

The Ballad of Mary Neill

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The Ballad of Mary Neill

In 1919, Colm O'Lochlainn published a book containing 102 Irish Ballads¹. Among these is one that refers to Strabane and Lifford and this intrigued the author, leading to a limited amount of research into the origins and content of this song.

The ballad was originally a street ballad and was first published by, among others, James Lindsay Junr., Stationer, &c., 9 King Street, Glasgow (see later.)

It relates a story of elopement and is based on an actual event, the shipwreck of an emigrant ship, the Charlotte Douglas, in 1836. However, whether the remainder of the story is true or accurate is not known since the author did not have the time to carry out further research. This article examines several additional published versions, that have significant differences from that given by O'Lochlainn.

The event recorded in the song is the foundering of the ship as reported in *The Londonderry Journal*²

LONDONDERRY SHIP NEWS:

THE CHARLOTTE DOUGLAS OF DERRY. - By a letter received in this city it appears that on the morning of the 9th ult., this fine vessel was wrecked on Whale head reef, at the entrance of Gasper bay, mouth of the St. Lawrence, during a dense fog. The whole on board, with the exception of one of the crew and two of the passengers, were saved; and the cargo has also been preserved from the wreck. Every exertion was made by the Captain to provide for the security and comfort of the passengers.

The trip had been advertised in the local papers, including *The Londonderry Journal*, as FOR QUEBEC,

The superior new copper-fastened Ship
CHARLOTTE DOUGLASS,
Burthen per Register, 575 Tons,
THOS. HARDENBROOK, Commander,
To Sail 26th April.

THIS splendid Vessel, only six months old, eight feet high between decks will, upon inspection, be found to afford accommodation to Passengers rarely to be met with. Respectable families intending to emigrate to the Colonies this season, will find the above a first-rate conveyance.

For rate of Passage apply to Mr. Samuel Morton, Strabane; Mr. William Elliott, Omagh; Mr. James Sherrard, Fintona; Mr. William Johnston, Irvinestown; Mr. John Halliday, Enniskillen; Mr. Michael Lipsett, Ballyshannon; Mr. Thomas Patterson, Letterkenny; Mr. R. Laird, Ballybofey; or the Subscriber, who will provide a sufficient supply of Fuel and Water for the voyage.

JOHN MUNN.

Derry, April 7, 1836.

She did not sail until May 8, and made a fairly swift journey of about five weeks. However, the captain changed before sailing to McNeilage.

The version of the song published by O'Lochlainn is as follows

I'm a bold undaunted youth, my name is John M'Cann,
I'm a native of sweet Donegal, convenient to Strabane.
For the stealing of an heiress I lie in Lifford jail,
Her father swears he'll hang me for his daughter Mary Neill.

While I lay in cold irons, my love she came to me,
"Don't fear my father's anger, for I will set you free."
Her father soon gave his consent to let me out on bail,
And I was to stand my trial for stealing Mary Neill.

Her father kept her close confined, for fear I should her see,
And on my trial day, my prosecutor was to be;
But like a loyal lover, to appear she did not fail,
She freed me from all dangers; my charming Mary Neill.

With wrath and indignation her father loud did call
And when my trial was over, I approached the garden wall.
My well-known voice soon reached her ears, which echoed hill and dale,
"You're welcome here, my Johnny dear," says charming Mary Neill.

We both sat on a sunny bank, and there we talked a while,
I says, "My dear, if you will comply, I'll free you from exile.
The Shamrock now is ready from Derry to set sail,
So come with me, off to Quebec, my charming Mary Neill."

She gave consent, and back she went, and stole the best of clothes,
And to nobody in the house her secret she made known;
Five hundred pounds of ready gold from her father she did steal,
And that was twice I did elope with charming Mary Neill.

Our coach it was got ready to Derry for to go,
And there we bribed the coachman for to let no one know,
He said he would keep secret, and never would reveal.
So off to Derry then I went with charming Mary Neill

It was to Captain Nelson our passage money paid,
And in the town of Derry it was under cover laid.
We joined our hands in wedlock bands before we did set sail.
And her father's wrath I value not – I love my Mary Neill.

It was o'er the proud and swelling seas our ship did gently glide,
And on our passage to Quebec, six weeks a matchless tide;
Until we came to Whitehead Beach, we had no cause to wail.
On Crossford Bay I thought that day I lost my Mary Neill.

On the ninth of June, in the afternoon a heavy fog came on;
Our captain cries, "Look out, my boys, I fear we are all gone."
Our vessel on a sandy bank struck was driven by a gale,
And forty were washed overboard, along with Mary Neill

With the help of boats and the ship's crew five hundred they were saved,
And forty more of them also have met a watery grave.
I soon espied her yellow locks come floating down the waves,
I jumped into the boiling deep and saved my Mary Neill.

Her father wrote a letter as you may understand,
That if I would go back again he would give me all his land,
I wrote him back an answer, and said that without fail,
"I am the heir of your whole estate, by your daughter Mary Neill.

