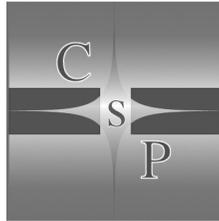


Travellers and Showpeople

Travellers and Showpeople: Recovering Migrant History

Edited by

Mícheál Ó hAodha



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

Modernity reached its limits with the recognition that its most cherished discourses were founded on an act of violence against the Other...If the Holocaust marked the culmination of the modern quest for mastery and the determination of the Other by the Self, postmodernity as a post-colonial and post-Holocaust discourse forces us to see the Self through the eyes of the Other.

—Delanty 2000: 3

We live in the era of the Other, the era of “difference”, the era of migration - that “stranger” who waits silently at the border crossing, battered suitcase in hand. Travellers and Roma are the archetypal migrants. Perennial “outsiders”, they are the people who have lived for centuries on society’s margins. This volume explores the history of these traditionally migrant peoples within the historical frame of articulation that is Western representational culture. It attempts to unearth the “occluded” histories of the migrant, the stories of these peoples who have yet to be understood. The Traveller...the nomad...the *Gypsy*...the *Roma*. He/She is the archetypal *Other*, a figure whose very existence generates ambivalence. This volume questions our notions of historical authenticity as relating to both national and diaspora cultures? It is only through a new re-engagement with the “official” versions of social history as relating to “marginal” peoples that we can creatively bridge the historical dichotomy that is Self and Other, that dichotomy which has been fundamental to a modernity crippled by crises of identity, representation and cultural legitimization?

Mícheál Ó hAodha

CHAPTER ONE

THE “ROUGH” VOICE OF REASON: RECALLING MARGARET BARRY

MÍCHEÁL Ó HAODHA

Margaret Barry was born in 1917. An Irish Traveller and ballad-singer, her distinctively powerful voice was honed in the noise of the fair, the race meeting and the football crowd. Starting out as a street singer or busker, Barry generally rarely failed to command attention and generally accompanied herself on the banjo while singing. She came from a family of accomplished Traveller musicians and her parents and her uncles were all accomplished street balladeers. Her grandfather, Bob Thompson, was a very talented uilleann piper who won the top prize at the Feis Ceoil that was held in Dublin – in 1897 and in Belfast the following year. The celebrated song collector Peter Kennedy first met Margaret in 1952 in Crossmaglen, County Armagh, where she was then living in a caravan at the village of Cregganbane. he wrote in one of his album notes. He had first heard of Margaret from Alan Lomax who had heard her singing the song *Goodnight Irene* at Dundalk fair in 1951. Kennedy recorded Margaret Barry in 1952. In the early 1950s she moved to Camden Town, London where she joined musical forces with County Sligo fiddler Michael Gorman, the duo becoming a permanent part of the thriving London-Irish emigrant-music scene, a scene that included such illustrious names as Máirtín Byrnes, Jim Power, Tommy McCarthy, Willie Clancy, and Seamus Ennis – to mention but a few. Ewan McColl invited Margaret, Michael Gorman and Willie Clancy to his London home in 1955 where they recorded two LPs - *Songs of an Irish Tinker Lady* and *Irish Jigs, Reels and Hornpipes*. During the 1960s, Margaret returned to Ireland with her daughter setting up home in Laurencetown, County Down. Her performances became rarer from the late 1970s onwards and she died in 1990 (RIP).

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Come Back Paddy Reilly, Margaret Barry, Emerald
Irish Music in London Pubs, Margaret Barry and others, Folkways
Irish Night Out, Margaret Barry, Michael Gorman, The Dubliners and others

CHAPTER TWO

“A CLOWN’S CLOWN” – EMMETT KELLY

MÍCHEÁL Ó HAODHA

Literary and historical sources indicate that the art of clowning is a very ancient one, a form of artistic expression which has existed for many thousands of years. It is said that a pygmy clown performed as a jester in the court of Pharaoh Dadkeri-Assi during Egypt's Fifth Dynasty – as early as 2500 B.C. Court jesters performed for the Chinese aristocracy since 1818 B.C. and when Cortez conquered the Aztec people in 1520 A.D. he discovered that the court of Aztec king (Montezuma) included clowns and jesters similar to those that were then part of the cultural tapestry of Europe. Most Native American groups have also had some type of clown characters as aspects of their religious and socio-cultural rituals and tenets and the same is true amongst many peoples, even today. These clowns played an important role in the socio-cultural and religious life of these communities, and were believed in some cases to be able to cure certain psychological physical calamities and diseases as suffered by both humans and animals. Throughout history most cultures have had clowns and jesters at one time or another. Irish and Irish-American culture is no different and Irish oral history and folk sources indicate that these clowns or “fools” were frequently given great freedom of speech. In many cases cultures they fulfilled a counter-hegemonic function and were the only people who were permitted to speak out against the ideas of the Celtic aristocracy or give a voice to opinions that were considered both radical or contrary to the hegemony of the ruling class. The subversive or prophetic humour of the tramp or clown figure is an aspect of Irish culture which has traversed sweeping historical, social and linguistic change and constantly adapted itself to new or changed conditions. One of the best-known of these “tramp” clowns, a man whose name will forever be associated with twentieth -century circus history was Irish-American artiste Emmett

