

The Kilmore Traditional Singers from Co. Wexford, Ireland

By Ian Russell

From the *2006 Festival of Village Carols Programme*, with additions by Edwin Macadam

Background

The Kilmore Traditional Singers from County Wexford in the south-east corner of Ireland have rarely sung outside their village since their tradition was first recorded over 250 years ago. It was therefore a great honour for the Festival of Village Carols to host the six singers from Kilmore as special guests for the 2006 Festival. The Kilmore carols are not set to the rumbustious type of fuguing tunes associated with the traditions around Sheffield, but rather they are more ethereal and mystical in character. In predating the Yorkshire and Derbyshire traditions, the Kilmore tradition provides a glimpse into an earlier form of carolling, characterised by a single melody line, which is ornamented, free flowing and unhurried, often modal in character, and performed by male voice in unison. It is not unusual for a carol to last more than ten minutes.

The current [2006] group of singers is led by Liam Sheil, who has been singing these carols for over forty years. Other members of the group, who all come from local families, are Liam's son, Jimmy Sheil; Robbie Whelan; Pat Bates and his brother Martin Bates; and Dixie Devereux (pronounced 'Dev-rix'). Their backgrounds are in fishing, farming and haulage, and each is a fine singer in his own right.

The carols are not performed as a set on certain auspicious days, as is the pattern in England, but rather one carol is sung for each day of the twelve days of Christmas. Nor are (or were) the carols sung as part of an itinerant house-visiting tradition, but solely within the context of the celebration of the Mass, whilst Communion is being taken, at the Catholic Parish Church of St Mary's in Kilmore. Whereas in the nineteenth century other villages in Wexford had closely related traditions, these had disappeared before the First World War, so that Kilmore is now the only village in Ireland to uphold such a tradition.

The Original Carol Collections

The origins of Wexford carolling are closely associated with two collections, which took the form of 'garlands'. The first is of considerable age, being compiled and very probably written by Luke Waddinge, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Ferns (the Diocese which included Wexford), and published in Ghent in France in 1684 – *A Smale Garland of Pious and Godly Songs, composed by a devout Man*,

for the Solace of his Friends and neighbours in their afflictions. The title page includes a verse (a ‘posy’):

The sweet and the sower
The nettle and the flower
The Thorne and the Rose
This Garland Compose.

The garland, which was published in the aftermath of severe Catholic repression in Ireland, comprises several religious verses together with poems written for the disinherited gentry of County Wexford, and others relating to the Popish Plot. Significantly, it also contains eleven Christmas songs, two of which are sung to this day in Kilmore (‘St Stephen’s Day Carol’ and ‘Song for New Year’s Day’), whilst a third, ‘On Christmass Night all Christians sing’ is the earliest text for the carol known as ‘The Sussex Carol’. These carols proved to be very popular and the *Smale Garland* was reprinted in London in 1728, and again in Drogheda in 1731.

The second collection, which dates from 1728, is *A New Garland, containing Songs for Christmas*, which was compiled by Revd William Devereux (1696-1771), who was born in Ring, Tacumshane. He later became the Parish Priest of Drinagh (now Piercetown); having no chapel, he said Mass in a sheltered corner of a field. He had a ‘rich voice’ and entertained friends with songs from Spain, which he had learned whilst studying for the priesthood in Salamanca.

The *New Garland* contained three of the carols from the *Smale Garland*, two of which are the ones noted above as being part of the Kilmore tradition. The other ‘Kilmore’ carols which William Devereux included are: ‘The Darkest Midnight’, ‘Christmas Day Is Come’, ‘Song for St John’s Day’, ‘Song for the Holy Innocents’, ‘St Sylvester’s Day’, ‘Song of Jerusalem’, and ‘Song for Twelfth Night’.

Another inclusion which the Kilmore carollers sing, though it is not considered to be exclusive to their village, is ‘The Enniscorthy Carol’ – ‘Good people all this Christmas time’.

