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Music Tourism at the Border: Sharing the Traditions of the Oriel Region

INTRODUCTION

Ireland is recognised to be an important tourism destination within Europe. Beyond its wild landscapes, its important heritage sites and its offer concerning beer and spirits, the island is known for its important folk music tradition, which attracts many tourists and “visiting musicians” all along the year (O’Shea 2007; Kaul 2009; Ó hAllmhuráin 2016), and is internationally recognised as an important element of the tourist experience (Cronin and O’Connor 2003).

In particular, some regions on the western coasts, such as Co. Clare and Co. Sligo, are particularly renowned for their music scene. The village of Doolin is an internationally famous example, with thousands of music visitors that come into town every year searching for and playing within its music scene, and is indeed recognised as the “music Mecca of Ireland” (Kaul 2009; Ó hAllmhuráin 2016).

Despite the lingering legacy of cultural nationalism and later tourism strategies that led to a heightened sense of association of the west of the country with a more authentic Irish identity, music is not an exclusive feature of the west of Ireland. Irish traditional music is indeed experienced throughout the island, impacted to varying degrees by the presence or otherwise of tourists. In particular, music can be identified as an opportunity for developing and activating tourism enhancement and cultural awareness of less renowned destinations (Bull 2008).

Co. Louth, the smallest county of Ireland, is located on the north-east side of the island. Close to the border, it is a midpoint between the cities of Dublin and Belfast. Despite the presence of several heritage sites, wild landscapes and vibrant traditions, this area lacks recognition from international tourism industry (Louth County Council 2021). Besides monasteries and landscapes, one of the things this border region can offer to express its heritage and identity are its music traditions. In particular, the territory traversing counties Louth, Monaghan and Armagh (and consequently divided by the Northern-Irish border) shares an important music and literary repertoire associated with the ancient kingdom of Oirialla, recognised today as the Oriel region.

Informed by Irish tourism policies and the development of Tourism Ireland as an all-island organisation, this paper examines how the musical traditions of the Oriel region have or can be integrated into the tourist experience in Co. Louth and surrounding areas.

MUSIC AND TOURISM

Music is a valuable element for local branding, and can contribute in territorial enhancement and promotion (Cerutti and Dioli 2016; Gortan-Carlin and Krajnović 2016), and the approach for this study recognises music as an important element to promote places. Connell and Gibson have dedicated several studies to the concept of music tourism, and on the ways music-related activities can be the primary reason to stimulate a visit to a particular territory (Gibson and Connell 2005; Gibson and Connell 2007). Recently, UNESCO has realised a City of Music Network (Bennett 2020, p. 2) and even UNWTO has recognised the importance of music in representing and expressing the sense of place of a given territory. Music is accepted to be a fundamental element for local branding strategies, being – just like gastronomy – an important cultural feature able to represent and attract uniqueness (UNWTO 2018). In this sense, it is possible to think about music from the north-east of Ireland as part of a local tourism promotion strategy targeted for experiential music tourists in search of intimate music encounters and new ways of engagement with Irish music tradition from a hidden context.

The music traditions from Co. Louth and the Oriel region are thus recognised as an important expression of local identity, able to cater for tourists in search for alternative experiences in a place not commodified by mass tourism phenomena but affected by division and political tensions, now exacerbated by Brexit (Doyle and Connolly 2017). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, some events that have been realised in the region, including the Féile Patrick Byrne Festival and the Summer Entertainment Scheme offer by the Oriel Centre – a regional cultural centre and performance space located in the former Dundalk Gaol – are considered as valuable opportunities to look at the potential of music encounters in this part of Ireland.

