



**Book Review — *Heading to the Fleadh: Festival, Cultural Revival and Irish Traditional Music, 1951–1969*, by Méabh Ní Fhuartháin.**

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Méabh Ní Fhuartháin provides us with “the first full-length, critical study of the Fleadh as a transformative cultural phenomenon” (Ní Fhuartháin 2024, cover). Through a complex interdisciplinary frame, *Heading to the Fleadh* explores aspects of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (All-Ireland Fleadh) as a historical, cultural and temporal event. Ní Fhuartháin presents the information in this book using the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of Irish studies, cultural history and festival studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, cultural musicology and folk music studies. The work outlines aspects and various iterations of the All-Ireland Fleadh as they are linked to the trajectory of the organisational development, growth and strategic objectives of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Comhaltas). Organised in chronological order, each of the seven chapters provide an in-depth account of the intertwined histories and evolution of the Fleadh festival and Comhaltas as an organisation. There is a substantial amount of detailed historical information regarding the annual events held from 1951–1969, which includes, but is not limited to the following: accounts of critical dates and key actors within Comhaltas, the event administration of the Fleadh, and the role of these actors and events in the greater revivalist movement and Irish traditional music scene. Beyond this historical perspective, Ní Fhuartháin situates the Fleadh as a social and cultural touchstone of Irish traditional music and investigates the ways in which various aspects of the All-Ireland Fleadh have become embedded in the community’s collective consciousness.

Chapter one addresses the social, political and economic pretexts that shaped the cultural landscape in the decades prior to the formation of Comhaltas in 1951, which influenced the organisation’s effort to create an

event that responded “to a period of perceived crisis in Irish traditional music” (Ní Fhuartháin 2024, cover). Ní Fhuartháin notes that Comhaltas, as an organisation, eventually drew on the outreach structure that other national organisations had found success in, which capitalised on local branches to encourage participation at the community level. Another element deemed essential for the event was the inclusion of competitions. The practice of festival-competitions such as those held by the Feis Ceoil Association were a familiar part of musical culture in Ireland. Through these familiar programming choices and the addition of new ones, Comhaltas cast a wide net to attract as many participants as possible to engage with the revivalist movement centred around Irish traditional music.

Chapter two explores the inaugural event held in 1951 in Mullingar with a particular emphasis on the significant contributions of local participants, which foreshadowed the continued importance of that dynamic in later years. Ní Fhuartháin provides a comprehensive account of the programme, results and reception of the multi-day event with details of the competitions, concerts and academically oriented presentations. Though aspects of the event underwent continual change in subsequent years, this chapter clearly outlines the structural elements of the festival that have remained central to the All-Ireland Fleadh.

Chapter three covers the period 1952–1955, highlighting the continued largely positive reception of the event, evident in increased attendance and host localities beginning to anticipate economic benefits from their involvement. The author traces changes in competition categories, special additions or notable omissions of categories for particular instruments, as well as the distinct local flair and participation that had become central to each host community’s identity over these years. Importantly, this chapter deals with the introduction of parades and pageants as a collective transition into the “Fleadh Zone” and the addition of Céilí band competitions alongside the individual categories. As the event grew in both attendance and prestige, so too did the demand for celebrity acts in the concert programme. While many of these performers were not considered to be traditional musicians, they were well known, which speaks to Comhaltas’s aim of engaging as many participants as possible.

Chapter four focuses on the years 1956 (Ennis) and 1957 (Dungarvan). Themes throughout this chapter draw attention to regional variants in what

constituted Irish traditional music. Another continuous theme examined is the stark contrast between these two events: the Fleadh in Ennis was economically successful, while the following year in Dungarvan it was perceived as a failure. By this time, host localities had developed certain expectations of mass attendance and substantial economic gain, which Dungarvan did not achieve, highlighting the growing involvement of economic stakeholders in the Fleadh as a mobile, annual event. The Ennis Fleadh became a cultural and commercial benchmark against which the Dungarvan Fleadh was measured. This dominant narrative persisted despite several culturally significant and successful aspects of the Dungarvan Fleadh, which, as Ní Fhuartháin points out, are often overshadowed in popular memory. Chapter five continues to explore the cultural and commercial themes raised in chapter four but largely delves into an examination of the re-remembering and re-telling of Fleadh-related events and how those accounts have impacted the perceived identity of the Fleadh.

Chapter six investigates the dichotomy between Comhaltas and the Fleadh as actors with the power to shape style and practice in Irish traditional music. One way the author explores that dichotomy is through a discourse analysis of the roles that members of Comhaltas have played, both as adjudicators of competitions held at the Fleadh and as organisers and/or curators of the event. Further, Ní Fhuartháin examines the Fleadh itself as a site where creative approaches and preferences have been publicly mediated by performers and adjudicators. The inherent subjectivity that has, since the event's inception, played a role in these outcomes is at the fore of discussion. As the author notes, winning a competition at the Fleadh usually resulted in a significantly enhanced reputation and profile for the winners, which often translated into greater opportunities to perform or record. For this reason, some felt that Comhaltas and the Fleadh exercised almost a monopolistic control over processes of learning, performance and recognition in Irish traditional music.

The final chapter examines the Fleadh throughout the 1960s and addresses the continued expansion of the event as a commercial success. Ní Fhuartháin details the internal conflict amongst cultural revivalists that emerged as a result of the increasing scale of the event, along with some negative associations that factions of the community began to attach to the

Fleadh as a rambunctious social gathering. While the challenges of managing the event had evolved over time both from an organisation and administrative point of view, the ever-growing crowds and shifting identity of the Fleadh brought both positive and negative outcomes for revivalist stakeholders. The session, which remained the primary form of unstaged music-making, rose to a new height of popularity as part of the Fleadh identity during these years, which situated Irish traditional music in dialogue with other revivalist movements around the world. This global engagement was further reflected in the composition of attendees at the Fleadh.

While this book is primarily an academic text, it is also compelling for non-academic audiences with aligned interests. The author's writing style is approachable, engaging and any instances of specialised vocabulary or use of terms in the Irish language are clearly defined. Ní Fhuartháin confronts power dynamics and mythologised histories in and around Irish traditional music as a part of the revivalist movement, which is woven throughout a dense historical account of the evolution and identity of the Fleadh. She presents a prismatic, interdisciplinary study of the Fleadh as a cultural phenomenon that has wide-ranging implications for the field of Irish traditional music and beyond.

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