Kelly¹. Kelly was born in Sedan, Kansas on the ninth of December, 1898 and despite having no “family background” in the circus, he would go on to become one of the most widely-lauded clowns of all time. As with many Irish-Americans of this era, Emmett’s father worked on the railroad while his mother supplemented the family income by running a boarding house.

The family left Sedan and moved to a farm in rural Missouri but the longing for a peripatetic lifestyle was evident in Emmett from an early age. In his late teens and early twenties he worked at a variety of different jobs, before apparently “settling down” to work as a cartoonist for a silent film company that was based in Kansas City. Ironically, it was in this job that the first drew the cartoons of the tramp clown character that would make his name throughout the U.S. and further afield as a circus performer in the years to come – i.e. the character know as Weary Willy – the stoic “loser”, the poignant and perpetual underdog, who never gave up – and who, because of this, occasionally won. Weary Willy was a symbol and inspiration for the working man of the Depression. Whiling away the long hours at his office desk and drawing cartoons allowed time for his imagination and Emmett Kelly dreamed of nothing better than joining the circus. Unlike the countless thousands of other dreamers, Kelly made his dream a reality. He bought a trapeze and in his spare time honed the skills of a circus aerialist. His entrée to the circus was by way of his skills as a painter and graphic artist – he painted the intricate designs that decorated the exterior of the circus wagons- but his big “break” as a performer came when he found work as a trapeze artist with *Howe’s Great London Circus where he also double-jobbed as a clown*. As he had yet to develop his “Weary Willie” character in its full incarnation his first clown roles a clown were in the guise of a “regular” white-face clown.² In 1923, while

¹ Today Emmett Kelly is sometimes referred to as Emmett Kelly Sr. in order to distinguish him from his son, Emmett Kelly Junior who was also an accomplished circus performer and clown in his own right.

² It is generally considered that there are four basic types of clown. These include the Whiteface clown, the Auguste, which became more popular than the whiteface, during the second half of the nineteenth Century, the Character clown and the New Vaudeville clown. The Whiteface clown is the oldest type of Clown in existence and uses white makeup on his face. It is believed that these early clowns emerged from the theatrical traditions of an earlier era where it was the habit for the entertainers to wear white faces for their performances. They also wore costumes that could be both elegant and bizarre. The “white-faces” acted as comics during acts or as the butt of the Ringmaster’s jokes. They also performed many physical stunts, jumping and tumbling in a comical manner so that the performers needed to both fit and lithe. The variation on the Whiteface clown that is known as the

working with John Robinson’s circus Kelly he met and married Eva Moore, a fellow trapeze artist and they would later perform together in an trapeze duet known as the "Aerial Kellys". The arrival of children necessitated that Emmett earn more money and it was while developing new roles and characters for himself that Kelly first drew inspiration from the previous cartoon “incarnation” that was Weary Willy. His new character did not initially secure the approval of his superiors in the circus – (this new clown “type” was initially considered too dirty-looking or scruffy) – and the Weary Willy “character” was put on the “back-burner”. The Great Depression and its attendant poverty and migration of people changed all of this however and the American public imaginary became more attuned to the appearance of tramps and hobos. In 1933, Emmett Kelly first appeared as Weary Willy, the clown figure who would become his standard character ever after.

Kelly was a hard worker and took jobs wherever he could find them, working his way across the U.S. and Europe with such illustrious circuses as the *Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus*, the *Cole Brothers and Clyde Beatty Circus* and the *Mills Circus* which toured Britain in the late 1930s. It was while he was in London that he came to the attention the leading circus owner and impresario, John Ringling North who signed Kelly up for the renowned *Barnum and Bailey Circus* as run by the Ringling Brothers.

