



***Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia.* Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 361 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4696-1822-7. \$39.95.**

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It has become an article of faith for many North Americans (especially white anglophones) that the pedigree of modern country-western music is “Celtic.” The logic seems run like this: country-western music emerged among people with a predominance of Scottish, Irish, and “Scotch-Irish” ancestry; Scotland and Ireland are presumably Celtic countries; ballads and the fiddle seem to be the threads of connectivity between these musical worlds; therefore, country-western music carries forth the “musical DNA” of Celtic heritage.

The new volume *Wayfaring Strangers* will provide comfort to those who wish to believe in this origin myth. It sets out to retrace the migration of people from Scotland to the north of Ireland in the seventeenth century and onwards to Appalachia in the eighteenth, and the forms of cultural expression – particularly music – that accompanied them on these voyages or were the product of these experiences. It narrates the stages of these migrations, citing snippets of song and historical documents that comment on the contemporary experiences of migrants, and integrates interviews with popular musicians and scholars who have worked on various aspects of this historical and musical legacy. The text is peppered with inset sections that cover tangential areas of interest including: instruments (such as the harp, fiddle and bagpipes), ethnic groups (such as the Celts and travelling people), and collectors and editors of material (such as Robert Burns and Walter Scott).

The result is a handsome volume that is amply illustrated with a story that is generally well told. It even includes a CD containing a selection of the songs discussed in the book. Orr and Ritchie have been involved in popularizing contemporary forms of folk music in the United States for decades now and they know their audience well. As enthusiasts and proponents of folk music, rather than as scholars trained to handle the complex range of subjects and fields that this study entails, however, the authors fall far short of modern academic standards. Indeed, they indulge in serious historical, cultural and ethnomusicological fallacies (sometimes recycled from obsolete works) which deserved to be addressed, particularly as this volume may give these misrepresentations a new lease on life and invest them with additional credibility.

The question of how to characterize the ethnicity and cultural milieu of the Scotch-Irish (and their component groups and successors) is a complex one indeed but the authors do not provide a suitable framework for that discussion in this work. Rather than exploring the role of language, social institutions and the circumstances of geography and politics in shaping or inhibiting particular cultural characteristics and musical forms, the authors assume too much about the essential and unchanging makeup of their subjects, dangerously echoing the rhetoric of racialism. They declare, for example, “With an eye on the next destination and a wayfaring tendency seemingly encoded in their DNA, Scots had been in a collective state of perpetual motion since the Middle Ages” (63).

Assuming an inherently conservative tradition allows them to claim that Appalachian music can be detected at the very genesis of the ancient kingdom of Scotland among its Gaelic founders: “This national birth also marks a cultural point of origin as the very deepest root of the music we will follow back through Ireland and beyond to the New World” (19). How this is possible is never explained, given that the volume concerns itself with anglophone music traditions rather than those of any Celtic language.

The ill-judged invocation of the term “Celtic” is emblematic of the book’s mishandling of ethnic and cultural categories. In the foreword, for example, Dolly Parton says that on a previous album she and her producer “wanted to show the close connection of Celtic music from Scotland, Ireland, England and Wales with what became bluegrass, country, and old-timey mountain music” (x).

There has been so much scholarship produced since the 1990s questioning the meaning of the ethnonym “Celtic” by everyone from Iron Age archaeologists to contemporary ethnomusicologists that anyone with an active curiosity and access to a university library would have to deliberately avoid confronting the reams of articles and books that have wrestled with these issues. The introduction to a recent and comprehensive encyclopedia of Celtic culture reflects on this, for example, asserting:

In the wake of this episode of ‘Celtoscepticism’, the relatedness and common origins of the Celtic family of languages remain unchallenged scientific facts, and the name ‘Celtic’ for this family – given that all such terms are ultimately arbitrary – is no more misleading or historically unjustified than such well-established and undisputed terms as, say, ‘Germanic’ or ‘Semitic’. On the other hand, the idea that certain types of non-linguistic culture – such as artefacts in the La Tène style – can be meaningfully described as ‘Celtic’ now requires greater circumspection (Koch 2006: xx).

In other words, language is a strong determinant of culture and key aspects of culture are embedded in, transmitted by, and negotiated through language and verbal genres. The notion that territory, genes or emotional states can be treated as markers of Celticity has been rejected by all serious scholars trained in the field. Orr and Ritchie have ignored the protests of traditional music communities themselves on these issues. Scott Reiss writes, for example:

Many critics contest the use of the term Celtic because it erases the boundaries between Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Breton traditional musics. This criticism is both right and

justified. Most Irish traditional musicians, and those people connected to the traditional music community, do not recognize Celtic as a musical category, referring to it as a “non-category” or “the C word.” The conflation of Irish, Scottish, and other styles enacted by the phrase “Celtic music” contradicts the local, regional, and national associations embodied in the music and its performance (Reiss 2003: 145).

