s 2nd Postgraduate Students’ Conference, 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, (New York: Free Press, 1964, 1893, trans. 1933) 28.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Meegan, ‘Local Worlds’ in John Allen and Doreen Massey, eds, *Geographical Worlds* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1995)

<sup>38</sup> See John Lovering, ‘The Global Music Industry: Contradictions in the commodification of the sublime’ in Andrew Leyshon, George Revill and David Matless, eds., *The Place of Music* (New York, London: Guilford, 1998)

always has that immediacy and root and warmth as a result”.<sup>39</sup> However, Hazel Fairbairn’s assertion that the ‘intimate relationship between music, dance and social gathering, and their high profile in rural lifestyle, is the source of regional styles’<sup>40</sup> must be re-examined in the context of the enormous changes in the socio-spatial contexts of Irish traditional music and the dislocation of musical styles from their regions of origin. A regional understanding of Irish traditional music is important even if it is difficult to identify discernable regional styles of playing.

The role of economics as a motivating factor in the construction and representation of regional identities must also be considered. In a discussion on the development of ‘world music’ as a marketing category and acknowledging the impact of fusion and hybridity on identity and music, John Connell and Chris Gibson note:

The credibility of some musical styles and genres arises from their origins, their sites of production, evident in a number of possible ways: smaller locations, places off the beaten track, exclusion from capitalist growth, isolation and remoteness from hearths of industrial production or working-class communities. For world music, place is central to images and marketing strategies.<sup>41</sup>

Vallely presents a similar argument in the relevance of regional musical styles in Irish traditional music noting the commercial value of regional styles while also suggesting that few musicians perform in a regional style.<sup>42</sup> Recordings of Irish traditional music are often accompanied by images and narratives of place that aim to attract an audience while also contributing to the construction of regions in Irish traditional music.

---

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin. Cited in Nuala O’Connor, *Bringing it All Back Home: The Influence of Irish Music at Home and Overseas* (Dublin : Merlin, 2001), 3

<sup>40</sup> Hazel Fairbairn, ‘Changing contexts for traditional dance music in Ireland: The rise of group performance practice’ in *Folk Music Journal*, 6/5 (1994), 566-599: 577.

<sup>41</sup> John Connell and Chris Gibson, ‘World Music: Deterritorializing Place and Identity’ in *Progress in Human Geography* 28/3 (2004), 342-361: 353.

<sup>42</sup> Vallely, ‘The Migrant, The Tourist, The Voyeur, The Leprechaun...’ in *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music*, 114.

A difficulty presented by the empirical evidence presented in this article regarding the presentation of regional difference in Irish traditional music is the use of county boundaries in figures two through five. Cultural regions may be influenced by, though rarely defined by, topographical and administrative boundaries. Presenting a geographical perspective, David Grigg notes the problems presented by the concept of boundaries of regions, stating: 'If a region is thought to be a real entity then it must be presumed to have clear and determinable limits'.<sup>43</sup> The understanding of regions based on culture and heritage and the processes of diffusion of culture challenge the clear definition of boundaries in regions and demand a qualitative understanding of regions. Claudio Lomnitz-Adler stresses the importance of a historical understanding of the construction of boundaries by competing identity groups.<sup>44</sup> In a study of Appalachian music, Deborah J. Thompson writes:

Like the rest of space, regions are now conceived as multiple, shifting, and contingent, with porous boundaries if they are "bounded" at all. The processual, historically contingent nature of a region and its entanglement with various networks of social relations makes it hard to characterize or describe, as it is constantly changing and evolving, with different parts changing at different rates and continually forming new webs of connection.<sup>45</sup>

Regions in Irish traditional music may not be satisfactorily represented by lines on a map. As well as the musical soundscape, the role of people and social relations and the evolution of the region over time must be considered. Boundaries may be distinguished between social groups, musical styles and attitudes influenced by various power geometries, economics and the politics of history and memory.

In a critique of the concept of a borderless world, David Newman notes two approaches to the concept of borders – the notion that borders constitute 'process' as opposed to simply pattern, and the concept of borders as 'institution' which must be

---

<sup>43</sup> David Grigg, 'Regions, Models and Classes' in Richard Chorley and Peter Haggett, eds, *Models in Geography* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968), 478.

