

water in motion, keeping the rhythm, changing the flow. Sarah accepted the attention of luminaries like Pete Seeger with equanimity, though in later years she would concede that their interest surprised her a bit, but she loved visitors. This is Jean Ritchie's recollection of their first meeting in 1952:

'It was like being at home in Kentucky when Sarah opened her door to us and welcomed us in. Neat as a pin, wearing an apron and not worried about that, smiling, outgoing, as though we were close neighbors dropping in.'

'Sarah immediately put the kettle on, then seated us near the kitchen table...while she got the big bacon slab onto a sideboard, cutting slices and, when the talking dwindled, went about making the tea, frying the bacon and tomatoes, singing and humming all the while...'

'I could see that her family was very important to her, as was her home and her place in the community. She valued her place there, and her main love besides her nearest and dearest was the music...a wondrous accompaniment to the series of events, hardships, sorrows and joys which made up her life.'

Liam Clancy's account of those evenings spent in Sarah's house conjures up a lively and happy, if slightly chaotic, scene:

'Peter, the man of the house, with his pipe and fiddle... and Jack, his son...Ann Jane Kelly, the neighbour, with a perpetual fag bigger than herself, shouting, 'Make the tay, make the tay.' Tommy, the youngest son...and the girls hustling and bustling, making pots of tea and

'She represented a way of life that is vanishing. It was nothing to do with going out to perform in the big concert halls. People came to her to learn and listen. She was held in that sort of awe'

Ciaran Carson

cutting cake...and they all buzzing around the queen bee herself, Sarah Makem, as she sat placid in the eye of the hurricane.'

Liam acknowledges his debt to Sarah's 'vast store of songs', and is sure of her place in the canon of greats, but reflects that today's society could neither produce nor sustain another such as she - 'Because there's no one to listen,' he says.

But there's always someone to listen, even if it takes a while to understand why we should. One Keady resident says,

'When we were young we thought people like Sarah were daft for singing those old songs, but sure it's easy to sing the songs that everybody likes. What Sarah did was to go on singing the old songs when there was nobody to appreciate them.'

Besides love songs and romantic ballads, many of Sarah's songs grew out of local incidents, or were songs of loss, poverty, and harsh experience; and there was a time when we as a nation wanted to forget these things and move on. Now we understand that these experiences made us what we are today, and we finally have enough self-esteem to celebrate them for what they are: a record of a people in the making.

Sarah is beginning to get the credit she deserves, but full recognition is still a while off. Maybe the time is ripe for a Sarah Makem Summer School to celebrate the importance of the song tradition in preserving our links to the past, so that we might face the future with new confidence.

A full case study compiled by Aileen D'Arcy on Sarah Makem can be downloaded from our website: www.sagp.org

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SARAH MAKEM

1900 – 1983



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Sarah Makem was born, lived, and died, in County Armagh, and spent hardly any time away from it, yet her name today is as revered in the world of folk music as that of Jean Ritchie, Pete Seeger, or Bob Dylan, for what Sarah did was sing, thereby preserving a priceless legacy of songs. She was an ordinary woman with an extraordinary gift, whose legacy might have been lost forever had it not been for the burgeoning interest in folk music in the middle of the last century that brought her into the public eye.



She was born with the century, at High Street, Keady, the daughter of Tommy Boyle and Margaret Greene, and as soon as she was old enough to leave school, she went to work in one of the linen mills that thronged the lush valleys of the Clay and the Callan. Sarah was a weaver, tiring, tedious work, and the songs that she and her workmates sang as they walked to and from work, and even in the cacophony of the mill itself, were a lifeline. A new song was a priceless gift, for music, in some subliminal fashion, could always lift the heart.

Music was in Sarah's genetic blueprint, and many songs came from her mother and grandmother, as well as travellers from England or Scotland, and the radio or gramophone records. She only had to hear a song once to remember it perfectly, and once she learned a song she never altered or amended it. Singing was more natural to her almost than speaking, part of the fabric of her life rather than something she did at certain times or in certain circumstances; and she never wrote an original song.

David Hammond considered her to be one of the best traditional singers in the world, the voice pitched low, assured, lyrical, and celebratory, but she didn't see herself as a woman with a mission; Sarah simply loved to sing.

Her siblings emigrated to New England, finding work in the cotton mills in Dover, New Hampshire, and, as each one made a bit of money, they would send home for the next in line,

enclosing the fare. By the time it came to Sarah, she had met Peter Makem from Derrynoose, and the two young lovers decided to stay at home and get married, rather than waste good money on the journey to America. Sarah set about rearing her own family: Jack, Mona, Peggy, Nancy, and Tommy. She was rooted in the traditions of her native place, believed in folk cures, knew how to wash and lay out a corpse, and she loved to read. She knew all that was happening in the area, and the wider world as well, for she listened to the radio, and hers was one of the first houses to have a television set. She was a good cook, and very houseproud; and she used to do a bit of sewing on an old treadle sewing machine - naturally enough, a Singer. But no matter what activity was going on around her, Sarah went on singing, an accompaniment or counterpoint to the events of her life. She was also a woman of strong Christian principles, completely unaffected, perhaps even unattracted, by the trappings of fame, and the over-riding impression is of a bright, kindly woman with a sense of humour. She took great delight in singing to aggravate, and if she got a red-hot Republican within earshot she would let rip with a rousing Orange ditty, but if Dr. Dorman came by, she would sing the most fiery rebel song she knew!

Husband Peter was an accomplished musician, playing the fiddle, the flute, and the drum, when he wasn't working as a scutcher, and Tommy Makem recalls his father sitting slightly off-



side vis-à-vis the action during recording sessions, not over-awed though maybe a bit bemused by all the attention, smoking and tapping his pipe to the rhythm of the songs when he wasn't called upon to play. Between them the couple fostered an atmosphere in which music thrived, and those who valued it found a ready welcome.

Sarah's voice reached an audience beyond musicologists and collectors when her rendition of *As I Roved Out* was used as the theme tune for the radio programme of the same name in the early 1950s, but Sean O'Boyle had recognised what a rich vein he had tapped when he started to record her songs. She never wrote any of them down, but she reckoned that she could rattle off four hundred or more without effort, and when folk from both sides of the Atlantic started turning up at her door eager to hear her sing, people around her, including her son Tommy, began to appreciate them too.

Tommy had made the acquaintance of the young Liam Clancy when he came to Keady with American Diane Hamilton to record Sarah in 1952, and, as half of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, they incorporated many of Sarah's songs into their programme; but their success and her growing celebrity flowed along in tandem rather than piggy-backing off each other. Tommy came across a cassette tape of Sarah Makem's Ulster ballads that yielded three songs he had never heard her sing, including *The Butcher Boy*, a very fine ballad that he has performed many a time since. The fortuitous combination of Sarah's talent for remembering and Tommy's talent for performing has brought such songs to audiences worldwide. Sometimes she might only have a verse or two of a song, and then Tommy would embellish it, write a few new verses, or splice it with another song of a similar theme. In this way the tradition never becomes stale, but is like