This libretto is quite accurate in that the loss of the ship was caused by the fog, but the name of the ship is completely wrong as also the name of the Captain. In addition, only three persons were lost rather than the forty stated. The total carried by the ship was quite possibly the five hundred stated, but since the ship never reached Quebec there would be no return of the passengers recorded at the destination port. The name of the Beach is incorrect, and also the name of the bay; the correct names being Whalehead Reef and the location was Gaspé Bay. Whether the remainder of the song is correct cannot be stated but it is fair comment to state that it is extremely unlikely that Mary would have been able to get away with such a larceny as claimed since £500 then would be equivalent to at least several hundred thousand in today's currency. It is also doubtful that her father would hold such a large amount of gold at his home or permit someone to abscond with it.

The ballad was published as a street ballad in Glasgow, printed by James Lindsay, Stationer, &c., 9 King Street, (City), Glasgow, with the title **Mary Neal**, date unknown, and with the following differences:

Strabane replaced by Streban;
the correct name of the ship, Charlotte Douglas;
£5000 in lieu of £500;
New York as destination rather than Quebec;
the Captain of the ship as Nelson; and
the location of the wreck as Whitehead Reef, in Gosford Bay.

A copy of this is held in the Murray Collection, of Glasgow Broadside Ballads, in Glasgow University³.

An alternative version was also printed by James Lindsay as **Mary Neil**, with slight differences as follows:

the name of the ship, Charles Douglas;
the Captain of the ship as McNealy; and
the location of the wreck as Cape Wrath Head, in Gaspar Bay.

A copy of this is held in the National Library of Scotland⁴.

The Madden Collection, contained within the Bradshaw Collection, of Cambridge University Library⁵ has a number of sheets with similar titles, one being **An Admired Love Song, called MARY NEIL.**

:

the correct name of the ship, Charlotte Douglas;
the Captain of the ship as Wilson; and
the location of the wreck again Whitehead Reef, in Gosford Bay.

An accurate version was printed by Such of London, several copies of which can be seen in the Bodleian Collection of Broadside Ballads at Oxford University⁶, entitled **Charming Mary Neal,**

the correct name of the ship, Charlotte Douglas;
£5000 in place of £500;
the Captain of the ship as Wilson; and
the location of the wreck again Whitehead beach, in Gosford Bay.

The Bodleian also has a version printed by Harkness, J. (Preston)⁷ with the title **Mary Neal and John McCann:**

Treban in lieu of Strabane;
the name of the ship, Charles Douglas;
the Captain of the ship as McNeal; and
Six men of the mast did die

Three versions of the song were collected in Canada. The first was by E. B. Greenleaf⁸, entitled **Mary Neal**, as sung by John Powers, Fortune Harbour, 1929. The main differences are:

Strawval in place of Strabane;
Wexford jail rather than Lifford; and
the name of the ship, The Maid of Erin.

It was sung to the tune “Willy Reilly.”

H. Creighton⁹ collected the second, with the title **Mary Nail**, from Ben Henneberry, of *Devil’s Island*, NS. The words show how an item transferred orally can be quite transformed. These are as follows

Denagogue, convenient to Scotland;
The name of the ship as Charlie Stewart;
Adara in place of Derry;
Woodland reef in Guysboro’ Bay; and
fourth of June rather that the ninth.

Kenneth Peacock¹⁰ recorded a slightly different version at *Cape Broyle*, Newfoundland, in *July*, 1952, entitled **Mary Neal**

Millertown and Stablane;
The name of the ship as Charles S. Douglas;
Captain Wilson; and
Wheaton's Head in Gaspe Bay.

This is the only one with the correct name of the bay.

A more modern version of the ballad was recorded and published by the English folk song performer, writer, collector and editor, Martin Carthy¹¹. He had only six verses rather than the more usual twelve, and had obtained part from a Mrs Marina Russell of Upwey, and the remainder from other printed sources. His big difference was:

Edinburgh and willing to trepan.

The local version of the ballad is that given by Sam Henry in 1924¹², as **Charming Mary O'Neill**: This could be considered to be quite an accurate version since he had heard it sung by a one-legged man, 36, a former blacksmith, from his father, a Belfast carter (district between Claudy and Strabane). However, there are only eight verses, with the following differences:

The name of the ship is correct as CharlotteDouglas;
Captain Wilson;
Six months rather than six weeks; and
Whithead Reef in Goffard Bay.

The tunes for the versions given by O'Lochlainn and that for Mary Nail from the internet are different and are given below:

38.—CHARMING MARY NEILL

I am a bold un - daunt-ed youth my -
name is John Mc Cann I'm na - tive of old Don - e - gal con -
-ve - nient to Stra - bane For the stealing of an hei - res - s I
lie in Lif - ford jail Her fa - ther swears he'll
hang me for - his - daughter Ma - ry Neill.

