

The McNulty Family

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Abstract

The McNulty Family was known as the royal family of Irish entertainers. They were the hottest Irish entertainment act on the East Coast, and perhaps in all of North America, from the 1930s through the 1950s. Ann “Ma” McNulty was the leader; her son Peter played the violin and piano, sang, and danced; and her daughter Eileen sang and danced. They also acted and performed skits to accompany their songs and comedy routines. Their shows were a high-energy, fast-paced type of vaudeville event. Ann Burke was born in Kiltewan, County Roscommon, Ireland, in 1887 and emigrated to the United States in 1910. She married John McNulty in 1914 and was a widow by 1928. This emigrant, who played the melodeon, and her two talented children started to entertain people to make a living. At the height of their career in the early 1940s, in addition to appearing at several venues every week, they had two radio shows, wrote a weekly column for the Irish Advocate newspaper, and had released about eighty recordings. Their vaudeville style was an excellent compliment to their talents, where acting and dancing were part of the delivery of a song or comedy routine.

The McNulty Family (Figure 1) was the hottest Irish entertainment act on the East Coast, and perhaps in all of North America, from the 1930s through the 1950s. Ann “Ma” McNulty was the leader, and her son, Peter, played the violin and piano and sang and danced, and daughter, Eileen, sang and danced. They also acted and performed skits to accompany their songs and comedy routines. Their shows were a high-energy, fast-paced type of vaudeville event that appealed to both Irish emigrants and Irish Americans. They were very Irish and very good!

Family History: Facts and Dates

Anne Brigid Burke, the youngest of nine, was born 2 December 1887 in Cloonmurly, Kiltewan, County Roscommon.¹ This date conflicts with the 1920 U.S. census, which lists Anne’s birth in 1891, but this type of discrepancy is not unusual with census records.

Kiltewan is not even on the standard road map supplied by the Irish car rental companies and is considered only a crossroads on the survey maps. Located less than two miles north of Knockcroghery, the town consists of a few buildings, including a good-sized church and school. When Pat Burke, Anne’s father, died, his widow, Abby, married Ed Fannon. The ruins of the Burke-Fannon house are located a fraction of a mile beyond the church on the right (Figure 2).

The author wishes to thank Pat and Jim Grogan for their help with dates, family details, and photos. Their encouragement and enthusiasm for sharing was an essential ingredient in completing this article. A special thanks as well to John Ridge for providing his issues of *The Advocate* newspaper containing Peter McNulty’s columns, and to the New York Public Library for microfilming.

¹ Birth certificate, Ireland, registration number 11369789. Courtesy of Pat and Jim Grogan.



Figure 1. The McNulty Family. Left to right: Peter, Eileen, “Ma” with one of her Superior accordions. Photograph from Copley 9–610 album cover, Ted McGraw collection. Reproduced with permission of the Irish Music Corporation.



Figure 2. Burke/Fannon house in Kiltreevan, County Roscommon, built with stone walls, thatch roof, two-to-four rooms, two windows in front, six living therein, as listed in the 1901 Irish census. Photograph courtesy of Ted McGraw.

The 1901 Irish census lists the following family members:

Edward Fannon, 60

Abby Burke Fannon, 48

Katie Fannon, 1

John Burke, 23

Elizabeth Burke, 17

Annie Burke, 13 (Ma McNulty)

Ann's other brothers and sisters, all older than John Burke, emigrated before this census. Members of the family still living in Kiltreevan today include Rose Kelly, whose grandmother was Ann Burke's stepsister, Katie Fannon.

Ann Burke's involvement in acting on the stage in Ireland before she emigrated to America in 1910 at age twenty-two is documented in a Kiltreevan School concert program from 1907. (Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish always used "America," rather than the United States, when referring to the land of opportunity to which they emigrated.) She met John McNulty, who had emigrated from Drumkeeran, County Leitrim, in 1911, and they were married on 20 April 1914. They lived in Attleboro, Massachusetts, where they had relatives. Ann and John's first child, Eileen, was born on 25 February 1915, after which the family moved to New York, where Peter was born on 28 April 1917 in Dobbs Ferry. By 1923 the McNultys had

moved to New York City. Although John McNulty was not a musician, he was a good céilí dancer, and he supported the children's performing ability. According to one account, he built a stage in their basement for them to use for practice. John McNulty passed away on 13 December 1928 at the age of thirty-eight.

The two children, Eileen and Peter, with their mother, began performing in New York as the McNulty Family in about 1926 when Peter and Eileen were still teenagers. Because the children attended Holy Name School at 97th and Amsterdam Streets in Manhattan for at least five years, it must have been in the late 1920s that the nuns at the school advised Ann McNulty (now a widow) to take the show on the road to provide a means of support for her family. Figure 3 shows a publicity poster for them from 1930.