<sup>44</sup> Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, 'Concepts for the Study of Regional Culture' in *American Ethnologist*, 18/2 (1991), 195-214: 207.

<sup>45</sup> Deborah J. Thompson, 'Searching for Silenced Voices in Appalachian Music' in *GeoJournal* 65 (2006), 67-78: 67.

managed and perpetuated.<sup>46</sup> The presentation of borders as institution contrasts with the ‘physical lines which are simply the static and locational outcoming of the social and political decision-making process’.<sup>47</sup> The role of *Radió Éireann* and *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* in the social and political processes, as well as in the institutionalisation of regional boundaries in Irish traditional music is examined in this paper.

### **Evidence of regionalism in Irish traditional music**

Influenced by the approaches of the Berkeley School of Cultural Geography, Carney proposes that all cultures develop at a cultural hearth from where they are diffused.<sup>48</sup> These cultural hearths emerge through processes such as those outlined by Smyth – as a result of conquest, colonization and the occupation and shaping of land.<sup>49</sup> Irish traditional music has been conventionally associated with the rural west of Ireland and the identification of areas of Irish culture that developed with little influence from other cultures. Early collections, such as those by Petrie, show an imbalance in the geographical sources of music and, in the case of Petrie, betray his beliefs that Clare was the most authentic source of Irish traditional music (fig. 2).<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> David Newman, ‘The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in Our ‘Borderless’ World’ in *Progress in Human Geography*, 30/2 (2006), 143-161.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

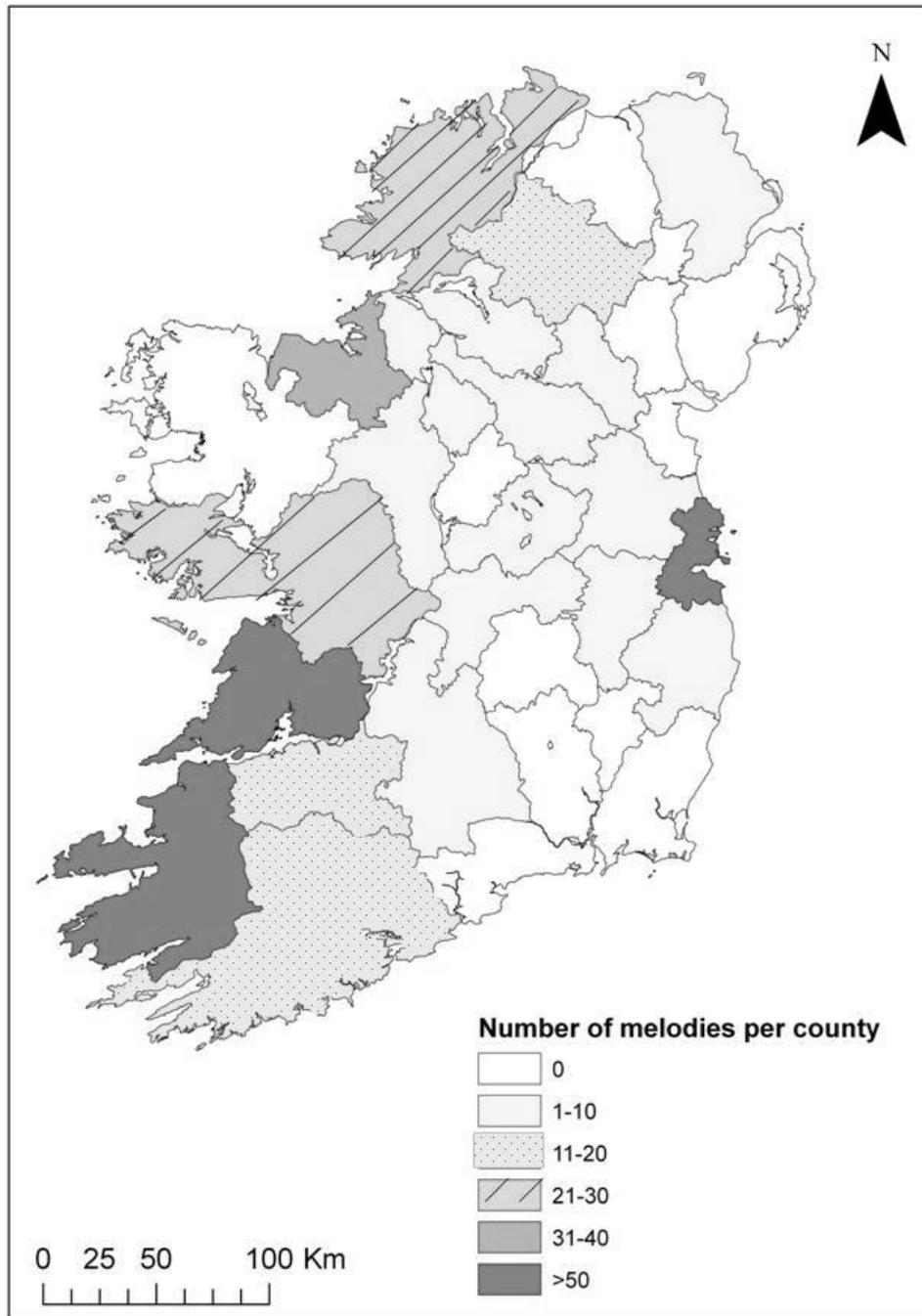
<sup>48</sup> George Carney, ‘Western North Carolina: Culture Hearth of Bluegrass Music’ in *Journal of Cultural Geography* 16 (1996), 65-87: 65.