There is only one short section that attempts to explain what the ethnonym “Celt” can or should mean and how it relates to other ethnolinguistic categories (18-19), but it is not well crafted and is more likely to confuse than to enlighten. After erroneously claiming that the Romans pushed the Celts westward into the Atlantic zone, they assert, “Not surprisingly, the idea of a Celtic legacy is strongest in the windswept outposts of these regions, and each has its own distinct language, dialect, and customs, including songs and musical instruments” (18). What is the difference between a dialect and a language? When did these linguistic forms, song genres and musical instruments evolve? No explanation is offered, even though these issues are essential for understanding social and musical history.

Ethnonyms, especially for the various branches of the Celts, are used inconsistently and inaccurately, leading one to believe that these fundamental issues have eluded the authors. The Scottish Borders are supposed to have been bullied by Highlanders, who in fact lived too far north to be a threat, and the communities of the Borders are described in perplexing categories: “To complicate matters, the people were of mixed ancestry, social status, and religion – a combination of Scottish Celts and Picts, with influences of ancient Britons, Anglo-Saxons, and Irish all contributing to their identity” (45). These are, in reality, overlapping ethnic classifications and it is not clear if the authors think that these diverse origins complicated matters for people historically or merely for those trying to find simplistic categories for them today.

The traps surrounding the “Celtic” label that await the unprepared are also evident in the volume’s attempt to explain the origins of the bagpipe and its place in musical history. It claims that the ancient Celts brought the bagpipe to Greece and Rome, and that the Romans then likely brought it to Scotland. The source for this curious claim is not given, but it is not in line with contemporary scholarship. Although it does seem likely that some sort of reed aerophone was played in Gaelic regions in the early medieval era, the bagpipe as we now define it was developed in urban, continental Europe and introduced to Ireland and Scotland in the High Middle Ages at the earliest, as Hugh Cheape’s recent definitive study about the instrument in the British Isles substantiates.

The bagpipe has been identified with so-called ‘Celtic’ culture and a reputation formed in its performance of significant northern regional musical traditions. Historically, however, an association with ‘Celtic’ Europe is only recent and the term ‘Celtic’ has been submitted to critical scrutiny by British scholars who stress that it refers only to language rather than other cultural forms. ... In the wider Europe, the bagpipe appears to have spread rapidly [from the European continent] in the circumstances of what historians have called the ‘Twelfth Century Renaissance’ when towns and town life, trade and trade routes developed dramatically, and music circulated as part of a minstrel and troubadour culture in the 12th and 13th centuries (Cheape 2008: 1, 29).

The claim that “by the fifteenth century the bagpipes displaced the harp as the instrument of choice” (37) is misguided in terms of both chronology and character. The bagpipe had probably just arrived in Gaeldom in the fifteenth century for the purposes of sending signals for battle and did not find widespread acceptance among the Gaelic élite (who were the community gatekeepers) as a musical instrument until the seventeenth century. Even once this was accomplished, the bagpipe and clàrsach co-existed well into the eighteenth century by occupying different functional niches (Newton and Cheape 2008).

In an inset section discussing prose narratives, it is erroneously claimed that modern Appalachian storytellers “like Sheila Kay Adams and Bobby McMillan can recite countless Celtic or Old English stories and their variants from memory” (187). This again begs the question of what is meant by “Celtic,” or indeed by “story,” in this declaration. There are hardly any plot structures that scholars agree survive from a proto-Celtic heritage nor are there any characters or narrative elements in Appalachian oral narratives that derive specifically from Gaelic tradition (despite whatever ancestral connections modern tradition bearers may have). If the authors are referring to migratory tales or motifs that can be found all over the world (such as the Märchen genre), including Celtic communities, they have misapprehended the applicability of the label “Celtic.” They also invoke the title “seannachie” (it is misspelled in the book: it should be spelled “seanchaidh”), but mistakenly conflate the original function of the seanchaidh as professional custodian of historical lore with the modern vernacular storytellers who include tales understood as fictional in their repertoire. The definition of “bard” (291) is similarly defective.

Had the authors actually been interested in the historical contributions of Celtic peoples to the legacy of song-poetry of Ulster (or in the British Isles generally), we would expect a discussion somewhere in the volume of the sophisticated and precocious Gaelic literary tradition, the earliest vernacular voice to emerge in Western Europe and the strongest manifestation of continuity for communities that still speak a Celtic language. The book avoids even mentioning the subject. The only song tradition that it deals with is the anglophone Child Ballad genre (named for Harvard scholar Francis James Child) and its origin among medieval Francophone minstrels. It seems plausible for the book to assert that the Child Ballad forms the bedrock of the Appalachian song tradition, but if the history of literature (whether in prose or song-poetry form) of the British Isles is to be told in its fullness, particularly from a “Celtic” perspective, it cannot leave out such significant elements of tradition, especially as they intersect with many aspects of the heritage that the book purports to investigate. Such omissions of knowledge lead them to assert, for example, that the singing of hymns only came to the British Isles with the Norman invasion of 1066 (209), whereas hymns comprise some of the earliest textual items that survive in the Gaelic language, going back as far as the seventh century (although there are references to Gaelic hymns being sung as early as the sixth century).