Apparently these nuns were the first to pay Ann for a performance. "Ma," or Naneen, as she was called by her family, was clearly the "boss" and taught the songs and arranged the dances and acting skits for her family. By the late 1920s the children had already completed studies in music, dancing, and acting. They learned their steps from Professor Ed Courtney, who had emigrated from County Kerry and ran a dancing school at the Killarney Halls, 153 West 64th Street, in New York City. The following is an excerpt from a January 1928 newspaper ad for the Courtney School:

When you graduate from the Courtney School of Dancing, not only are you proficient in Irish Hornpipe, Jig and Reel, or Scotch Highland Fling, but also in the "Pat Rooney," Waltz, Clog, "Soft Shoe," "Swanee River," Buck and Wing, and all American tap. In short, no matter what the music, or popular song, you are capable of getting out and "Stepping It." As witness the "McNulty Children," expert steppers, who are a product of the Courtney School solely.²

Ma's experience in the parish dramatic society before she emigrated was now paying dividends.

The "Irish Showboat"

The "Irish Showboat," the name used throughout the McNulty Family's career for their shows, was introduced to radio in 1932 and to the stage at the Rockefeller Center Music Hall in 1933 (Figure 4).³

The "Irish Showboat" had a wonderful run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Opera House, where the McNultys typically performed three to five times a year for sell-out crowds. In 1948 audiences were still enjoying the "Irish Showboat," then in its sixteenth year at the Brooklyn Academy. By that time the three McNultys had expanded to a cast of nineteen performers. Peter lists some of the "Showboat" acts and performers in his "The News Nest" columns on 20 January 1940, 9 March 1940, and 18 January 1941: The Stone Outside Dan Murphy's Door; Sweet Bedelia "She's a Pip" (Peter in drag); Mickey Sweepstakes—the Dancing Horse that drinks beer; Bill Tuck the Sailor and his dog Trix; Patsy Curtin; Jimmy Hackett; Peggy Mulvey; Helen Roache; Peter Donald; Sean Hayes; Don Hedman; Charlie O'Brien;

² Advertisement for Courtney's School of Irish Dancing, *The Advocate*, 28 January 1928.

³ Decca Records, liner notes to *Irish Showboat, The McNulty Family*, Decca Album A 518, 1947.


America's Greatest
Irish Radio Entertainers



The Famous
McNulty Family



Figure 3. 1930 publicity poster for the McNulty Family Entertainers, courtesy of Pat and Jim Grogan.

ALL HANDS ON DECK
FOR THE
IRISH
SHOWBOAT
STAGE REVUE



MICKEY THE IRISH
DANCING HORSE

SWEET BEDELIA

SET BY
SAILBOAT SIX



DANNY
THE GREEN HORN

THE IRISH
SHOWBOAT PARADE

ALSO A
COLORFUL ARRAY
OF 17 BELOVED IRISH
FOOTLIGHT PERFORMERS

THE McNULTY FAMILY
At Brooklyn Academy of Music
Ashland Place in Brooklyn
Near Lafayette Street

CURTAIN 8:30

SUN. JAN. 11

Admission 55 & 83¢ INC. TAX Now on Sale at Box Office



Figure 4. "Irish Showboat" poster, 11 January 1942, courtesy of Pat and Jim Grogan.

Jack “Lakes of Sligo” Healy; and the Jackets Green Orchestra, which included accordionist Johnny McDonnell. Ann McNulty also wrote a playlet, *Danny Boy, the Greenhorn*, for her children, which she copyrighted and first produced in 1927. A version of *Danny Boy* was always part of the “Showboat” theater performances. The “Irish Showboat” was presented not only as a radio program, and on theater stages, but also in recordings. The McNulty Family recorded two versions of the “Irish Showboat” theme song, one in 1937 for Decca, and the other in the 1950s for Copley records of Boston.⁴

“Ma” McNulty played the single row button accordion, or melodeon, as it was called in Ireland. As shown in a photograph held by the family, she owned five of them, each tuned in a different key: one Baldoni, two Walters, and two Superiors.⁵ In this way “Ma” could overcome her self-imposed limitation of playing in only one key by selecting the instrument best suited to the song at hand. “Ma” was also noted for her frilly gowns, which she designed and made. In more than one of his newspaper columns, Peter mentions visiting his mother’s apartment littered with scraps of material in the process of being sewn together to make the next beautiful creation.

The “News Nest” Articles

From 22 April 1939 until he was drafted into the army on 19 September 1942, Peter wrote a weekly social column for *The Advocate* newspaper in New York⁶ titled “The News Nest by Peter McNulty” and signed “The Corncrake,” an affectionate nickname assigned by “Ma” in her playlet, *Danny Boy, the Greenhorn*. After Peter was drafted, Ann continued the columns until 1 May 1943 and then wrote for the *Irish Echo* newspaper, also in New York.