<sup>49</sup> William J. Smyth, ‘The Making of Ireland: Agendas and Perspectives in Cultural Geography’; see also Smyth, *Map-making, landscapes and memory: A geography of colonial and early modern Ireland c. 1530-1750* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Breandán Breathnach, ‘Petrie and the music of Clare’ in *Dal gCais* 2 (Miltown Malbay, 1975), 63-71.



Figure 3: Source of melodies in *Ceol Rince na hÉireann II*<sup>52</sup>



<sup>52</sup> Using the list of sources given by Breathnach in the Appendix to *Craobh Rince na hÉireann II* (1976), the map represents the number of tunes per county included in the publication.

Music was part of the rural lifestyle of Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but the spaces for Irish traditional music have changed greatly. By the time of Breandán Breathnach's *Ceol Rince na hÉireann II*,<sup>53</sup> the pattern of music in Ireland has changed (fig. 3). Many musicians now reside in Dublin while influential figures such as Willie Clancy of West Clare and Denis Murphy of East Kerry provide a large proportion of tunes in the book. The existence of a new Dublin audience that sought a replacement for out of print collections was also a motivating factor in Breathnach's work.<sup>54</sup> In the introduction to the second volume of *Ceol Rince na hÉireann*, Carolan notes the inclusion of polkas and slides sourced primarily in Kerry, Cork and Limerick, as well as tunes from Donegal, 'which had not been part of Breathnach's world in the 1950s'.<sup>55</sup> The inclusion of this repertoire in Breathnach's collection both highlighted the depth of the tradition and fed the process of homogenisation.

The changing patterns presented in these publications represent both sound and circumstance. Rambling Houses made way for dance halls and later pub sessions and concert hall stages; fairs and markets in rural villages at which agricultural trade was central and music peripheral have been replaced by music festivals in larger towns celebrating the individual musicians and 'selling' music. Over time, Irish traditional music has moved from the rural periphery to urban centres throughout the country and has become a popular and commercial rather than an entirely folk culture.<sup>56</sup> Regions adopt Irish traditional music as an economic resource and regions of Irish traditional music, both new and 'discovered', have been largely neglected by research into the tradition.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Breandán Breathnach, *Ceol Rince na hÉireann II* (Dublin: The Department of Education, 1976).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Carolan, 'Preface' to Breandán Breathnach, *Ceol Rince na hÉireann IV* (Dublin: An Gúm, 1996), xii.