SOURCES

This study is informed by primary and secondary data. Primary sources have been acquired through personal experiences attending music-related activities and initiatives in the territory under analysis – in particular those expressly associated with Oriel’s music culture – together with the collection of interviews realised with local traditional musicians and singers from Co. Louth, Co. Monaghan and Co. Armagh. Secondary data have been gained through the study and analysis of some books, articles and thesis such as “A Hidden Ulster: People, Songs and Traditions of Oriel” (Ní Uallacháin 2003), “Towards the Potential Role of a Neglected Eighteenth-Century Harper in Cultural Tourism in the Oriel Region” (Crawford 2018), “Exploring Festival, Place and Community in Irish Traditional Music” (Moley 2015), “The Rose in the Gap: Dance Music of Oriel from the Donnellann Collection” (O’Connor 2018) and “Borderlands: a Journey Through Changing Times” (East Border Region Interreg IIIA Partnership 2001).

The first one is a primary comprehensive book dedicated to the poetry and music tradition of Oriel, while the second and the third are two thesis realised by students at DkIT (Dundalk Institute of Technology) in the recent past. The last reference is a publication dedicated to historical sites of Ireland’s eastern border region financed by the European Union through the Ireland/Northern Ireland Interreg IIIA Programme and managed by the East Border Region Interreg IIIA Partnership¹. Another source is represented by the ongoing research of Colleen Savage – a colleague from DkIT – dedicated to the song tradition of South Armagh and the work of John Hannon, informed by the recent work of Gearóid Trimble (2016).

CO. LOUTH AND INFO ON LOCAL MUSIC-RELATED ACTIVITIES

Co. Louth, known as the “wee county”, is located on the eastern side of the island. The main towns are Drogheda (south side) and Dundalk (north side). The Cooley peninsula and the village of

¹ The Interreg IIIA Programme was an EU Community Initiative designed to support cross border co-operation, social cohesion and economic development between regions of the EU operating from 2000 to 2008.

Carlingford are also noteworthy. This county offers alternatives to more famous Irish attractions including opportunities for outdoor activities in beautiful landscapes, and it presents many associations with mythology and literature. Despite this potential, Co. Louth is currently an overlooked destination, outside main tourism paths, perceived only as a corridor between Dublin and Belfast.

Despite its small size, two cultural regions are identifiable. The southern side, closer to Dublin, is historically associated with the Boyne Valley, an established tourism infrastructure between Co. Louth and Co. Meath with famous attractions such as the Neolithic site of *Brú na Bóinne* (UNESCO World Heritage Site). The northern side, culturally closer to Ulster, is part – together with Co. Monaghan and Co. Armagh – of the Oriel region, a territory without a defined border but with a shared music and Irish language literature tradition. Despite the beauty of the Cooley peninsula and important heritage sites around Dundalk such as the Proleek Dolmen and Castle Roche, tourism infrastructure and marketing is less developed. In both instances, the potential of music for tourism is largely neglected, although the success of an Irish traditional music festival in Drogheda in 2018 and 2019 highlighted this as an area for development and opportunities.

Drogheda has been recognised as place with significant potential in the context of tourism. It is a picturesque and historical town that holds numerous cultural initiatives. It hosted the last two pre-COVID-19 editions of the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, the biggest annual Irish traditional music event in Ireland. The event had a significant economic impact, and attendances at the event surpassed previous iterations, reaching an impressive crowd in 2019 (Kearney and Burns 2022). It had a great resonance, shaping the town's public spaces and leaving an important footprint in Drogheda's streetscape, which is still visible today. Through the Fleadh, Drogheda demonstrated its potential, gaining a reputation for its music-related opportunities. The Fleadh was a flagship event that led to the recognition of Drogheda as a "Destination Town" by Fáilte Ireland, the main national Irish tourism organisation (*Ibid.*).

Further than Drogheda, Co. Louth and surrounding areas appear as territories with an interesting music resource that overcomes traditional sounds. Beyond the shared assumption

amongst many tourists and international marketers of Ireland as a country whose music scene is dominated by drinking songs, the region seems to be an interesting music-cluster. A number of music societies have flourished with a focus on Western Art music. Organisations like Drogheda Classical Music, the Louth Contemporary Music Society, Ardee Baroque and the Boyne Music Festival offer different encounters with Classical music. Alternative sounds have also their celebration through the Fuinneamh Music&Arts Festival, located in the Dundalk area, where DJ sets are mixed with Celtic aesthetics in an impressive event.