Providing the appropriate frame of reference is paramount for work of this nature, and it is easy for modern assumptions to be projected anachronistically onto the past, thereby obscuring the most relevant lens through which it can be understood. The most serious flaw of the volume is that it chooses to comprehend history through the identities of modern nation-states – Scotland, Ireland, and England – rather than through the more relevant framework of ethnolinguistic culture groups. Whether a community spoke a form of Gaelic or a form of

English was more fundamental to their sense of identity, to their connectivity to other communities, and to the forms of cultural expression that they practiced than what king or government claimed sovereignty over their territory. This error in judgement leads the authors to make generalizations about Scots and Irish (and their presumed associated cultures) based on anglophone materials and to overlook the relevance of such sources to the substantial Gaelic populations and territories of these regions during this era.

This shortcoming has important consequences relating to the song tradition that forms the focus of the book. The “Scottishness” of the Child Ballads is stressed numerous times (especially 44, 176, and 180-82), yet this classification by nationality belies the fact that they are the product of an anglophone literary tradition – whether based in England or Lowland Scotland – with close analogues elsewhere in Western Europe, apart from Gaeldom. This point needs to be stressed. Despite geographical proximity and circulation further afield, the Gaelic communities of Scotland and Ireland did not, on the whole, welcome or create local variants of the Child Ballads. One of the very few exceptions to this rule, “Barbara Allen,” is included in its Irish form on the accompanying CD but this solitary example gives the false impression of widespread cultural cross-pollination. The Gaels spurned the Child Ballads because they had their own heroic ballads which enjoyed strong popularity into the nineteenth century that were more redolent of Gaelic cultural values and aesthetics (a musical-literary genre unfortunately ignored in *Wayfaring Strangers*). Hugh Shields covers this topic in his definitive study of narrative song in the Gaelic tradition of Ireland, which he extends easily into Gaelic Scotland:

It is hardly surprising that the ballad genre reached Ireland through Britain, though some medieval European poetry perhaps took more direct routes to the more distant island. Given moreover the special cultural characteristics of Gaelic society and its conservative attachment to native genres, it is not very surprising that the ballad acquired no idiomatic Gaelic forms, in Scotland any more than Ireland. ... The old ballad remained generally foreign to Gaelic and seems to have exerted, in both Ireland and Scotland, only a diffuse influence on its speakers. Only two English ballads seem to have gone into Irish retaining something of the ballad character (Shields 1993: 40, 55).

Orr and Ritchie attempt to bring the Gaels of the Highlands into the production of Child Ballads in Scotland (34-35), and assert that Scottish Gaelic songs influenced Ulster’s pre-migration musical tradition (80), but there is no evidence to demonstrate any substantial impact of this nature.

The authors are mistaken to assume repeatedly that the forms of social dance and related music (particularly as played on the fiddle) which we now associate with Irish and Scottish vernacular tradition were fully formed by the time of the eighteenth-century migrations (76, 84 and 232). They are sometimes even asserted to exist centuries beforehand (11, 28, 32, 81 and 193). Although Orr and Ritchie seem to depict the eighteenth century as a whole as the “Golden Age of Scottish Fiddling” (29), in fact only the last two decades of the eighteenth century and the first two of the nineteenth centuries can be described this way, well after most Ulster Presbyterians had already left the British Isles for North America. The authors would have been wise to heed the advice of Peter Gilmore (cited elsewhere in the book), who has sounded a note of caution about taking too much for granted about any early Scotch-Irish musical identity:

...the movement of musical and lyrical ideas takes place not only spatially, north and south, east and west and back again, but also in time. Assumptions about the nature of the Scots-Irish and therefore their influence on traditional American music ultimately rest on the assumption of an undifferentiated, essentialist ethnic identity unaffected by this space-time matrix (Gilmore 2011).

Rather than being an essentially Celtic, Scottish, or Irish musical phenomenon, as presumed by this book, social dance music was a popular, international form of entertainment that entered a vacuum left by the collapse of the native Gaelic order. It thus marks a significant departure from, rather than continuity with, the older Celtic traditions.