<sup>56</sup> In the introduction to *Baseball, Barns and Bluegrass* (1998) Carney defines folk culture as a culture that demonstrates stability and continuity and which is associated with an informal, personal, everyday lifestyle based on face-to-face communication. Irish traditional music exists in two forms, as an element of the folk culture of individuals and groups around the world and as part of a mass-produced, mechanized, media-conscious, popular culture.

<sup>57</sup> In *Traditional music: Whose music?* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, Queen University, Belfast, 1991) Paddy Glackin approaches the concept of a Dublin region of music. The success of the

Many of the social institutions connected with Irish traditional music, including record companies, radio stations and universities, are not focused on or located in isolated rural regions in the west of Ireland. However, conventional patterns still emerge as the ideologies and narratives of the tradition remain influenced by historical connections to established regions such as Sliabh Luachra, South Sligo and County Clare. Carney notes the importance of social institutions in providing ‘performance opportunities, repertoire exchanges and professional exposure for musicians to gain regional prominence and national recognition’.<sup>58</sup> In considering perceptions of regionalism in Irish music, Corcoran problematises the role of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* and *Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)* in highlighting particular people and places that distort the perceived geography of Irish traditional music. Valley also notes the role of *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* and the selectivity of *Raidió Éireann* on the geography of Irish traditional music, identifying the latter as ‘effectively Ciarán MacMathúna’s choice and Seán Ó Riada’s opinions respectively’.<sup>59</sup> As already highlighted, the spaces of the social network in Irish traditional music have evolved from the home, dancehall and public houses in the immediate neighbourhoods of the artists involved to a global, often urban based social network supported by political and economic motives. Increasingly musicians record albums, take part in competitions, travel to festivals of Irish music around the country, and appear on radio and television. These further strengthen the recognition of some

---

Temple bar Irish traditional music festival in Dublin city has begun to focus attention on a number of urban based traditional narratives with an alternative assemblage of characters. Gerry Quinn acknowledges the importance of regional styles and their principal exponents in the chronicles of Irish traditional music. Despite no discernable regional style, Gerry Quinn ‘Temple of Trad’ in *The Irish Examiner* 24th January 2007, acknowledges the importance of Dublin traditions stating: ‘The notion that Irish music is a rural phenomenon belies the fact that traditional music has prospered and flourished in Dublin for generations. Names like Tommy Potts, Leo Rowsome, Séamus Ennis, Tommy Reck and Sonny Brogan are legends of the tradition, and all hail from the capital city, or close by in Co. Dublin’. The chronicles of a Dublin tradition create a regional narrative whose structure closely resembles those of more established regions such as Sliabh Luachra but the socio-spatial conditions and historical development of Irish traditional music in Dublin differ greatly.

<sup>58</sup> Carney, *Baseball, Barns and Bluegrass*, 145

<sup>59</sup> Valley, ‘The Migrant, The Tourist, The Voyeur, The Leprechaun...’ in *Blas: The Local Accent in Irish Traditional Music*, 107.

regions of Irish traditional music. The regional imbalance in Irish traditional music is highlighted by an examination of some of these social institutions.

Ó Riada, amongst others, identified Michael Coleman as the single most influential figure in Irish traditional music.<sup>60</sup> His prominence in the early years of the recording of Irish traditional music influenced many musicians and brought attention to the region of South Sligo where he had learned much music and from where he had emigrated. At different times, recordings of particular individuals and groups have brought attention to and led to the identification of regions. Speaking on radio, Dan Herlihy, an accordion player from Sliabh Luachra, told the story of how he found out about ‘Sliabh Luachra’ in the 1970s:

Well you see when I left to go to England, there wasn't an awful lot of talk of Patrick Keffe at all or even Sliabh Luachra because, you won't believe this now but I was over in Dave Lythe's house one night and he said to me “I got this new ah thingame, this new ah, big round records, what do you call 'em, [Peter Brown: LPs], yes, ahm music from Munster he said, its from Sliabh Luachra”. And I said to him "where the hell is Sliabh Luachra?" you know and he said “it's on the Cork-Kerry border it says here on the thingame” and I said “who are the players?” and he said “Denis Murphy and Julia Clifford and Patrick” and sure I says “ah for Christ's sake sure that's where I come from”. But I didn't know the Sliabh Luachra before I left but ‘twas all Sliabh Luachra when I came home.<sup>61</sup>