Kelly’s role in this circus was to performance to wander into the circus ring “impromptu-like” during the acts of other performers acts – where he would suddenly appear – in order to string up laundry on a low acrobatic wire, dust down the animals, or work the stands. He is generally acknowledged to have been the first clown in circus history to have the privilege of remaining in the ring to act on his own while others were still performing. He also performed his own acts, the most famous of which was known as the "sweeping the spotlight" routine. Kelly would remain with the Barnum and Bailey Circus for fourteen seasons in total. He was also active on Broadway in shows such as "Please Keep off the Grass" and in the then fast-expanding film genre where he performed in such notable circus classics as *The Greatest Show on Earth* and Federico Fellini’s classic “The Clowns”. Beginning in 1957, he worked with the *Shrine Circus*. Emmett Kelly lived a long and happy life and died in Florida, in

"Grotesque" Whiteface is an exaggerated type of character that is still common in the modern imaginary today – everything about him is “out-of-kilter” or exaggerated beyond belief including the costume – bigger wider and baggier pants, shoes, collars, and wigs are frequent – Bozo and Ronald McDonald are two famous whiteface characters that would be in this clown category.

1979. Today, his memory is celebrated and immortalized in the *Emmett Kelly Museum* in the town of his birth – Sedan, Kansas.

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CHAPTER THREE

BEADY POCKETS: SYMBOLISM AND PRACTICALITY IN IRISH TRAVELLER CULTURE¹

FIONNUALA CARSON WILLIAMS

As a child, familiar with the following rhyme, I was intrigued about how one could lose a pocket:

*Lucy Locket lost her pocket
Kitty Fisher found it
Not a penny was there in it
Only ribbon round it.²*

Lucy's pocket, however, was not the kind of pocket we know today, an integral part of a garment, but a separate item. Various attempts have been made to identify Lucy and Kitty, and thereby have a *terminus ante quem* for the rhyme, but Iona and Peter Opie think it more likely that the names are stock rather than belonging to particular people. The earliest version of the rhyme in their book is 1805, when it was noted as being sung in girls' schools in Hampshire in the south of England.

¹ This was originally presented as a Member's Paper at the Society for Folk Life Studies conference 16-18 September, 2005, in Melrose, Scotland

² This is the version as I remember hearing it at home in the 1950s. Other versions are to be found in, for example, Opie and Opie, 1980, 279: 'Lucy Locket lost her pocket/ Kitty Fisher found it/ Nothing in it, nothing in it/ But the binding round it. (James Orchard Halliwell 1842) and 'Lucy Locket lost her pocket/ Kitty Fisher found it/ Not a penny was there in it/ Only ribbon round it.' and Peirce 1983, 50, given under 'Walking Rhymes': 'Lucy Locket lost her pocket;/ Kitty Fisher found it./ There was not a penny in it./ Just a ribbon round it.' Another children's rhyme which mentions a pocket is found in Leyden 1993, 107, and Brady, 1984, 50, given under 'Picking Sides': 'A pig went into a public house/ "Where's your money?"/ "In my pocket."/ "Where's your pocket?"/ "I forgot it!"

The following poem by Jonathan Swift takes us back another century to 1700. It shows how and where pockets could be fastened. The poem is a mock petition with the grand title of 'To Their Excellencies the Lords Justices of Ireland The Humble Petition of Frances Harris, who must Starve, and Die a Maid if it miscarries.' In it Mrs Harris explains:

...all the Money, I have, which, God knows, is a very small stock, I keep in my Pocket, ty'd about my Middle, next my smock, So when I went to put up my purse, as God would have it, my smock was unript, And, instead of putting it into my pocket, down it slipt.³

The word *pocket* itself originally meant a *bag* and survives in the form *poke*, used in Northern Ireland to refer to a hollow conical wafer topped with ice cream, or *cone*, as opposed to the rectangular *slider* composed of ice cream between two flat wafers. 'Poke' was certainly one word sent in from Northern Ireland in response to the BBC quest, started in January 2005, to people throughout the United Kingdom for words and phrases unique to their area in preparation for 'Voices Week' (22 August–). It was included in a selection of these published at the beginning of the week in the *Belfast Telegraph* of 22/8/2005. 'Poke' also survives in its original sense of 'bag' in the expression which is common in English everywhere 'to buy a pig in a poke' meaning 'to buy something unseen.' When the word 'pocket' transferred to the pocket that was an integral part of a garment, such as a skirt, the original articles were sometimes referred to as 'bag pockets'.

