

Ciaran Carson

**THE
BRIMMING
WORLD**

*Selected Essays
(1975-2014)*

Edited by Gail McConnell



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The Little Bag of Spuds

Where was I? I was learning a tune. I was asking myself, what does it mean to learn a tune? The tune in question was 'The Bag of Spuds'. First I heard it, or heard it again after many years, was from Patsy Hanly's playing of it on RTÉ. Then I did something that would have been unthinkable at the time, some twenty or thirty years ago, when I was learning tunes day and night: I looked it up on the internet. Back then, in the late seventies, I was immersed in music, and for some years never a day or night went by than a tune, or a rake of tunes, would be beeling about in my head, or I'd be playing them at some session or other. The air was filled with waifs and strays of melody, strains and half-remembered snatches. I'd sit down with a tin whistle in my hands to try and capture them, sometimes by myself, sometimes with Deirdre who, in any event, has a better ear than I for these things, so I'd be learning from her more than from my own memory. I'd always ask her, 'How does it go?' She'd be the first to get the tricky bits, the quirks, the unexpected turns of phrase that made this tune stand out among its more common relatives, the ones we knew already.

Sometimes we'd have recourse to the comparatively new medium of cassette tape. Around 1977 I bought a Sony TC-55 Cassette-Corder with built-in Electret Condenser Microphone and Auto Shut-off. Not that I remember the technical details; I had to go to the internet for those, and found an image of the same model on display at the website of the Ralph D Thomas PI Vintage Collection, Thomas Investigative Publications, Inc., Spy Exchange and Security Center, Austin, Texas. The Sony, as I remember it, was the

size of a small Bible. I've just located one on my bookshelves and measured it at seven inches by five by one and a quarter, which is about right, though the Sony felt heavy as a brick, as if compressed by some *Third Policeman* technology. For some months I'd bring the Sony along to sessions before we found that the machine got in the way of the music, not to mention the conversation. So, after a while we abandoned the machine and relied on memory with all its pitfalls and sometimes creative interventions. And the spy connection reminds me that there was always something clandestine about the act of recording, even if you asked permission to do so, which I always did, unlike some people I could mention. But that's another story.

It's 2008 now and a once unimaginable technology enables me to find 'The Bag of Spuds' on the net. The first version I come across is an MP3 clip on Amazon from Kevin Crawford's CD *In Good Company*. He's playing it on a B-flat flute along with Martin Hayes on viola, accompanied by Arty McGlynn on guitar and Jim Higgins on bodhrán, and it upsets all my expectations. Patsy Hanly's playing of it, still going round in my head, was urgent, quick, full of get-up-and-go, round the house and mind the dresser. Crawford and Hayes play it at about half the speed, and of course it's much lower in pitch than your normal D, so it sounds like a 78 rpm record played at 33 rpm. It's ruminative, with a tinge of melancholy, and quite beautiful. I remember saying to Deirdre after Patsy Hanly's playing that it was the kind of tune you have to play fast, and I think she agreed. I still think there are such tunes but I should have known better for there's always another way, sometimes radically different, to play a tune. Or maybe just plain bad: among the other few clips on Amazon is the Ballinamore Céilí Band, a terribly disjointed version with dynamically out-of-sync piano accompaniment. Not wishing to denigrate it unduly I asked Deirdre for a second opinion. 'It's like a three-legged race which no one is winning,' she said. On a scale of one to ten we gave it

a three.

‘I think they call that “The Little Bag of Spuds”,’ said Bernie, ‘or maybe the other one’s “The Little Bag of Spuds”, and this is the Big One.’ And then there was some banter as to whether it would be the seven-pound or the three-pound bag that you’d be wanting, and would you like a pound of butter to go with them. So then Deirdre reiterated, for Bernie’s benefit, her story of Desi Wilkinson’s playing it through the letter box of a pub when he got locked out and everyone else was inside having a big feed. ‘And what was the upshot?’ said Bernie. ‘Oh,’ said Deirdre, ‘the woman of the house came out and chased him.’

There’s a minute of reflection before Bernie starts up another reel, ‘The Woman of the House’. There’s not a tape-recorder about the place but out of the corner of my eye I see that a newcomer to the session, a desultory fiddle-player, is now fiddling with her mobile phone, and I suspect the rules of session engagement are being broken.

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