Irish traditional music is not the product of an isolated island population. Rather, it derives from a rich history of musical exchange with European music, especially popular dance music. This was music demanded and appreciated by urban Irish audiences from the eighteenth century to the present. As Seán Connolly points out in his study of pre-Famine Irish society, travelers' accounts from eighteenth-century Ireland chronicle the movement of popular European dances and the music that accompanied them from the urban centers of Ireland where they made their first appearance to the more rural areas of Ireland (Smith 2003: 105).

These new forms of cultural expression were filtered through the local aesthetics of each region that participated in this new fashion and the creativity of the individual performers there. As Phil Jamison (interviewed in *Wayfaring Strangers*, p. 291) has pointed out elsewhere, building upon the work of Alan Jabbour (also interviewed in the volume, pp. 235, 238-9 and 291), the musical and choreographic lineage is not so much "pure" and vertical, but hybrid and horizontal.

While Southern fiddling is often thought of as a direct descendent of an old Anglo-Celtic musical tradition, as folklorist and musician Alan Jabbour has pointed out, the regional fiddle styles of the British Isles and America are more like "cultural cousins" of the same generation. These traditions developed concurrently during the second half of the eighteenth century, and while they have shared ancestry, they are distinctly different. ... The hoedowns, reels, and frolics of Appalachia likewise were not pure survivals of an ancient Anglo-Celtic heritage, locked away in isolation, but a constantly evolving folk tradition that incorporated elements of recently popular social dances with the older traditions (Jamison 2015: 50, 19).

The authors also imply that strathspey reel tunes from the Highlands were adopted in Donegal (where they are typically known as "highlands") centuries ago (30, 32 and 234) when in fact the Donegal variants of strathspeys are a nineteenth-century development, making them irrelevant for understanding the Scotch-Irish heritage of Appalachia.

To be fair to the authors, the book attempts to deal with an extremely complex and convoluted set of topics that require an inter-disciplinary approach, including ethnomusicology, history, literature, anthropology and sociology. The immediate success of the volume in terms of sales demonstrates that there is popular demand among the North American public to address

this legacy, but it is a shame that Orr and Ritchie were unable or unwilling to integrate excellent recent scholarship into their account that would have addressed the shortcomings I have discussed in this review essay. There are a slew of other errors of a similar nature that would need to be corrected before *Wayfaring Strangers* could be considered a reliable account of the subject. It is surprising moreover that the reputable academic press that published the volume did not undergo the requisite due diligence process with the text so as to identify and rectify the many conceptual and factual errors that plague it, even if scholars in the North American academy that specialize in these subjects are thin on the ground.

The dogged persistence of Orr and Ritchie in characterizing the anglophone cultural expressions of Appalachia as “Celtic,” despite the reservations and skepticism of many of their sources, leads to the suspicion that one of their goals – whether conscious or unconscious – is to appropriate the concept in order to cash in on the contemporary cachet of the term and to imbue “mountain culture” with an archaic pedigree that does not properly belong to it. This exercise also serves to legitimize the forms of popular anglophone culture with which the authors are involved personally.

I have a great deal of sympathy for the authors’ stance that it is better for communities to create and participate in their own forms of cultural expression rather than to consume products passively that have been produced by others, especially when those communities have been marginalized by the mainstream (xvi-xv and 270-84). It is ironic, however, that the appropriation of the term “Celtic” and the silence of real Celtic-speaking communities serves not only to mischaracterize Appalachian traditions but to further disenfranchise communities that actually speak Celtic languages from their own cultural assets.

A few years ago Pádraigín Ní Uallacháin published an extensive study of the native song-poetry of one of the regions of Ulster. In the volume’s introduction, she describes the value of the Gaelic literature of the province and the degree to which this tradition has been concealed and sequestered:

For too long the story of the southeast Ulster Gaelic song and literary tradition has been a secret – a hidden world – accessible only to those who could speak and read the Irish language, that is, to people like myself whose home language was Irish and whose parents had made a commitment in the hope that their children might have a greater understanding of the life-enhancing tradition from which they came and which it was their right to know. ... My aim in writing this book is to tell the story and, as a singer, to make these songs accessible again so that they will find a voice once more in a wider community. They tell us a wealth about the human heart, about the people who made them, the times in which they lived and the traditions of their communities (Ní Uallacháin 2003: 15, 16).

Even though Orr and Ritchie interviewed Ní Uallacháin’s husband Len Graham for *Wayfaring Strangers* and their goals and methods are very similar to Ní Uallacháin’s for the same region, the rich vein of material she has collected and the insights she has gleaned from it remain hidden in their account of the cultural life of Ulster. It is to be hoped that future scholars take better account of the Gaelic legacy if they decide to appeal to the idea of Celticity and that

the anglophone musical and scholarly traditions will not remain the dominant beneficiaries of the interest in the Scottish and Irish diaspora in North America.

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