Apart from the literary and linguistic evidence some pockets themselves actually survive,⁴ and Swift's poem of 1700 appears to be almost contemporary with the earliest known examples.⁵ The *Dictionary of English Costume 900–1900* says that in the nineteenth century a pocket

³ The reference to Mrs Harris' pocket was obtained through Cunnington, Cunnington and Beard 1960

⁴ After my paper in Melrose, Christine Stevens of the Society, kindly told me of Barbara Burman who, with others, was researching pockets (for details see next footnote). I contacted her, sending her my paper. She was surprised to know that pockets were being worn until recently. An exhibition connected with the research 'Pockets of History' ran in the Fashion Museum, Bath, Somerset, England, from 27 September 2006 to 2 September 2007 <http://www.fashionmuseum.co.uk> and <http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/fashion>

⁵ Pockets of History: production and consumption of women's tie-on pockets from c 1690-1914, a Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton project in progress by Barbara Burman, Jonathan White and Seth Denbo supported by an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant.

was 'a separate article in the form of a small, flat bag, or a pair of such bags, attached together by a tape and that, although worn under the skirt, pockets of this period were 'frequently ornamented with coloured needlework patterns' (Cunnington, Cunnington and Beard 1960).

Skirts then were full and access to pockets was through plackets or vertical openings. For the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, skirts became straighter so pockets beneath would have spoiled their line and ladies carried an 'indispensable' or 'reticule'. During this period some pockets with a classical look were designed (Squire 1974). The fashion for wider skirts soon returned and with them a return to a pocket or a pair of pockets worn under the skirt, often in plain white linen or cotton like one in the Gallery of English Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester, England, which dates to between 1825 and 1835.

Then, about 1840, pockets sewn into skirts became usual. Men had had such pockets sewn into side seams much earlier—from the 16th century. One of the *Cries of London*, Plate 7 'Fresh gathered peas,' however, gives us an example which shows that bag pockets continued to be worn by those less well off whose clothes did not follow all the changes in fashion. The *Cries of London* were studies of fruit sellers, and so on, who probably lived in the countryside. (The *Cries of London* were originally published in 1687 with a final printing in 1821 and several pirate copies in between, so there is a complicated publication history (<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk>). Here, again, the pocket is plain and worn under the skirt. Women, when working, often hitched up their long dresses as their petticoats were shorter and easier to move in. The trains, or back hems, of the dresses were pulled through the plackets, the openings to the pockets. Incidentally, wearing the outer skirt tucked up in this way was a style which transferred to high fashion. This style is familiar to us through china figurines.

Although pockets sewn into skirts had become usual from the mid-nineteenth century on, a single separate pocket, often decorated and colourful, remained part of peasant costume in some places, for instance, France (Thompson *et al* 1980, 106) and Scandinavia, for much of the next century. Coloured drawings of infant girls, and both married and unmarried women wearing these were presented, for example, by Kathleen Primmer in her *Scandinavian Peasant Costume* published in 1939 in London (Primmer 1939, Sweden 66 and coloured facing plate, 67, 68, 75 and 76, and Finland 91, 92, 94 and 95). The sporran could be considered an extant example of the bag pocket while the more ubiquitous bum bag is really the pocket reinvented. A group for whom separate pockets continued to be worn by *women* were Travellers and the arrival of a Traveller's pocket in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, in 2004 as part of the

Aileen L'Amie Traveller Collection sparked off this little investigation. The Library's pocket is at present on display in the Northern Ireland Museums Council's touring exhibition *Our people our times* (2 May 2005–) which has a section on Travellers. It is illustrated in the booklet which accompanies the exhibition (Crozier 2002, 13).

From what we can tell from the few surviving records that there are, Travellers' garb has always echoed that of settled people, albeit if worn in a particular way or displaying a preference for particular styles, colours, fabrics or accessories. Like other groups, it might be said that Traveller style was just slightly out of time with mainstream fashion, although the gap is certainly less perceptible nowadays, particularly amongst the present teenagers. One of the earliest descriptions of Travellers that we have is in a County Antrim clergyman's account book, for the years 1672 to 1680, located by Aileen L'Amie in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (Document/1614/3). The clergyman 'describes the annual visits of a family group to the rectory, begging food and clothing, and mentions the women as being strikingly distinct from the general population, with very dark hair and eyes, and brightly coloured plaid skirts'.⁶