Herlihy's memories reflect the historical and imaginative invention of Sliabh Luachra within the Irish traditional music community and emphasise the role of both the radio and visitors to the region including Séamus Ennis and Ciarán MacMathúna. The radio and a series of recordings released by Ossian entitled ‘Music from Sliabh Luachra’ were significant forces that shaped the environment in which Sliabh Luachra music and identity evolved, was diffused and imagined in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* presents an altogether different problem in the emergence, identification and perception of regions in Irish traditional music.

---

<sup>60</sup> Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, 53.

<sup>61</sup> Dan Herlihy interviewed on *The Rolling Wave*, RTÉ Radio 1, and 10th January 2007.

*Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* is an important, complex organisation, described by O’Shea as ‘a powerful agent in co-opting selected rural musical practices and repertoires to become “Irish traditional music”, emblematic of a unified national culture’.<sup>62</sup> Often critiqued for blurring regional variations in the tradition and encouraging the development of a homogenous sound, *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* has developed regional patterns of its own that feed into and influence the wider tradition.

Figure 4 Division of medal winners at *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2008*<sup>63</sup>

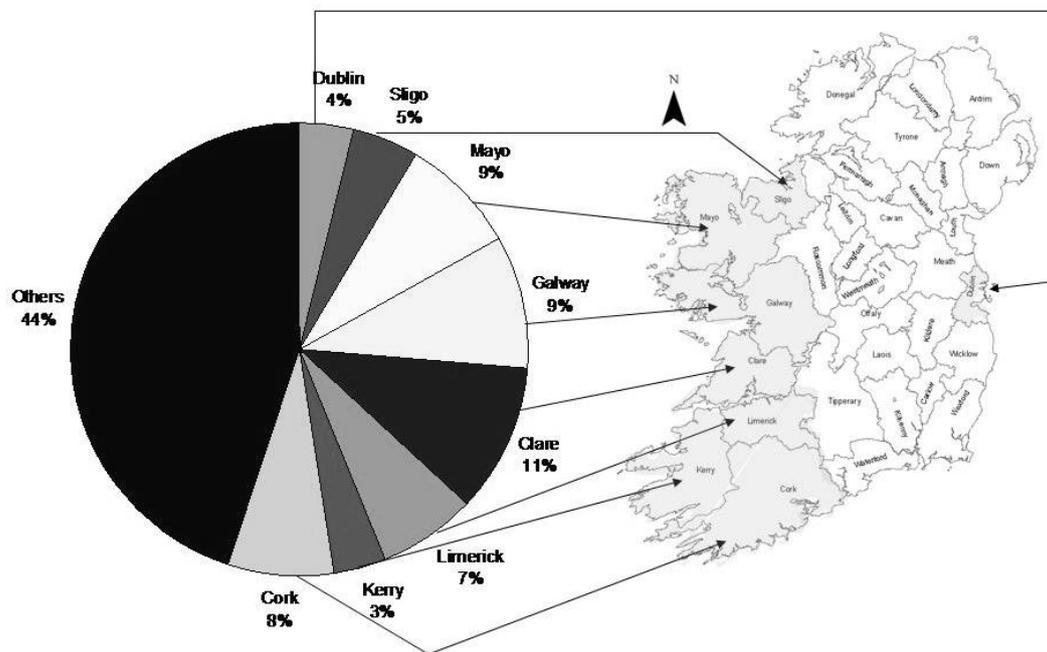


Figure four focuses on competitions at *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2008*. The chart shows those counties that won more than three per cent of medals. Over fifty per cent of the medals were won by competitors from the west of Ireland while Dublin is the only county represented not located on the west coast. Stronger branches of the organisation, particularly those with a large youth base, come to the fore at *Fleadh*

<sup>62</sup> O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, 145.

<sup>63</sup> Using the results of *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2008*, Figure 4 highlights the counties that achieved 3% or more of the medals awarded across all competitions.

