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Thérèse Smith (ed.), *Ancestral Imprints – Histories of Irish Traditional Music and Dance*

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REFERENCES

Thérèse SMITH (ed.), *Ancestral Imprints – Histories of Irish Traditional Music and Dance*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2012, xv + 245 p., ISBN 978-1-85918-492-9.

- 1 This collection of 13 essays, mostly by practicing musician-scholars, is an examination of a wide range of collections, recordings and art works, both in Ireland and in the USA, asking one intriguing question: “how did modern technology contribute to our understanding of this, our tradition”.
- 2 The editor, Thérèse Smith, is an Associate Professor at the UCD School of Music with a wide variety of interests in ethnomusicology, from African American music to Irish traditional music. Unfortunately, there is no information on the authors, although some names will be familiar to Irish trad enthusiasts.
- 3 The book itself is divided into 4 fairly balanced parts – 19th-century manuscript collections, the Diaspora, Recordings, and Songs – with 12 pages of notes, 13 pages of bibliography, an index of songs and tunes, an index of names and numerous illustrations.
- 4 The rather cryptic dual title of the book might suggest a global exploration of musical practices in Ireland, but what we are offered here is rather a chronological analysis of the documentation of Irish music and dance, mostly *via* primary sources, all articles aiming at a better understanding of processes of change within the tradition, a concept too often overlooked in Ireland since the 19th century in favour of a more conservative outlook.

- 5 From 19th century manuscripts to 20th century sound recordings by amateurs, from Ireland to the USA, from the deconstruction of past collections to personal experience, from P.W. Joyce to Chief O’Neil and Seán Ó Riada, from *sean-nós* singing in Kilronan to harp playing in Dublin, from competitions at *An Oireachtas* to the Eurovision Song Contest, from local sensitivities to global tastes, most articles conscientiously revisit the stiffened and unifying vision of Irish music, envisaging a refreshing and long-term approach of the concept of evolution in traditional music and dance.
- 6 This is completed by framing essays by two respected outsiders, Susan Ziegler and Philip V. Bohlman, respectively with a history of Richard Henebry’s wax cylinder collection between Ireland, Germany and Russia, and with a panorama of Irish music “at the edge of history”.
- 7 The tone of the articles is highly readable, generally clear and convincing, with a special mention for several authors, among whom O’Brien-Moran and his analysis of early American recordings of *uilleann* pipers and their influence on Irish piping styles (although he fails in my view to define precisely what he means by “American style”). Daithi Kearney’s seriously substantiated conclusion that Seán Ó Riada’s “Our Musical Heritage” is an “unreliable guide to Irish Traditional Music” will also make for a very enjoyable read for those of us who could never comprehend the musical guru’s very restrictive vision of tradition. Finally, Helen Lawlor’s analysis of the commodification of the “neo Irish harp” should receive special praise for a challenging and positive approach to harp playing in the 1950s and 1960s.
- 8 However, the quasi absence of the Internet as a vector of tradition is quite baffling in a scholarly volume whose introduction starts with the words “Over the past two decades, two main trends that have come to the forefront of a variety of disciplines [...] have been history and memory”.
- 9 Overall, the aims of the book are easily achieved via a vast array of sources from multiple geographical settings over a period of a century and a half, and it should be regarded as an essential read for whoever feels Irish Cultural Studies deserve more books challenging established truths.

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