The Library bag pocket is a replica which Aileen L'Amie had made in the 1980s following a description by Sinéad Ní Shuinéar, a social anthropologist with an intense interest in Travellers who, at that time, was wearing a pocket and recently described it to me as being most practical (personal communication Spring 2005). But what of actual bag pockets? The search for information began with a call to a Traveller organisation in Belfast to establish the Traveller term for such items and Bernard Mongan, to whom I spoke, was immediately able to let me know that it was 'beady pocket'. Then Bairbre Ní Fhloinn of the Séamas Ó Duilearga Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Archive, University College Dublin, reminded me of her photo of Mrs Winnie O'Donnell of Roscommon town taken in 1981. It was exhibited in Dublin Castle about twenty years later in an exhibition for *Citizen Traveller Week* and published about the same time in *Béaloideas* along with seven other photographs of Travellers from the Archive (Barron, Ní Fhloinn and uí Ógáin 2001, p. 161). Mrs O'Donnell is wearing her beady pocket on her left side, under her apron. It is rectangular, about 12" wide and 16" long, with a horizontal placket, or bound slit in the material, about a third of the way down. The material is not black and seems to have thin lighter-coloured vertical stripes. The two-thirds of the pocket below the placket are much more densely decorated than the part above. The decoration

⁶ As quoted by Ní Shuinéar in McCann *et al* 1994, 64

consists mainly of light-coloured braid or chain stitch embroidery over which numerous light-coloured buttons, some metal, are sewn. The placket is outlined with rick-rack, with a further row of rick-rack above it right across the pocket. About the same time, Louise Harrington of Cork Traveller Women's Network came to work on the Aileen L'Amie Traveller Collection in the Linen Hall Library and offered to ask women in the Network about beady pockets. They had, in fact, made beady pockets as part of their 'Wagon Project'. I am extremely grateful to Louise for using a questionnaire I subsequently sent her.⁷ All six women she spoke to currently live in Cork city and one of the younger ones was born in Cork, the others being born in counties Kerry, Limerick, Clare and Galway. Their answers form the bulk of what follows but scraps gained from elsewhere point towards a uniformity throughout the island of Ireland.

It certainly seems that the practice of wearing a pocket has died out and that Bairbre's photo taken in 1981 in Roscommon is probably one of the last we shall get of a pocket being worn. They were worn by married women and sometimes by single women. It appears that some older married women continued to wear them after the practice had died out among the new generations. In answer to my questionnaire by women whose ages ranged from mid-thirties to 71, all said that the practice had died out. The women said that 'some older Traveller women wore pockets up to a couple of years ago in Cork' and one said that her aunt wore one until her death in Ennis, County Clare, ten years ago, however, the wearing of pockets generally seems to have stopped about twenty years ago.

None of the respondents had seen them for sale. Some women made their own pocket 'but if you knew someone, a friend, who was very good at making pockets you'd buy the material and give it to them and she would make a pocket for you as a favour, no money exchanged.' Mary M, a Traveller in her forties who sometimes lives in Belfast, told me in 2005 that her aunt had been very good at making pockets.

Traveller pockets consist of a flat bag or pouch and ties. I asked about the shape and colour of the bag part. The two shapes mentioned were horseshoe and square. The opening, if starting at the top edge, could be "V"-shaped or horseshoe-shaped while the Aileen L'Amie Traveller Collection pocket has a simple vertical opening and Mrs O'Donnell's has a horizontal placket.

As regards the material, black satin was usual and, less commonly, plaid material, but it could be any kind or colour as it was usually made of

⁷ For a copy of the questionnaire please see the appendix

spare material. The ties were usually of the same material as the pocket, however, some pockets had a different coloured border and then, as in the Aileen L'Amie Traveller Collection's pocket, the ties were the same as the border. Coloured stitching was a feature and 'traditional colours for stitching were red, yellow and blue thread, and sometimes green.' I did ask whether each family had a certain style of pocket but this does not seem to be the case, rather 'everyone had their own design, some were fancy, others weren't', 'depending on taste and skill in sewing.'

While some pockets, especially plain ones, were worn inside the skirt, according to the older women interviewed, the younger women said 'pockets were always worn to the side of the apron, always visible and on the outside' of it. The pocket was worn on the right hand side, except if you were left handed. While the name 'beady pocket' is the commoner, the term 'side pocket' is also used. It was tied at the back with one knot and a bow, like shoelaces. As to *when* they were worn 'Pockets were worn all the time, as part of the dress; a woman wouldn't be dressed properly without one,' the younger women said, while the older added 'Worn every day, especially useful when selling swag.' 'What was kept in the pocket? 'Money, children's birth certificates, a child's holy communion medal. [They] were used to mind special things...to keep them safe, "safer than the bank"' sewing things, thread, small scissors, thimbles.' Margaret, one of the younger women's mother, 'kept change, cigarettes and always camphor.' Other women kept a small face cloth, or lint to burn if a child had nappy rash.' In answer to the question 'Would you say a pocket was like a handbag?' the women said 'Exactly.'