*Cheoil na hÉireann*. These branches can themselves constitute a regional identity, if in some cases merely transitory, while many regions with strong local traditions are filtered out using this perspective.

The *fleadhanna* organised by *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* are one example of a festival in which local and regional identities of the location of the event are subsumed by the identity of the organisation. In some instances the *fleadh* provides an opportunity to recognise local traditions and individuals but this is much more explicit at events that are closely linked to their location and the individuals and social networks of that region. These include the Patrick O’Keeffe Festival in Castleisland during which the music and musicians of Sliabh Luachra are celebrated, though it must also be acknowledged that a great amount of music performed has little or no connection to the local musical soundscape or the legacy of Pádraig O’Keeffe.<sup>64</sup> These festivals also provide a space for new generations of musicians to express their local identity within a transitory music community space.

Radio and television programming have also constructed patterns of regional difference in Irish traditional music. In *Our Musical Heritage*, Ó Riada identified three regions of singing located in Connemara, West Kerry and East Cork/West Waterford. Ó Riada focused on a small number of regions in the instrumental music tradition. To the fore were Sligo, Clare and West Limerick/North Kerry. Ó Riada featured a number of musicians from Dublin, signalling the location of a musical activity in the capital. Ó Riada also recognised different traditions in west and east Clare and also makes reference to regions in Cork-South Kerry and Leitrim that he does not analyse.

---

<sup>64</sup> Pádraig O’Keeffe is the more popular version of the name of the Kerry fiddle master. Pádraig himself often signed his name in Irish as Pádraig Ó Caoimh but was better known in Castleisland town as Patrick Keffe. The variations in his name are similar commemorated in three monuments to O’Keeffe in Castleisland, Glounthane Cross and Scartaglen. See also, Matt Cranitch, 2006, *Pádraig O’Keeffe and the Sliabh Luachra Fiddle Tradition*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Limerick.

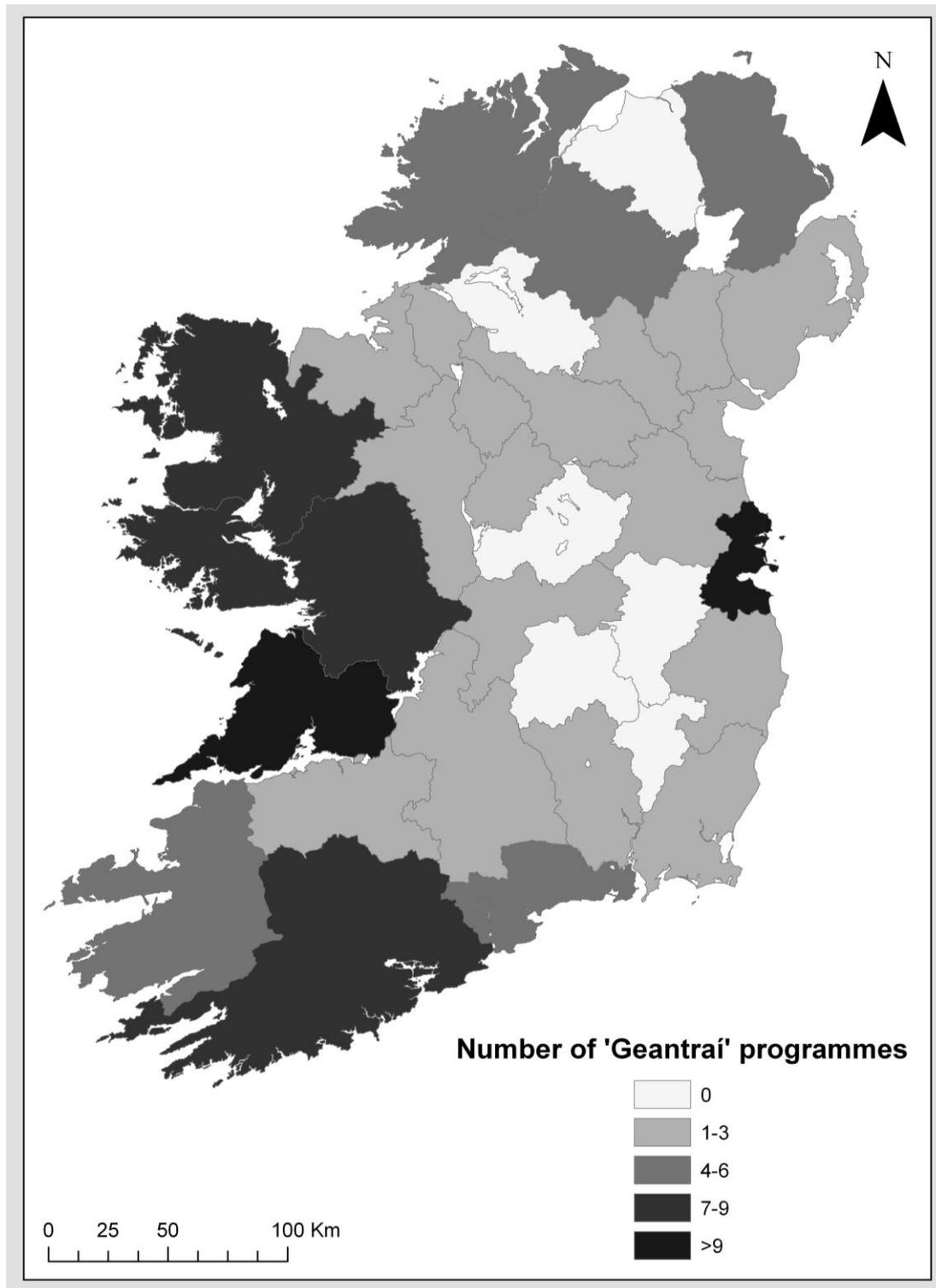
Figure 5 Map representing the regions considered by the television series *Caniúntí Cheoil*.<sup>65</sup>