During his years in the army, Peter was a member of a quartet known as the “Foxhole Filharmaniacs” who presented shows in bombed-out buildings, caves, hospitals, and even knee deep in snow. They were members of the 106th Division that bore the brunt of the Belgian Battle of the Bulge. After that battle Peter was awarded the bronze star for valor. He was discharged from the army with the rank of second lieutenant in January 1946.

Peter’s columns document the social calendar, and indeed the social life, of the McNulty Family and many other Irish entertainers during that period. They sparkle with Peter’s good humor, as shown in the following examples:

22 February 1941. In describing an upcoming “Showboat Review”: “Laugh while you’re able. Your face will be straight long enough.”

⁴ Decca Records, catalog number 12087, 18 February 1937, and Copley Records, catalog number 9–257, 1950s.

⁵ Photograph of Ma’s five accordions, not printed here, courtesy of Pat and Jim Grogan.

⁶ *The Advocate* newspapers were eight to ten pages in length, and all but the first of Peter’s articles appeared at the top left of page 5 during the entire run, the most prominent spot on the social page. The articles averaged two columns wide, down three-quarters of the page, or about 900 words.

- 11 January 1941. On an upcoming wedding: “He will slip the binding band on her most important finger very soon.”
- 8 March 1941. “Money talks but it’s too shy to be on speaking terms with most of us.”
- 8 March 1941. Compliments to Helen Savage on her “crispy crackling” column.
- 4 July 1942. Here’s . . . strutting up 103rd St. with a “nice armload of loveliness.”
- 3 January 1942. “Don’t miss the Irish Showboat Review folks. You’ll be ‘blitzkrieged’ by the positive cream of Irish showfolks.”
- 27 June 1942. “Mickey H’s new pulse-quickener—a blondorable!”
- 4 May 1940. On his twenty-third birthday: “Here’s thanks again for the birthday greetings from all you ‘swelliferous’ folks from, Sincerely yours, ‘The Corncrake.’”
- 1 March 1941. Expecting couples: “The Harry Wades will be ordering an extra quart of milk a day, in or around April.”

Peter, a good-looking young man well known through his performances, radio broadcasts, and the newspaper column, even had his own fan club. At one time in the early 1940s, there were 160 members of the “Corncrake’s Association,” which met at Matty Murphy’s on East 198th Street.⁷

The Peter McNulty Music Club of the Traditional Irish Musicians Association⁸ was formed in the early 1970s after Peter’s death and was testimony to his skill as a traditional fiddler. Peter’s columns provide additional evidence of this skill; for example, on 18 April 1942, he talks about a powerful time spent exchanging fiddle tunes with Pat Breen and Johnny Heaney. The Club, one of a series of such groups in the New York area, met in the Bronx. These organizations preceded Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann and were eventually merged into Comhaltas, the international Irish traditional musicians’ organization.

Eileen McNulty and Johnny Grogan

Eileen McNulty was spotted by Johnny Grogan (1914–68) in 1936 on the beach at Keansburg, New Jersey. When she took a walk, Johnny struck up a conversation with Peter and found out to his delight that he was Eileen’s brother. When she returned, Eileen found a handsome guy playing ball with Peter, and their courtship began. They were married on 5 June 1937 and had two children, Jimmy, born on 5 February 1945, and Patricia, born on 21 March 1946. Johnny, an officer in the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilders of America, served as vice president of the union from 1943 to 1951 and as president from 1951 to 1968. He was also vice president of the AFL-CIO Executive Council and would eventually become mayor of Hoboken, New Jersey, a post he held from 1953 to 1965. Johnny Grogan was involved in many other activities as well and at one point was elected Supreme National President of the Holy Trinity Guild of America.

⁷ Peter McNulty, “The News Nest,” *The Advocate*, 27 September 1941.

⁸ *The Advocate*, 19 February 1972.

Eileen was a great dancer, and her feet can be heard on many of the McNulty Family recordings. After the death of her brother Peter in 1960, her husband John in 1968, and her mother “Ma” in 1970, Eileen reinvented herself. She went to Ireland for intensive training, obtained her TCRG (Irish dance teacher certification), and taught Irish step dancing from 1972 to the mid-1980s. She died on 22 September 1989.

Eileen’s son, Jimmy Grogan, performed in the family’s act for a short time in the early 1960s following Peter’s death. He is pictured with “Ma” and his mother in a 3 November 1962 *Irish Echo* newspaper ad for a McNulty Family appearance at the Emerald Society’s Night of Shamrocks.

Vaudeville, 1875 to 1925, and the McNulty Family Style

The development of vaudeville marked the beginning of popular entertainment as big business, dependent on the organizational efforts of a growing number of white-collar workers, and the increased leisure time, spending power, and changing tastes of an urban middle-class audience in the 1880s. When vaudeville came in, coarse and vulgar material went out: The objective was to present a variety program of respectable, clean entertainment that would appeal to female- and family-based shopping traffic in the larger cities. Far from being an inferior form of entertainment, vaudeville in fact constituted a distinctive style of its own, requiring performers magnetic enough to dominate an area of the stage, and exuberant or skillful enough to capture an audience’s attention and hold it until the act was over.