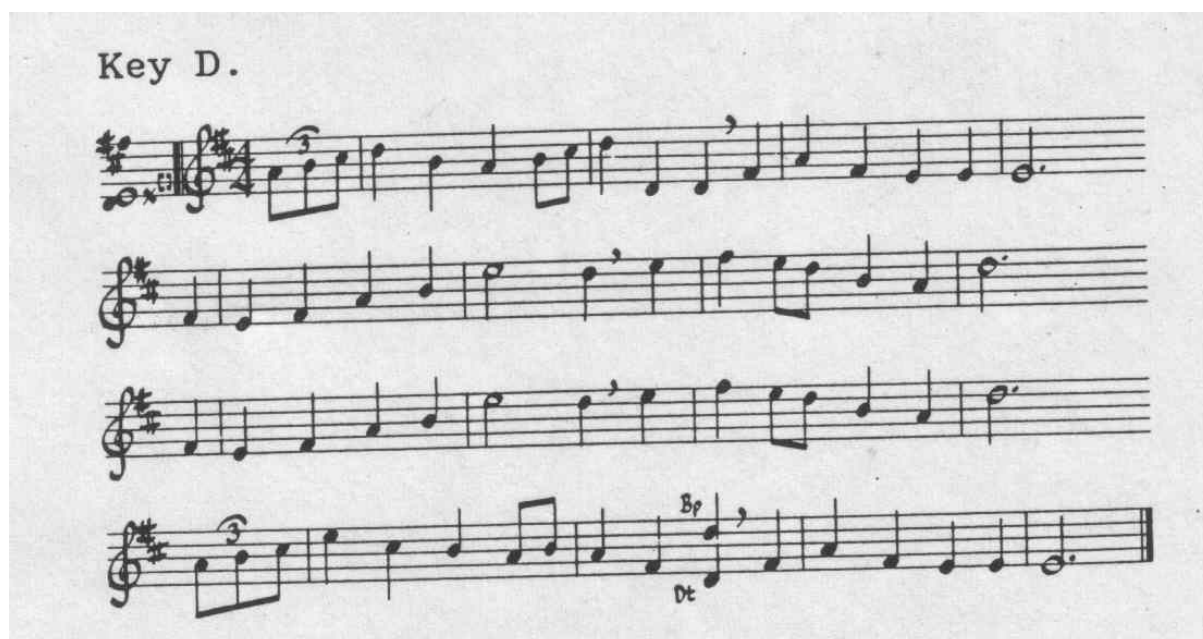
Mary Nail

I am a bold un - daun - ted youth, My name is John Mc - Cann. I'm a na - tive of sweet
De - na - gogue, con - ven - ient to Scot - land. Who was stea - ling of an hei - res - s and ly - ing long in
jail Her fa - ther swears he'll have my life a - long with Ma - ry Nail.

The above is the same as in H. Creighton's Book

The latter version (tune only) can be listened to on the Internet at
<http://www.mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=3896>

The tune in San Henry's book is:



References

- 1 Irish Street Ballads, collected and annotated by Colm O'Lochlainn, The Three Candles Limited, Dublin, 1919, reprinted 1946, 1952, 1956, 1958, 1962.
- 2 *The Londonderry Journal*, several issues, April 1836
The Londonderry Journal, Tuesday May 10, 1836
The Londonderry Journal, Tuesday, July 26, 1836
- 3 Glasgow Broadside Ballads, The Murray Collection.
<http://www.cc.gla.ac.uk/courses/scottish/ballads/index.htm>
- 4 <http://www.nls.uk/broadsides/broadside.cfm/id/14829/criteria/Mary%20Neil>
- 5 The Henry Bradshaw Irish collection presented in 1870 and 1886. Cambridge University
- 6 [http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=2806+b.11\(259\)&id=12382.gif&seq=1&size=0](http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=2806+b.11(259)&id=12382.gif&seq=1&size=0)
[http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=Harding+B+11\(3905\)&id=04832.gif&seq=1&size=1](http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=Harding+B+11(3905)&id=04832.gif&seq=1&size=1)
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- 7 [http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=Harding+B+11\(3843\)&id=04769.gif&seq=1&size=0](http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=Harding+B+11(3843)&id=04769.gif&seq=1&size=0)
- 8 Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland, Collected and edited by E. B. Greenleaf. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1933. Song no. 92.
- 9 Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia, collected by H. Creighton, J. M. Dent & Sons, Toronto and Vancouver, 1932. Song no. 80
- 10 Peacock, Kenneth, Songs of the Newfoundland Outports. Collected and edited by K. Peacock. Ottawa, 1965. pp 216-217
- 11 Sweet Wivelsfield, Martin Carthy, Deram (Decca) SML1111 (LP, UK, 1974)
<http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/martin.carthy/records/sweetwivelsfield.html>
- 12 Sam Henry's "Songs of the people" / edited, transcribed, and annotated by Gale Huntington; revised, with additions and indexes by Lani Herrmann ; geographical index prepared with the aid of John Moulden. Athens, Ga. ; London : University of Georgia Press, 1990. p479