Although there is no known copy of Devereux’s original New Garland extant, several versions of it survive, copied into later manuscripts. There are also records of carol singing in Wexford dating from this time in Killane, Mayglass (Ballymore), Lady’s Island (Tacumshane), and Rathangan. The carols were introduced into Kilmore parish from 1751 onwards by Father Peter Devereux, and remarkably members of the Devereux family have been closely associated with the carols ever since. The voice of Liam Sheil’s uncle, Jack Devereux (1910-1999), former leader of the carollers who sang for more than

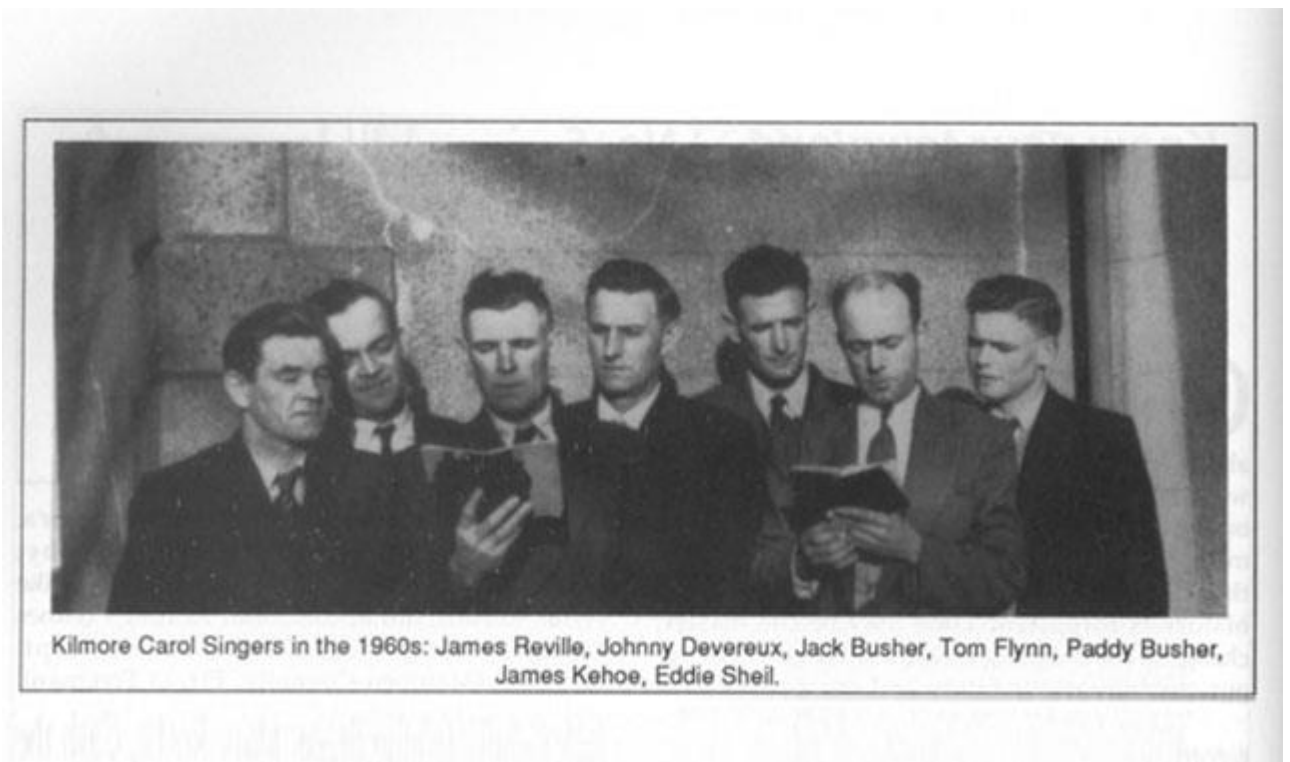
sixty years, is to be heard in a talk recorded and broadcast by RTE in 1982 [which we listened to at the Festival]. Liam's grandfather, also Jack Devereux, sang for over fifty years.

Planning the visit, last January, Jerry O'Reilly and Ian Russell visited St Mary's Church, Kilmore, to hear the last two carols being sung and to meet the singers. It was a wonderful encounter and grateful thanks are due to Father Denis Doyle, the Parish Priest, for his kind and generous welcome. They also met the lads in the more secular surroundings of Quigley's Bar, across the road from the church, and it was from there that the trip to Sheffield was planned.

Postscript

Sadly Liam Sheil died on 9 July 2007 – see <http://www.wexfordpeople.ie/news/kilmore-in-mourning-after-liams-sudden-death-27670441.html> . The Kilmore Carollers have subsequently been led by Pat Bates of Grange, Kilmore.

Kilmore Carol Singers in the 1960s and 70s



Group of Kilmore carol singers during the 1960s: James Reville, Johnny Devereux, Jack Busher, Tom Flynn, Paddy Busher, James Kehoe, Eddie Sheil



The singers in 1972: Jack Busher, Johnny Devereux, James Kehoe, and James Reville, Jack Devereux, Liam Sheil.

Links

[On Christmass Day 1678 - poem by Luke Wadding](#)

[Facsimile of Carol for New Year's Day, from Michael Murphy's ms.](#)