During the early 1920s, when the McNultys developed their style, live entertainment was the popular norm in the big theaters in America. The movies, radio, and recordings were developing rapidly, but it was sound film, beginning in 1926, that sounded vaudeville’s eventual demise. By this time the McNultys already had a very tight vaudeville act, modeled after the standard song and dance routines of the day with top hats, tails, and canes. Their dance routines were a combination of tap and traditional forms. Primarily stage entertainers, they were not a dance band or solo performers, but acting and dancing formed a vital part of their delivery of a song. An example of the talent displayed in their dance routines is evident in Figure 5, which shows Eileen and Peter, in step, literally flying across the stage. The McNulty Family songs covered a wide range of material and were popularized not only by the family’s performances, but, as we shall see shortly, also through their many recordings and radio broadcasts. Their act was unique among Irish entertainers of their time. Interestingly, their popularity actually was increasing at a time when vaudeville in general was suffering because of the “talking” pictures.

Media and Other Venues

The McNultys started broadcasting on radio in 1925 and by the early 1940s had two of their own weekly radio shows on WWRL, Wednesday at 7 P.M. and Sunday at 6 P.M. The family appeared on well known New York City Irish American variety broadcasts, such as Dorothy Hayden’s father’s show on WWRL and Harry McGurk’s show on WATV. Live appearances on these top-rated shows presented an



Figure 5. Eileen and Peter airborne during a dance routine, courtesy of Pat and Jim Grogan.

opportunity for them to publicize their appearances and promote their recordings. They also appeared on national radio with Rudy Vallee in 1938 and made an appearance on Milton Berle's television show in 1953.

The primary venue for the family's popular "club floor shows," as Eileen referred to their act, was the Leitrim House. There were five establishments named the Leitrim House, all run by Mike McGuire and Mike McCabe. Two were located on Rockaway Beach and the other three in New York City: at 59th Street and 3rd Avenue, 138th Street and 3rd Avenue, and 200th Street and Webster Avenue. Rockaway Beach, on the south shore of Long Island, was a major center of Irish entertainment at that time. In addition to the two Leitrim Houses (which stood side by side), there were several other Irish night club/dance halls, such as the Dublin House and the Sligo House. Most of these establishments boasted similar facilities: a bar, tables, open windows all around, and a dance floor. Typically, these halls held about 200 people.

The family kept a busy schedule, often performing multiple shows at multiple venues. In 1941 alone, for example, they performed at twenty-eight different venues in addition to the summer shows at Rockaway, larger events such as the "Irish Showboat Review" concerts at the Brooklyn Academy, and the annual *Night of Shamrocks* sponsored by the Emerald Society at the Yorkville Casino (a venue that held more than 1,000 people).

Recordings

The McNulty Family recorded 155 commercially released sides on three record labels, all ten-inch breakable, 78 rpm records.⁹ Their first recording session was for the Decca label on 10 November 1936; the last was about 1955 for the Copley label. This output is comparable to, or greater than, other popular Irish artists in the pre–World War II era. In comparison to the McNultys, for example, Frank Quinn recorded 185 sides, the Flanagan Brothers 161, and Dan Sullivan 116.¹⁰ Accompaniment varied on the recordings, with most of them including Ma, and others including Peter’s fiddle or piano and Eileen’s dancing (see Figure 6).

The following six sides (three records) were released from their first recording session, and the variety of material is worth noting:

“Stone Outside Dan Murphy’s Door”: a well-known old Irish favorite

“Polly O the Automat”: a popular new restaurant format in New York City; a boy-meets-girl song, written by Ann McNulty

“The Half Door”: an Irish country courting song

“Mother’s Silver Curl”: a mother’s song

“Master McGraw”: a sports song

“Hills of Donegal”: a well-known old Irish favorite

The Decca 12000 Irish Series included 288 records by fifty-one Irish artists issued between 27 October 1934 and 21 March 1950, with a gap during the war from 1942 to 1947. The McNultys recorded fifty-one records (102 sides) for Decca between 11 October 1936 and 30 December 1947. The *Irish Showboat* album was issued in 1947 and contained four 78 rpm records issued between 1938 and 1942. Other artists in this series included Paddy Killoran, Michael Coleman, John McGettigan, and John Feeney.

The McNulty Family songs came from various sources, including some that they wrote and others that they reworked. Among the latter, for example, is “Haste to the Wedding,” taken word for word from the *Songs of the Gael*,¹¹ a twelve-part series of books in sol-fa notation that were printed in 1915 and used in the schools in Ireland. Figures 7, 8, and 9 show some 78 rpm record labels.

Twelve tracks (six records) of the McNulty Family were issued by Standard records of New York City around 1950. Standard was one of the small companies that lasted only a few years. The Standard-Colonial company must have lasted into the 1960s, however, because in addition to issuing at least nineteen 78s, they also issued twenty-two 33–1/3 rpm albums of Irish music.