However, Irish traditional music is also an important presence here. Sessions in local pubs are an opportunity to approach this world engaging with an environment far from tourism consumption and staged authenticity phenomena (MacCannell 1973). According to what tourism promotional materials and academic studies identify with the concept of “authenticity”, sessions here maintain a very specific local character; they remain something by the community for the community. Sessions remain a moment of social gathering made by locals for the locals. They are scheduled and coordinated with pub’s management, but they still preserve a strong sense of informality. Many are also an opportunity to engage in the learning of Irish traditional music. The informality and friendliness which dominate these moments offer a chance to beginners of approaching trad music.

Other elements that emerge from a general Irish traditional music background in the area are represented by the piping tradition. In Co. Armagh, this is demonstrated by the presence of an important and extremely active piping club and annual William Kennedy Piping Festival, while in Drogheda a mural recalls the history of the Taylor brothers that emigrated to America, where they developed the modern uilleann pipes chanter. Drogheda had an important reeds production in the 19th century, and during those years many pipers, like the Taylor brothers and Pat Ward, were living and musicking in the area (Matthews 2018). Another important element of local music heritage is the song tradition in south Louth and Meath. The figure of the 18th-century balladeer John Sheil, in this sense, is extremely relevant. This songwriter, defined as the «best English-Irish poet before Yeats» (Moulden 2021) has been one of the first authors from the Boyne Valley to write ballads in English, contributing to the passage from the Irish language to English as everyday language in Ireland.

Céilí bands are something important for Dundalk's music history. First ensembles were born in the '20s as a kind of compromise between modernity and tradition. The idea was to meet and mix traditional features of Irish music (such as melodies, rhythms and music instruments) together with elements associated with jazz big bands and dance halls like the use of drums and piano (O'Connor 2001, pp. 59–60). First céilí bands developed in Dundalk during the '50s thanks to the work of John Joe Gardiner (fiddler and flutist) and Rory Kennedy (accordion player), two musicians who gave new life to local music community, both because of their activity with the *Siamsa Céilí Band* – a very prestigious music project, that inspired many musicians and still inspires contemporary ensembles – and for their commitment to establish the first local *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*² branch in 1958 (Mac Mathúna and Ní Chonaráin 2003). Their commitment in institutionalizing Irish music was the first step that allowed Co. Louth to have three different CCÉ branches, aimed at promoting and sustaining music educational activities in the area (Commins 2019).

THE ORIEL REGION

Oriel, also known as Airgialla, Oirghialla and Uriel, was an ancient kingdom of Ireland divided in sub-dukedom across the northern-eastern border territory (Ní Uallacháin 2003; Moley 2015; Crawford 2018). This is a region without physical boundaries; the name Oriel refers to an area united by traditions more than to a geographic area (*Ibid.*). Here, a strong Irish literature developed for centuries, as well as an important harp tradition (inscribed in 2019 in the UNESCO intangible world heritage list). This territory, divided between south-east Ulster and north Leinster, saw the development of a strong transcribing tradition of those melodies sung and played by bards for noble Irish families (O'Connor 2018, p. 14), as well as the preservation of traditional techniques such as the old harp fingernail style (Crawford 2018). In particular, the figures of the harpers Patrick Quin and Patrick Byrne are extremely important. Sadly, this regional music tradition has been forgotten and neglected for a very long time, and only in the last twenty years there has been a new interest

² The largest cultural organisation involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music (Kearney 2013).

in its cultural potentialities. In addition, the creation of a political border in 1922, and the Troubles which afflicted Northern Ireland for more than thirty years (increasing the division between communities and identities) contributed to threat and reduce the knowledge about this heritage.