<sup>65</sup> Figure 5 is a subjective representation by the author loosely demonstrating the regions considered in the television series *Caniúntí Cheoil* (2007).



Figure 7: Map representing the location of spaces used in the recording of *Geantraí*, produced by Forefront Productions for TG4.<sup>67</sup>



<sup>67</sup> Information on *Geantraí* was sourced from Forefront Productions and relates to programmes broadcast between 1997 and 2008.

In a process akin to that enacted by Ó Riada, the television series *Caniúntí Cheoil*, first broadcast between 30<sup>th</sup> September and 4<sup>th</sup> November 2007, presents a more limited account of regions in Irish traditional music that do not equate exactly to Ó Riada's model – Fermanagh being of particular note, especially in light of the publication in recent years of a book and CDs entitled 'Hidden Fermanagh'.<sup>68</sup> The series struggles in an attempt to make historical narratives relevant to contemporary music making. In contrast, the radio series *Céilí House* and television series *Geantraí* broadcast music and information about the living traditions of different places, often connected to public houses, festivals and other events. Both programmes attempt to present the music of as much of the country as possible but County Clare and Dublin City continue to emerge as popular locations for Irish traditional music. The material presented in each of these programmes is also problematic in consideration of their impact on the perception of regionalism in Irish traditional music.

Figure five illustrates the quantity of programmes of *Céilí House* and *Geantraí* from each county. The map concerning *Céilí House* considers where programmes were recorded between January 2004 and December 2008. There is an imbalance caused by *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* as a number of programmes are recorded in the host town each year. In the map presented, this affects counties Donegal and Offaly in particular. A number of archive programmes or programmes containing a mix of material from different areas are not included. In the case of programmes broadcast from studios in Dublin, if the programme is specifically concerned with a particular place, such as the desire to feature musicians from counties competing at the All-Ireland finals in gaelic football and hurling, this is represented. Repeat programmes are not included.