“The Likable Lovable Leitrim Lad” was a big hit for both the McNulty Family and Standard records. The song, written by Peter and first performed on the family’s radio show in May 1942, had everything required to make it a popular hit. It was tied to the war effort with a verse about leaving the bride behind and going off to battle; a mention of Peter’s father’s home of Drumkeeran, County Leitrim, provided a direct tie to Ireland; and it referenced two other popular Irish American entities: Notre Dame (Fighting Irish college football team) and the Fighting 69th, the most

⁹ The Ted McGraw collection contains all 155 recordings.

¹⁰ Discographic information courtesy of Alan Morrisroe, Dublin, Ireland.

¹¹ Breathnach, Padraig. *Songs of the Gael, No. 10*. Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1915.



Figure 6. Peter with fiddle, “Ma” with one of her Walters accordions, and Eileen. Photograph from Copley EP 9-8 album, Ted McGraw collection.

famous regiment of the Irish Brigade. Formed in April 1861, the Brigade earned its name during the battle of Bull Run in the American Civil War.

In 1953 the McNultys started to record for the Copley label, manufactured by O’Byrne DeWitt in Boston. They eventually issued forty-one tracks on 78 rpm records, 45 rpm (see Figure 10) and extended play 45 rpm records, and 33-1/3 rpm long-play records. The last record made by the McNultys, “The Boys from the Co.



Figure 7. Decca 78 rpm, “Old Ballymoe” record label, American pressing, Ted McGraw collection.

Armagh” and “The Homes of Donegal,” was the second to last Copley single record issued.

A particularly interesting release is the “Irish Rover” recording, which contains several key changes and features a piano accordion rather than a button accordion. “Ma” McNulty, as previously noted, played in only one key at a time and rarely appeared on the Copley records. In this case, the piano accordion accompaniment was supplied by a studio union musician who was of German descent. According to members of the family, “Ma” was furious that the traditional sound of her button accordion, for which the McNulty Family was noted, was being cast aside for marketing reasons. The record company’s aim was to increase sales by including more variety, provided in this case by multiple key changes that could be easily played on a piano accordion, but would have been difficult on the single row button accordion. Figure 11 shows Ma with one of her little single row button accordions.



Figure 8. Decca Supreme 78 rpm record, Irish pressing. Although most of the McNulty Family Decca records were also issued in Ireland, this particular record was issued only in Ireland. Ted McGraw collection.

The Trip to Newfoundland in 1953

The McNultys had a profound influence on the music of Newfoundland because of the efforts of one person, J. M. Devine, who ran the largest department store on the island, known as the Big 6. Devine distributed McNulty Family records all over Labrador and Newfoundland, and he sponsored radio shows featuring their music that were heard throughout the island. When the family arrived in St. John's harbor by steamship in April 1953, a crowd of several hundred people, complete with brass band, appeared to greet them. During a visit of at least two months, the family performed concerts, all of which were sold out. Numerous patrons had to be turned away, even in the remote areas of the island, despite the addition of extra performances on the tour.

Dr. Patrick Byrne, in discussing the reasons for the McNultys' popularity, details the demographics and politics of the province, a topic beyond the scope of this



Figure 9. Standard 78 rpm record label, Ted McGraw collection.

article.¹² It is important for our purposes here, however, to note that the McNulty Family's repertoire and style gave a legitimacy and respectability to a type of music that had been performed in Newfoundland for generations. The wide distribution, and subsequent popularity, of the McNulty Family recordings is evident in the music played by Newfoundlanders in their recordings.

One interesting example is the McNulty recording of the song "Molly Bawn," which does not concern the "Molly" of the well-known folk song, who was hiding under the bush to get out of the rain and was shot by her lover who mistook her for a swan.¹³ The McNultys' "Molly," recorded on 11 June 1942, is entirely different

¹² Pat Byrne, "Stage Irish in 'Britain's Oldest Colony': Introductory Remarks towards an Analysis of the Influence of the McNulty Family on Newfoundland Music," *Canadian Folklore* 13/1 (1991): 59.

¹³ Jennifer J. O'Connor, "The Irish Origins and Variations of the Ballad 'Molly Bawn,'" *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 14 (1986), <http://cjtm.icaap.org/contact/14/v14art3.html>.



Figure 10. Copley 45 rpm record label, Ted McGraw collection.

and was possibly written by Peter McNulty. That same version of the song is sung in Newfoundland and was recorded by Ryan's Fancy, a Newfoundland group, in 1980. Another example is the "Rollicking Skipper Jig," recorded by the McNultys on 27 May 1937. Note-for-note recordings of the McNulty version were made by two Newfoundland button accordion players: Harry Hibbs in the 1970s and Frank Mahar in 2005.¹⁴

Another example of the McNultys' influence in Newfoundland is the popular song "When I Mowed Pat Murphy's Meadow," which was issued on the Standard label. J. M. Devine, who was born in 1876 in King's Cove, Bonavista Bay, on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, composed its lyrics as he was mowing Pat Murphy's meadow when he was a young man. He convinced Peter McNulty to set

¹⁴ Harry Hibbs, *More Harry Hibbs, Vol. 2*, Arc Sound, Toronto, Canada, Arc AS809; Frank Maher and Mahers Bahers, *Mahervelous*, Borealis Records, 2005, BCD 168.