Now, with the unresolved question of Brexit, there is a great necessity of thinking about opportunities to overcome new challenges Irish people (either from south of north of the border) will face in the future (Doyle and Connolly 2017). It is in this context that a tradition shared regardless of political division may help in remembering a common heritage, identity and sense of belonging to a place. Music does not 'obey' political boundaries, it does not stop at a line on a map. It instead remains a great expression of territoriality. Moreover, such intangible heritage may be part of new tourism promotional plans, that could contribute to a renovated cultural awareness among the local population.

EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD, BETWEEN MUSIC FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

Music events and festivals are beneficial to hosting communities. For many tourists, festivals have become their primary reason to visit certain places. Therefore, small and medium sized towns have invested in the organisation of events and festivals to generate more visits. Results and benefits can be economic (Tohmo 2005) but also cultural and related to the place's (and its inhabitants) identity (Gibson and Davidson 2004). Dundalk is nowadays an important town within the region, but despite its location and recent activities such as the SEEK urban festival (a festival dedicated to murals in the town centre), it still suffers from a lack of recognition from tourism industry. As an interviewee reported, "the Oriel Centre is in Dundalk, but the *Fleadh* was held in Drogheda", and this hint reflects such struggle. The reason is that music needs to be integrated in a wider context (Gortan-Carlin and Krajnović 2016; UNWTO 2018). While Drogheda was able to integrate music, its heritage and its infrastructures (presenting itself as the first town of the Boyne Valley and the main gateway to explore the surrounding region), Dundalk experiences a lack of identity associated with its music scene and the Oriel traditions, but also because it is the Oriel region itself to be a territory divided by a border whose weakens the capacity of recognising the common heritage of this land.

Even if the Oriel region suffers from the lack of a common sense of recognition, some local events and activities demonstrate the relevance its music and its musicians had and still have within the territory. Here I consider two main events: Féile Patrick Byrne and the Summer Entertainment Scheme held the Oriel Centre in Dundalk.

Féile Patrick Byrne is a traditional music festival held annually on the Palm Sunday weekend in and around Carrickmacross, a town in Co. Monaghan on the border with Co. Louth. Organised by the local branch of Comhaltas, the *Féile* is set up to celebrate Patrick Byrne, the last noted exponent in Ireland of the historical Gaelic wire strung harp. Byrne was a blind harper from the 19th century, and he was the first Irish traditional musician to be photographed (Ní Uallacháin 2003). He was renowned as a talented musician who also played for Queen Victoria in 1841, receiving a warrant as Irish Harper to Prince Albert (*Ibid.*). I attended the festival in 2022 and again in 2023, and it proposed workshops, sessions, concerts and lectures (even if there were no particular activities focused on the Irish harp).

The former Dundalk Gaol is now hosting the Oriel Centre, a place that combines the role of a resource centre, a museum and a performance space providing facilities for teaching, archives, rehearsals and performances. The Centre aims to support the work of Comhaltas branches within the north-eastern territory plus organisations interested in promoting Irish and Oriel music culture. This place offers stimulating activities for those interested in discovering further details about the Oriel region, such as guided tours where the history of the building, as well as that of its territory, is displayed. The Centre proposes weekly sessions and performances with emerging and renowned traditional musicians, but most importantly a Summer Entertainment Scheme, where concerts are combined with sessions between music guests, teachers and students are offered. The Oriel Centre thus offers the opportunity to hear the best of local Irish music in an enjoyable and historical environment in a format which is at the same time participative and performative (Turino 2008), and so extremely appealing for those searching for a deeper involvement within Irish music.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORIEL'S HERITAGE PROMOTION

The best approach for the realisation of a tourism promotion strategy focused on Oriel's heritage comes from a common action shared between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland is a cross-border tourism organisation which seeks to increase tourism to the island of Ireland and to support Northern Ireland to realise its tourism potential. It was established under the framework of the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday 1998. It works closely with Fáilte Ireland, and since the territory of the Oriel region is divided by the border, and so it is partially in the UK, its support remains fundamental for any promotional activity dedicated to this area and its culture.