This is so, but pockets were also much more than mere handbags. Many women decorated the front of their pocket with buttons, brooches, holy medals and 'relics (small pieces of holy material).' 'Some buttons or beads,' the older women said, 'would have special memories-these were called keepsakes.' The younger women also mentioned this: 'keepsakes you got from other women and nice things you would come across.' In answer to the question 'When someone died what happened to their pocket?' Louise was told 'The pocket was buried with the person, but sometimes keepsakes from the pockets were passed on' (younger women) and 'Some people had the habit of passing them on and more people were buried with them. People had the habit of taking keepsakes from a person's apron [sic] after they died.'

Pockets were valuable and extremely personal property, not only because of the family records and essential items which they carried, but also the keepsakes and memories which they bore of friends who may have only been met once a year. The memories of Duncan Williamson, the

Scottish Traveller, of his granny Bella MacDonald's pocket are an eloquent testimony to this:

Although the practice of wearing pockets has surely ceased, beady pockets, like horse-drawn wagons, not only remain dear in the memory of Travellers but have become a symbol of Traveller culture and identity of which Travellers are proud, indeed, now proud enough to share with outsiders. Travellers in Pavee Point Travellers' Centre, Dublin (<http://www.paveepoint.ie>) recently revived the art of making pockets.⁸ I have mentioned the Cork Traveller Women's Network 'Wagon Project' and the Kerry Traveller Development Project also choose to show beady pockets as part of their display at an exhibition of arts and crafts by Travellers, the first such exhibition to be had in the thirty years of Listowel Writers Week, County Kerry (Editor 2001, 3). In a set of ten banners designed by Travellers as the culmination of a European Union New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme (1992 to 1995) run by Exchange House Travellers' Service in Dublin one participant choose to depict the beady pocket. The banners subsequently went on tour for a year as an exhibition called 'On the other side of the road'. The maker of one banner, Norah McDonagh of Coolock, County Dublin, says on the web page about the programme 'Traveller women loved the beady pocket-they were very important to them. The pocket was just like a purse, carrying all their important bits and pieces. You don't see many beady pockets now, but the ones you do see are as beautiful today as many years ago' (<http://www.exchangehouse.ie/now.htm>). The pockets may also stand for a lost rural ideal and are looked on with nostalgia because of this and because they remind younger generations of people dear to them who are no longer alive. When I asked Mary M about them her face lit up and her

⁸ In 2005 I participated in a workshop on pockets in Pavee Point and afterwards was kindly let choose a completed pocket and given a cut out of a pocket from a demonstration done for me for the Aileen L'Amie Traveller Collection. The completed pocket is horseshoe-shaped, 14" from top to bottom with a maximum width of 13 1/2". It is 10" wide at the top with a centrally placed 'V'-shaped opening 4" wide and 8 1/2" long. It is made of black twill bound with yellow blue-flowered cotton print. The binding at the top extends on either side to form the ties. The opening is outlined with two rows of chain stitch, one yellow and one red, in doubled six-strand embroidery silk. The same thread is used for seven flowers over an inch in diameter embroidered randomly in daisy stitch on the front of the pocket. The decoration is completed by assorted buttons of many colours, several with metallic effect. I choose this pocket because it appeared to be the most representative. The cut out was made by doubling the material, with the fold forming the bottom, and cutting by eye without pinning or marking the material. The tie was a 3 1/2" wide strip cut across the width of the material, 54" long.

eyes shone as she recalled happier carefree times and said it used to be lovely to see all the old women dressed up with their black pockets (personal communication early Spring 2005).

Apart from those mentioned throughout I am very grateful for the help of Aileen L'Amie herself, Valerie Wilson of the Textile Department of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and also Fiona Casey, Museum Assistant, Ulster American Folk Park, and Elizabeth McCrum, Head of the Division of Art (Acting), Ulster Museum, in the preparation of this little piece.

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Appendix

Beady Pockets

Dear All, We have a big Traveller collection here in Belfast as Louise probably told you and one of the things is a beady pocket. I am trying to find out as much as possible about beady pockets to keep the knowledge alive. Louise sent me information about your barrel top wagon project which I think was marvellous. Now to the questions!

Did only married women wear beady pockets?

Has the custom died out?

When did you last see someone wearing a pocket?

Where was this?

Did a person usually make their own pocket?

Did you ever see pockets being sold at fairs?

Where?

Was the background material usually black?

What were the ties usually made of?

Were there favourite colours for the ties and decorations?

What were pockets decorated with?

Would you keep adding decorations to you pocket as you got nice things?

How was the pocket worn—

under the apron,

over the apron

or without an apron at all?

Or did this vary?

