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Farewell to Erin: Oral Histories of Post-War Irish Music & Migration

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Ph.D. dissertation abstract

Between 1945 and 1970 over 665,000 men and women left Ireland for destinations across the globe. This study focuses on the society they left and the two primary receiving countries, the United States and Great Britain, with particular reference to the cities of London, New York, Chicago, and Boston. Using transnational and comparative historical analysis, I examine the Irish communities in those locales and movements and connections between them. Traditional music acts as a case study of the role of cultural practices and the ways they shaped and reflected ethnic identities. The main sources utilized are forty-one original oral history interviews with musicians and singers who emigrated between 1945 and 1970. A selection of these appears in the accompanying digital archive, 'Voices of Irish Music & Migration'. In addition, existing archival collections and published memoirs reveal diverse and evolving attitudes towards music in Ireland and across the diaspora. The unique significance of these sources is their insights into personal experiences and the meaning given to them in life stories. In the context of social and cultural history, they offer a window into the making of a generation.

Chapter 1 addresses methodological approaches to oral history and the creation of a digital archive. The structure of the remaining chapters follows the migrants' life course. Chapter 2 examines Irish society and culture in the period in which the interviewees grew up, a necessary consideration because it shaped their outlook and later experiences. The Irish in the United States and Great Britain in the post-war era are the subjects of Chapters 3 and 4. Both assess the nature of those varied communities and offer points of comparison on the themes of work, class, gender, social life, ethnicity, and culture. Together they support the argument that in America, post-war Irish migrants had to negotiate expectations, not only of the host society, but of earlier generations and their descendants in defining the ethnic group; while in Britain the post-war generation were able to define the group by virtue of their larger numbers, but they found themselves marginalized within British society. Chapter 5 examines migrants' changing attitudes to Ireland and the question of return migration in a life story context. As a whole, this dissertation argues that while each individual has a unique story, examining music and its social contexts provides insights into their points of connection and varied experiences.