The map of *Geantraí*, first broadcast in 1997, considers the location of programmes in the first ten years. *Geantraí* began as a concept in response to a commission offered

---

<sup>68</sup> Cyril Maguire, *Hidden Fermanagh: Traditional Music and Song from County Fermanagh* (Monea, Fermanagh: Fermanagh Traditional Music Society, 2003); Cathal McConnell, producer, *A Hidden Fermanagh: Traditional music and songs from County Fermanagh Vol. 2* (Monea, Fermanagh: Fermanagh Traditional Music Society, 2004).

by RTÉ for the development of programming relating to Irish traditional music. Forefront productions, who were previously involved and continue to produce programmes on *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* for RTÉ, proposed a series based on capturing the pub session. The producers sought to identify public houses that were genuinely involved in the promotion of Irish traditional music in an area and not solely in existence to cater for a tourist market. *Geantraí* is an effort to present, as best as possible, real sessions from different parts of the country and, according to Joe McCarthy, was ‘very much a play on the regional aspect of traditional music’.<sup>69</sup> Two patterns emerge from a study of where *Geantraí* has been recorded. Venues in Dublin and Clare have hosted a significant number of programmes. In response to questions on Ennis and County Clare, McCarthy states:

There are so many venues, there are so many musicians there, and it’s natural when you are making television programmes that you end up in Clare more than anywhere else, but we try not to be, I mean we are conscious of that and we give Clare a rest for a year or two. We try and be as conscious as we can of going to a new place. And the same applies to musicians. We try to use new musicians.<sup>70</sup>

*Geantraí* provides an insight into the musicians and spaces of different parts of the country and features a mix of well known professional and local musicians. However, it must be noted that programmes do not confine the musicians featured to those that normally perform in the public house or town that the programme is being recorded in. *Geantraí* is a complex representation of regional soundscapes motivated by a desire to create good television and attract an audience. The geographical patterns that it presents or creates are challenged by the political economy in which Irish traditional music exists.

*Our Musical Heritage* acted as an introduction to regional diversity in Irish traditional music but was also an agent in the construction of regional identities in Irish traditional music. The people and places presented by Ó Riada influenced the connection between music and place in Irish traditional music, reinforced by cultural

---

<sup>69</sup> Joe McCarthy in interview with author, 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

nationalism's celebration of the west of Ireland, the commodification of Irish traditional music, and the growth of the tourist industry. More recent radio and television programmes perpetuate existing perceptions concerning the geography of Irish traditional music and, by presenting music as heritage, engage with the construction of regional identities in the present. Patterns in the levels of success achieved by competitors from different counties at *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* further contribute to the perception of geographies of Irish traditional music dominated by western counties with limited understanding of regional identities that transgress or exist within political and administrative boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

Ireland is an island of great regional diversity. Regional identities are shaped by the history and heritage of the regions and develop in different stages influenced by a variety of motivating factors. Irish traditional music is increasingly used in the construction and expression of regional identities and the politics of regional identity have led to the rediscovery of local musical heritage. However, there is an imbalance in understanding the musical traditions of the island with a particular focus on western counties and County Clare in particular. This may be related to the influence of cultural nationalism in the nineteenth century, the role of North Connacht based musicians in the American recording industry of the 1920s and 1930s, and tourism, radio and television from the 1950s. Empirical evidence also suggests that a geographical imbalance does exist but this imbalance is both under-theorized and under-researched.

The discourse on regions in Irish traditional music has conventionally focused on the performance of a regional musical style. The performance of musical style is increasingly a conscious choice on the part of performers, also influenced by the politics of identity and an increased interest in regional difference in the face of cultural homogenisation. Musical style has become deterritorialized. That does not necessitate a devaluation of a regional understanding of Irish traditional music. A new study of regions of Irish traditional music must consider regions as historically contingent processes that involve a variety of social, economic and spatial networks. The social, cultural and political environment in some parts of the country has

allowed regional identities in music to flourish at different times while other areas have been enveloped into a homogenous national tradition, adopting a national history without remembering local stories. Local stories, memories and sounds are part of the richness of Irish traditional music.

The application of Carney's framework does not succeed in addressing all aspects of the geography of Irish traditional music. The cultural landscape of Irish traditional music has been enhanced by a large number of monuments and statues, while the tourist industry has exerted a particular force on the sounds and environment of Irish traditional music and the development of regional identities. The various aspects of the construction of regions highlights the need for greater conceptual interrogation of regions in understanding Irish traditional music.