Was the pocket worn hanging down in front or to one side?

If the pocket was worn to the side was there a particular side?

Was the knot tied at the back, or at one side?

Were the ties doubled round the waist and then knotted?

How was the pocket tied—

with a special knot?

in a bow?

When were pockets worn?

Only outdoors?

Only when collecting?

On special occasions?

What was kept in the pocket?

Were sewing things kept in the pocket?

Would you say a pocket was like a handbag?

When someone died what happened their pocket?

Was it passed on?

What different styles of pocket are there?

Had each family a certain style of pocket?

Have you seen a different style of pocket anywhere?

Where?

What was it like?

Were there any other names for beady pockets among Travellers?

Do you know any jokes or stories about pockets?

What other special things do Travellers wear?

Thank-you so much for all your answers.

Fionnuala Carson Williams May 2005

CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE ON THE MARGINS: REPRESENTATIONS OF IRISH VAGRANCY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND IRELAND

FREYNE CORBETT

There is no doubt that the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy of August 1963 had a predetermined agenda. Their major purpose was, according to Jane Helleiner, to find ways to settle 'Itinerants' so any findings of the Commission tended to be subservient to this purpose.¹ Her reaction to the Commission's Report is characteristic of most modern liberal analysts: that it served only the need of the establishment, that it always depicted 'Itinerants' as a problem and that 'Itinerants' were a threat to society.² The report itself seems to bear out this view, despite a stated desire to improve the life of the 'Itinerants'. Its objectives were; to inquire into the problems arising from 'Itinerants', to examine the problems inherent in their way of life and to consider ways to improve that way of life including absorption into the settled community, to paraphrase their introduction.³ Since 1963 no 'final solution', to quote Charles Haughey, to the 'problem' of Travellers has been found which is not very surprising, given the chasm that divides the differing viewpoints.

For about five hundred years or so society has been trying, with varying degrees of coercion, to solve the 'problem' of unwanted visitors. They have been named as migrants, vagrants, vagabonds, masterless men,

¹ Jane Helleiner, *Racism and the Politics of Culture Irish Travellers*, (Toronto, 2000) p. 8.

² Michael Hayes, 'Indigenous otherness: some aspects of Irish Traveller social history' *Éire-Ireland* 41: 3 & 4 Fall/Winter (2006). p. 144; Séamas Ó Síocháin, Joseph Ruane and May McCann, 'Introduction' in May McCann, Séamas Ó Síocháin and Joseph Ruane (eds.) *Irish Travellers Culture and Ethnicity* (Belfast, 1994) p. xxiii

³ *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* (Dublin, August 1963) p. 11.

Gypsies, idlers, sturdy beggars, deserving beggars, displaced persons amongst other disparaging titles. Presumably there were some real criminals included in this underclass. Among the responses to the 'threat' of these unfortunate people were: transportation, execution, almsgiving, the pillory, the stocks, branding, mutilation, slavery, whipping, imprisonment and moving them on to the next town.⁴ The 1963 Report's recommendations were considerably more enlightened than many of these efforts but its appeal for 'charity' on the part of the settled community indicated its frustration in finding any permanent 'solutions'.⁵ The purpose of this article is to look at the history of the subcultures on the fringes of society in England and Ireland and the responses of the settled community to them with a particular reference to those people called Irish Travellers.

It appears that the years between 1500 and 1650 witnessed a great rise in poverty and it is from this period that the modern laws on vagrancy and social control have their origins. It is from around this time that the records of discussions and solutions to 'mass beggary' seem to originate. The population of England and Wales grew from about 2.4 million in 1525 to around 5.5 million in 1660. This was not a steady growth but interspersed with crop failures and plague epidemics, particularly in the years 1550-2, 1578-9, 1589-93 and 1603-4, which slowed the inevitable rise. More people also meant lower wages and a reduced food supply.⁶ There had always been the poor but now they were more numerous and they were mobile. The poor seem to have migrated from the countryside to the growing population centres.⁷ Simply put, population increase combined with economic hardship and famines, which were common at the time, equated to greater poverty which led to unrest and rebellion.⁸

The fear of revolt, personal violence and the threat to property all conspired to create suspicion of strangers, particularly poor ones, in the minds of the settled population. It could be that the arrival of much larger numbers of travelling, hungry poor created one of the first instances of 'otherness' of the modern era, in Europe at any rate. William Lambard, a magistrate, spoke in 1582 of 'vagrant and flying beggars who... infect and stain the earth with pilfery, drunkenness, whoredom, bastardy, murder and

⁴ John Pound, *Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England* (Essex, 1971) p. 38, 39.