Figure 11. Eileen, “Ma” with her Baldoni Bartoli accordion, and Peter. 1940 publicity photo courtesy of Pat and Jim Grogan.

his poem to music and record it. Technically, then, it’s not an Irish song, but a Newfoundland song. Today a plaque in the meadow commemorates it.¹⁵

Among the fifty-five albums of Newfoundland music from the 1960s and 1970s in my own collection, nineteen artists on thirty albums recorded forty-nine songs that were previously recorded by the McNulty Family. The continued influence of the McNultys in Newfoundland long after they stopped performing led Ryan’s

¹⁵ A photograph of the plaque by Kent Hotson can be seen at <http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/NFLDHistory/PatMurphysMeadow-KingsCoveNewfoundland.htm>.

Fancy to invite Eileen, then aged 60, to appear with them on one episode of the *Ryan's Fancy* TV show in 1975.

Categories of Songs and the McNultys' Own Compositions

The McNulty Family recorded a wide variety of different types of songs:

Emigration: "Irish Showboat," "Goodbye Johnny Dear," "The Dawning of the Morning"
 Mother: "A Mother's Love Is a Blessing," "Mother's Silver Curl"
 Homesick (people): "Tipperary Daisy," "Seamus O'Brien"
 Homesick (places): "Hills of Glenswilly," "The River Moy," "Homes of Donegal," "Groves of Kiltveevan"
 American: "Polly O the Automat," "The Kelly's," "Likeable Lovable Leitrim Lad"
 Comic: "Grandfather Brian," "Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake," "O'Brien Has No Place to Go,"
 "Denny McCall"
 Sea: "They Sailed Away from Dublin Bay," "The Irish Rover"
 Irish Pride in America: "The Hat My Father Wore," "Let Ye All Be Irish Tonight"
 Sports: "Master McGraw," "Limerick Races"
 Courtship: "Let Mr. McGuire Sit Down," "In Old Ballymoe," "Mother Malone," "I Don't Care if I Do,"
 "The Half Door"
 Old Songs: "Little House under the Hill"
 Patriotic: "Irish Soldier Boy," "John Mitchell," "Boys of the Co. Cork," "Kelly from Killane"

Many of the songs were composed by Peter and Ann:

Peter McNulty:

"Likeable Lovable Leitrim Lad" (*Standard Record Label F-14007*)
 "Molly Bawn" (*Famous Irish Songs, Volume 1, Haskins Shamrock Irish Store, NY, undated, p. 140*)
 "Rose of Aranmore" (*music only, words by Hugh O'Donnell of Brooklyn*)
 "When I Mowed Pat Murphy's Meadow" (*music only, words by J. M. Devine*)

"Dora My Darling"	"My Old Hometown"
"Susie O'Malley"	"When It's Tea Time in the Meadows"
"My Charming Nell McCoy"	"My Sweetheart"
"Polly O the Automat"	"I Never Loved Another but You"
"At the Close of an Irish Day"	"Dawning of the Morning"

Ann "Ma" McNulty: (credit given on the Decca Record labels):

Some songs were probably the result of a group effort; for example, "In Old Ballymoe" was a McNulty version of "Ballinasloe," as Peter reports in his "News Nest" column of 26 October 1940.

Conclusion

Genuine "soul" music, whether jazz, blues, or Irish traditional folk music, has an elusive quality that has little to do with the technical manipulation of the instrument, but rather reflects the spirit and inspiration of the player shining through that technical manipulation. Box player Joe Cooley from Peterswell and Oisín MacDiarmada, fiddler with the group Teada, play such soul music, as do many other top Irish traditional musicians. "Ma" McNulty had a similar gift. Far from technically perfect, her music would lift auditors right off their feet. Sometimes the attendees at her concerts in large halls such as Rockefeller Center gave the ushers a hard time because as soon as she started to play they attempted to dance in the aisles.



Figure 12. Eileen, Peter, “Ma” with one of her Superior accordions. Photo from Copley 9-604 album cover, Ted McGraw collection.

This infectious quality of the McNultys’ soul music is evident in such recordings as “Rattigan’s Fancy” and “The Blackberry Blossom” (1942); halfway through the recording, the tune changes and the group crashes into the “Blackberry Blossom” as Eileen’s shoes hit the floor flying. Figure 12 shows another photo of the family in action.