Within the Republic's territory, Oriel's music and literature heritage can be integrated within local tourism promotion through the work of Fáilte Ireland. Fáilte Ireland is developing several regional strategies dedicated to the territories included within Ireland's Ancient East programme, a destination marketing campaign and brand aimed at promoting the eastern side of the country, and north-eastern territories may have the opportunity to increase their relevance within Irish national tourism scheme thanks to their experiential features (Fáilte Ireland 2022). More specifically, new IAE development strategies up to 2027 seek to enhance the experiential component of visiting the region through five main objectives:

- Motivate the domestic and international consumer to visit Ireland's Ancient East
- Provide the visitor with more reasons to stay, increasing the economic impact of tourism
- Ensure the region is easy to access, navigate and consume
- Enable and assist the industry to grow and create sustainable jobs in local communities
- Build committed stakeholder and industry partnerships

According to this development proposal, Oriel's traditions may be inserted within IAE new strategy for the north-east (thus promoting Co. Louth and Co. Monaghan only). However, since the relatively small distance between these counties and Co. Meath, with the Boyne river and its important heritage sites, Oriel's music heritage represents an additional opportunity to enrich the tourism proposal for the north-east, adding its music-related experiences for the promotion of this part of the island.

An opposite alternative would be represented by a similar operation realised by Tourism Northern Ireland, the Northern Irish organisation for local tourism management, and it would bring to a single promotion for Co. Armagh and Down. Even if divided by the border, however, this territory shares the same traditions, and this is the reason to think about the potential of local cultural heritage from a shared perspective.

The operation of Tourism Ireland is linked with the Shared Island Programme. The Shared Island Initiative was launched by the former *An Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) Micheál Martin in 2020 to foster dialogue on a shared future on the island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement (Shared Island Dialogue Series 2020). It brought people together to discuss key concerns for the future, opportunities for cross learning and understanding the full potential of cooperation through the framework of the Agreement. Dialogues have focused on several themes including tourism, and an online discussion in January 2022 was dedicated to this sector. Over 160 tourism and civil society stakeholders from across the island joined the event online to discuss the success of tourism cooperation in Ireland and explore how best to enhance opportunities for domestic and international visitors in the future (*Ibid.*).

The programme offered a number of key themes:

- Cooperation in tourism and the role of Tourism Ireland
- Strong connectivity and well-developed infrastructures
- Tourism contribution for the economic prosperity
- COVID-19 common recovery strategy
- Development of sustainable tourism on the island
- Digitisation
- Shift of tourism towards a more experience-oriented industry which can benefit regions and areas outside traditional tourism 'hot spots'

This last theme appears as extremely relevant in relation to Oriel's potential. Local intangible cultural heritage would definitively fit within this goal, and thus music and poetry from the region may produce important benefit on a social as well as on a cultural level (Kneafsey 2003). However, it is

necessary to consider and involve the various stakeholders, which include musicians and music organisations, to ensure that possible development does not negatively impact on the intangible cultural heritage of the region that this plan seeks to promote (Shoukat *et al.* 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

The Oriel region represents an interesting (border) territory whose intangible cultural and music heritage has been neglected and overlooked for decades, and only recently it has started to be recognised as an important element for local identity and sense of place. Moreover, it is included in some regions of Ireland, like Co. Louth, which have a great tourism potential, but are ignored by main tourism flows. Music represents an interesting opportunity to appeal experiential and music tourists searching for alternative and “authentic” musical experiences (Gilli 2009; Kaul 2009). In recent years, Brexit has profoundly changed the rules to enter the UK, with some unresolved issues concerning Northern Ireland. This situation could lead to political tensions if something new – such as a hard border or a referendum for the unification of Ireland – will be introduced. The Oriel region is a territory currently separated through an artificial frontier of great cultural and political relevance. However, this region has the chance of being a bridge between two realities, overcoming diversities in the celebration of a common heritage, where cooperation is leaded through the value of a shared local culture and music tradition.

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