

# Two Emigrant Experiences, Happy and Otherwise

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Emigrants to North America composed many songs about their experiences, and none more so than the Irish. Some of these songs made their way back to the old country, while some did not. As a descendent of immigrants, a slight plurality of them Irish (including the most recent, a great-grandfather), I've always been interested in songs of emigration, especially positive ones – I like to imagine my ancestors being happy with their choice!

Unfortunately, this was not the case with the protagonist of “By the Hush”, who had the bad luck to land in the middle of the American Civil War and was drafted into that conflict. To my knowledge, O.J. Abbott's version (which he sang to Edith Fowke) is the only North American source, and overseas singers likely learned the song from the Folkways recording or other revival singers. The song was recorded by Andrew M. Stewart and others, sometimes under the title “Paddy's Lament” or “Paddy's Lamentation”.

O.J. Abbott was a prolific source singer for Edith Fowke, singing over 100 songs for her. He was aged 85 at the time! Born in England, he came to Canada at age 12. He learned his songs mostly while working in lumber camps in the Ottawa Valley and elsewhere, where many of the workers were Irish, hence a preponderance of Irish songs in his repertoire. He later worked for the C.P.R., for Canada Cement, and in paper mills for J.R. Booth and E.B. Eddy. When his songs were recorded, he lived in Hull, Quebec. Brief biographies are found in Edith Fowke's *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario* (1965), Folklore Associates Inc. and Burns & MacEachern Ltd.,

and *Songs of the North Woods* by László Viká and Jeanette Panagapka, a book devoted entirely to Mr. Abbott, published in 2004 by University of Calgary Press.

By contrast, the protagonist of “The Rambling Irishman” had a positive emigration experience. Also by contrast, the song didn't go back across the Atlantic. Tom Brandon's recording is the only source I know for it. Many Irish singers have recorded a totally unrelated song using that title, also known as “Lough Erne” (also a happy emigration song). The subplot concerning the girl falling in love with a man who her mother considers totally unsuitable shows up in numerous other North American songs, such as “Ye Girls of Old Ontario” and the many versions of “Roving Gambler”. This resonates with me especially as my family folklore contains a couple of instances of couples being banished to Canada for having married above or beneath their station. I think the subplot marks the song as being of North American origin.

Edith Fowke, in *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario*, states, “Just as O.J. Abbott was the finest of the older Ontario singers, so Tom Brandon is the finest of the younger ones.” Like Mr. Abbott, Tom learned songs while working in lumber camps as a young man, and much of his repertoire was Irish, but he scorned “the comic pseudo-Irish ditties so popular with modern entertainers”.

In these days of high immigration to Canada, it's important for us to recall the experiences of earlier generations who faced similar challenges and in many cases managed to live happy and prosperous lives.

## By the Hush, Me Boys

### By the Hush, Me Boys

$\text{♩} = 120$  Traditional

Oh, it's by the hush, me boys, I'm sure  
that's to hold your noise, And lis - ten to poor Pad - dy's nar -

ra - tion. I was by hun - ger pressed and in  
 pov - er - ty dis - tressed, So I took a thought I'd leave the I - rish  
 Chorus  
 na - tion Here's you, boys,  
 do take my ad - vice, To A - mer - i - cay I'd have yez not be  
 com - ing. There is noth - ing here but war where the  
 mur - der - ing can - nons roar, And I wish I was at home in dear old  
 Er - ein.

Oh, it's by the hush, me boys, I'm sure that's to hold your noise,  
 And listen to poor Paddy's narration,  
 I was by hunger pressed, and in poverty distressed,  
 So I took a thought I'd leave the Irish nation..

Here's you, boys, do take my advice:  
 To Americay I'd have yez not be coming;  
 There is nothing here but war, where the murdering cannons roar,  
 And I wish I was at home in dear old Erin.<sup>1</sup>

Then I sold my horse and plough, my little pigs and cow,  
 And my little farm of land, and I parted,  
 And me sweetheart, Bidy McGhee, I'm afear'd I'll never see,  
 For I left her there that morning broken-hearted.

Then meself and a hundred more, to Americay sailed o'er,  
 Our fortune to be making, we were thinking;  
 When we landed in Yankee land, they shoved a gun into our hand,  
 Saying, "Paddy, you must go and fight for Lincoln."

General Meagher<sup>2</sup> to us said, "If you get shot or lose your head,  
 Every murdered soul of you will get a pension."  
 In the war I lost me leg; all I've now is a wooden peg;  
 By<sup>3</sup> my soul, it is the truth to you I mention.

Now I think meself in luck, to be fed upon Indian buck,  
 In old Ireland, the country I delight in,  
 And with the devil I do say, "Curse Americay!"  
 For I'm sure I've got enough of their hard fighting.

From the singing of O.J. Abbott, *Irish and British Songs from the Ottawa Valley*, Folkways Records FM 4051 (now available on CD from Smithsonian Folkways).

**The Rambling Irishman**  
 Transcription by Peter Johnston

## The Rambling Irishman

$\text{♩} = 88$  Traditional

I am a ram - bl - ing I - rish - man, I've tra - velled this coun - try  
 o'er I've formed a res - o - lu - tion to leave my na - tive  
 shore. With a knap - sack o'er — my shoul - der and a black - thorn in — my  
 hand, I — head - ed for A - mer - i - cay like a ram - bl - ing I - rish - man

I am a rambling Irishman, I've travelled this country o'er;  
 I formed a resolution to leave my native shore;  
 With a knapsack o'er my shoulder and a blackthorn in my hand,  
 I headed for Americay like a rambling Irishman.

Now, when I reached Americay, the girls all jumped with joy;  
Said one unto the other, "Here comes an Irish boy!";  
They took me in to the saloon and taken me by the hand;  
The very first toast they all drank round was, "A health to an Irishman!"

Now, I had not been in Americay not more than a week or so,  
When I formed a resolution to further lands I'd go;  
With a knapsack on my shoulder and a blackthorn in my hand,  
I started for Pennsylvania<sup>4</sup> like a rambling Irishman.

Now, when I reached Pennsylvania,<sup>5</sup> at an inn as I passed by,  
The landlord's lovely daughter to me was no ways shy;  
She asked me in to dine with her and taken me by the hand;  
She went home and told her mother she was in love with an Irishman.

"Now, daughter, dearest daughter, oh, what do you mean to do,  
For you to marry an Irishman, a man that you never knew?"  
"Now, hold your tongue, dear mother, and do the best you can,  
For there's friendship and good nature in the heart of an Irishman."

Now my rambling days are over, and I mean to take a wife;  
I'll work for her and toil for her the dear days of my life;  
I'll work for her and toil for her and do the best I can,  
And I know she'll never rue the day that she married an Irishman.

From the singing of Tom Brandon, *The Rambling Irishman*, Folk Legacy Records FSC-10 (re-released on cassette by CSTM's Mail Order Service).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced "Air-yin".

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced "Ma-her".

<sup>3</sup> Pronounced "Be".

<sup>4</sup> I sometimes Canadianize the song by changing "I started for Pennsylvania" to "I headed up to Canaday" (full disclosure!).

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, I sometimes change "Now, when I reached Pennsylvania" to "Arriving up in Canaday".



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