McNulty Family performances were always multifaceted presentations: they sang, danced, played the accordion, violin, and piano, and were adept at putting on comedy skits. The following eyewitness description of one of their shows by Johnny Hanley, drummer for Paddy Noonan, captures the excitement they generated:

They were the Royal Family of entertainers—there will never be another act like them. The ‘Night of Shamrocks’ was a big night for all the entertainers in New York City; thousands of people were there at the ‘Palm Gardens’; there were 20 different acts. The excitement would build up, goose pimples came over people, and there was a hush—the McNulty Family were about to appear. Then all of a sudden out of nowhere the act would crash onto the stage. The highlight would be a dance routine with the hats and canes. The hats would be on and they would lean on their canes and do their kicks, and it was fantastic! There will never be anyone again like the McNulty Family.¹⁶

Appendix 1. Complete Discography of McNulty Family Recordings¹⁷

McNulty Family: Alphabetical List	U.S. Decca	Irish Decca	Copley	Standard
A Mother's Lament	12107*	W4172		
A Mother's Love Is a Blessing	12254*	W4874		
A Mother's Love is a Blessing			DWL9-610	
A Toast to the 32 Counties			9-259*†c	
Along the Rocky Road to Dublin			DWL9-611	
Amber Tresses Tied In Blue	12222	W4536		
Ann Carawath Hornpipe (Stack of Wheat)				F-14010
At The Close of an Irish Day	12242a	W4645		
At the Close of an Irish Day			9-258*†c	
Auld Skillara Hat				F-14009
Back To Donegal	12089b	W4035		
Barney Brannigan	12155	W4274		
Bedelia				F-14010
Biddy Donahue	12197	W4405		
Boys From the Co. Armagh			9-266*e	
Boys of the Co. Cork			9-257*†c	
Boys of the Co. Cork	12087*	W4051		
Breakfast in Bed on Sunday Morning			9-244†	
Chasing the Chicken, Maid on the Green Jig	12255			
Christmas in Exile (10/21/38)	12183	W4327		
Come Out of the Rain Barney McShane	12126	W4464		
Daisy Bell	12246	W4874		
Darling Girl from Clare			9-225*†e	
Dawning of the Morning	12154	W4274		
Denny McCall	12210	W4463		
Dora My Darling				F-14016
Drum Collier	12270	W5213		
Dunloe Fair	12210	W4487		

¹⁶ Johnny Hanley, *Irish Memories: Recollections of the Irish American Music Scene from the 1940's, 50's and 60's*, Copley Records, Collectors Series, Rego Irish Records, COP0001, 1992.

¹⁷ Sources for information include: Ted McGraw collection of all 155 sides, numerous undated advertising flyers published by Decca and O'Byrne DeWitt record companies for cross-media catalog number verification, and Steven Abrams, "A Disco-graphical Project," <http://78discography.com/Dec12000.htm>.

Eileen	12274	W5216	
Eileen McMahon	12271		
Eileen O'Dair	2963		
Erin's Green Shore	12155b	W4293	
Erin's Green Shore			DWL9-610
Exile of Cork			9-228*† d
Fair Roscommon Polka			9-226*† e
Far Away in Australia	12256a		
Flower of Sweet Strabane			F-14008
Flowery Dell, Miss Drury's Reels	12255		
Foggy Dew	12259a	W5214	
Galway Rogue (Bandon Blarney Stone)	12271	W4240	
Garryowen, Three Little Drummers Jig	12258		
Golden Jubilee	12246	W4872	
Goodbye Johnny Dear (4/4/39)	12197	W4434	
Goodbye, I'm on My Way to Dear Old Dublin Bay			DWL9-610
Grandfather Brian	12189	W4378	
Green on the Green			F-14016
Groves of Kiltewan	12240*	W4644	
Haste to the Wedding	12195*a	W4394	
Hat My Father Wore on St. Patrick's Day			9-261*† c
Highland Mary	12100	W4856	
Hills Of Donegal	12071	W4002	
Hills of Glenswilly	12270a,b	W5215	
Hills of Knock-na-Shee			9-226*e†
Homes of Donegal			9-266*e
I Don't Care If I Do	12119	W4226	
I Don't Care If I Do			DWL9-610
I Don't Work For a Living	12222	W4464	
I Have a Bonnet Trimmed in Blue, Maggie in the Woods Polkas	12253		
I Ne'er Loved Another But You	12217	W4447	
I'd Sing Like a Thrush (Little Bridget Flynn)	12127	W4240	
If You Ever Go Over	12196	W4394	
I'll Forgive and I'll Try To Forget (3/25/47)	12274	W5215	
I'm Living the Life O Reilly	2963		
I'm Sighing Tonight For Killarney and You	12089	W4051	
In Old Ballymoe	12240*	W4671	
Ireland Boys Hurrah!	12099	W4170	
Irish Greens and Bacon	12127		
Irish Soldier Boy	12263a	W5214	
It's Nice to Get Up in the Morning			9-244†
Jackets Green			9-228*† d
John Mitchell	12217	W4563	
John Mitchell			DWL9-610
Kelly the Boy From Killane	12236*	W4644	
Kerry Long Ago	12189	W4277	
Kielrow, Ma McNulty's Favorite Fling	12273b		
Knock at My Window Tonight Love	12198	W4405	
Leather Away With the Wattle O Polka			DWL9-610
Let Mr. Maguire Sit Down	12100	W4171	
Let Mr. Maguire Sit Down			DWL9-610
Let Ye All Be Irish Tonight	12169	W4327	

Likeable Lovable Leitrim Lad			9–261*†c	
Likeable Lovable Leitrim Lad				F-14007
Limerick Races	12252*a	W4873		
Little House Under the Hill	12208	W4463		
Maid of the Sweet Brown Knowe	12148	W4307		
Master McGraw	12071			
McDonnell's Old Tin Roof	12209	W4447		
McNamara from Mayo				F-14008
McNamara from Mayo			DWL9–611	
McNulty's Irish Showboat	12087*a	W4420		
McNulty's Irish Showboat			9–257*†c	
Mickey Hickey's Band	12257			
Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake	12254*a	W4873		
Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake			DWL9–610	
Miss McLeod's, Swallow's Tail Reels		W5217		
Molly Bawn	12257			
Moon Behind the Hill	12108	W4171		
Morriarty, the Happy Cop	12088	W4856		
Mother Malone	12195*	W4420		
Mother Malone			DWL9–610	
Mother's Silver Curls	12073	W4002		
My Beauty of Limerick	12161*	W4276		
My Charming Nell McCoy			9–227*†	
My Old Home Town	12272	W5212		
My Own Dear Galway Bay	12272a	W5216		
My Sweetheart	12259	W5212		
O Son Remember My Love	12196	W4563		
O'Brien Has No Place To Go	12236*	W4645		
Off to Philadelphia				F-14013
Old House Far Away	1208	W4035		
Old Potato Cake	12169	W4307		
Over the Hills and Far Away Fling	12126	W4227		
Polly o The Automat	12073			
Queenstown Harbor			9–227*†e	
Rattigan's Fancy, Blackberry Blossom Reels	12258			
Real Old Mountain Dew	12161*	W4378		
River Moy, The	12183	W4293		
Roamin' in the Gloamin'			9–245†	
Rollicking Skipper Jig	12099	W4178		
Rolling Rocks of Glan, River Meadow Reels	12099			
Rose of Aranmore	12252*a	W4871		
Seamus O'Brien	12247	W4872		
Shall My Soul Pass Through Old Ireland	12154	W4276		
Slippin' the Jig	12119	W4227		
Someone's Waiting for Me Back in Ireland			9–256*†c	
Somewhere in Ireland				F-14009
Song of the 32 Counties	12107*	W4270		
Stack of Barley	12273a	W5217		
Stack of Wheat Hornpipe (Ann Ccarawath)			DWL9–611	
Star of the Co. Down	12108	W4172		
Stone Outside Dan Murphy's Door	12072	W4020		
Susie O'Malley	12256			
Susie O'Malley			DWL9–611	

The Half Door	12072	W4020		
The Irish Rover			9-260*† c	
The Kelly's	12209	W4487		
The Star of Logie Bay			9-259*† c	
There's a Sweetheart Waiting For You	12241	W4672		
There's a Sweetheart Waiting for You			9-258*† c	
They Sailed Away From Dublin Bay	12208	W4434		
They Sailed Away from Dublin Bay			DWL9-610	
Thief of the World (4/4/39)	12198	W4536		
Three Leaf Shamrock from Glenore				F-14007
Tipperary Daisy	12247b	W4871		
Tipperary Daisy			DWL9-611	
Walker Walked Away	12176	W4594		
Waltz Me Around Again Willie	12176	W4594		
We'll Take You Back to Ireland	12148b	W4277		
We'll Take You Back to Ireland			9-260*† c	
When I Met MacKay			9-245†	
When I Mowed Pat Murphy's Meadow				F-14013
When It's Tea Time in The Meadow	12263	W52213		
When Rafferty Brought the Rumba to the Town of Aughnacloy	12118	W4226		
When You Look in the Heart of a Shamrock			9-225*† e	
When You're Winging Your Way to Old Ireland			9-256*† c	

Notes: There are 155 tracks total.

The eighteen tracks listed twice are re-recordings on different labels, not reissues.

There are seventeen instrumental tracks including one that was recorded twice.

* Also on 45 rpm, and † on 45 rpm EP (extended play, four tracks).

The 12 Standard 78's were also issued on Colonial LP-121 and LP-621.

Decca LP Coral 57368 = a, Coral 57464 = b.

Copley LP: DWL9-604 = c, DWL9-610 = d, DWL9-611 = e.

Where Copley 78's weren't issued, the DWL album number is listed.

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