⁵ *Report of the Commission*, pp. 102-105.

⁶ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *early modern England 1485-1714 a narrative history* (Oxford, 2004) pp. 152, 153.

⁷ Henry Kamen, *European Society 1500-1700* (London, 1984) pp. 167-169.

⁸ Fernand Braudel, *the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (France, 1966) pp. 734-735.

infinite like mischiefs'.⁹ This kind of language was similar to that used about nomadic peoples after they ceased to be objects of curiosity. In the 1530 laws of Henry VIII of England, 'Egyptians... have gone from shire to shire...and used great and subtle means to deceive the people, ... and have also committed many heinous felonies and robberies to the great hurt and deceit of the people they have come among'.¹⁰ Felony in early modern England was a capital offence as it was deemed to have been committed with criminal intent (*mens rea*).

To gain an idea about the length to which the law was prepared to go in its fear of insurrection from masterless men, particularly during the minority of Edward VI, a statute was passed in 1547 which allowed the courts to pass a sentence of two years servitude on a vagrant for a first offence. The slave was then branded with a 'V' and became the property of the informant who had reported him. He or she could be sold or in the event of the owner's death be passed on to his heirs. He could even be leased out and was forced to perform any task on pain of whipping, chaining or 'imprisonment with iron rings around his neck and legs'. Should the unfortunate slave escape and be caught he would be further branded with an 'S' on the face and made a slave for life. The second escape attempt would result in death. These extreme penalties were rarely carried out and found little support in the public at large. Within three years the more extreme provisions of the Act were repealed.¹¹ However the case of Joan Wynstone illustrates the seriousness with which vagabondage was taken: Initially whipped and branded as a vagrant in February 1576, she was caught wandering later the same year and was saved from the hangman by her husband but once again ran away and was hanged in October 1576.¹²

Apart from the nomadic peoples, called Gypsies, a corruption of Egyptian, although there is little evidence that they originated there, the emergence of migrants in greater numbers was a result of great social changes, which included shifts in agricultural production and methods, particularly enclosure, rising food prices, demographic increase and the

⁹ Kamen, *European Society*, p. 169.

¹⁰ Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *the destiny of Europe's Gypsies* (New York, 1972) p. 25.

¹¹ Pound, *Poverty and vagrancy*, p. 39; Robert Humphreys, *no fixed abode a history of the responses to the roofless and the rootless in Britain* (London, 1999) p.46, 47.

¹² Pound, *Poverty and vagrancy*, pp. 45, 46.

uncertainties of wage labour.¹³ Prior to the early modern period poverty had been viewed, apparently, as being pious and necessary for eternal salvation. The poor also provided a means for wealthier people to practise charity which aided their own salvation. Religious orders like the Franciscans became very wealthy on these principles which may have contributed to the demise of poverty as a desirable condition.¹⁴ In the medieval period the concept that God determined the guilt or innocence of criminals rather than human society gave way to the opposite view, though still dominated by religious belief, in the sixteenth century.¹⁵ It is also likely that the increase in the numbers of beggars and vagrants, leading to an increase in crime, overwhelmed the communities' charitable capacity and created the notion of 'undeserving' or sturdy beggars as opposed to the 'helpless' poor. In addition to migrating rural poor a great number of wandering, armed soldiers, in the days before standing paid armies, looking for their next employer would have added to the crime rate and general fear.¹⁶

The morality behind the laws against vagrancy in Tudor England was quite different than current perceptions on the application of criminal law. Of great importance were the intentions of accused persons, their *mens rea*, or mental guilt. Transgressions against religious strictures, particularly the Ten Commandments, carried grave penalties in early modern courts. The difference between legal and religious infringements was totally absent in these courts. The use of untrained lay people in the criminal system was crucial to the involvement of the community in the criminal justice system. It was held that criminality was a character flaw and not a product of society and that it was the duty of the propertied community, who by definition were industrious, to guard against those suspected of being so flawed. Innocence was held to be self evident and did not require trained lawyers. Crime was sinful and it was the collective responsibility of the community to combat it. At the bottom of all criminality lay idleness:

¹³ A. L. Beier, *Masterless men the vagrancy problem in England 1560-1640* (London, 1985) pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.

¹⁵ Cynthia B. Herrup, *the common peace participation and the criminal law in seventeenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1987). p. 3.

¹⁶ Beier, *Masterless Men*, pp. 94-95.

Of sloth comes pleasure, of pleasure comes riot, of riot comes whoring, of whoring comes spending, of spending comes want, of want comes theft, of theft comes hanging...¹⁷

The concept of extenuating circumstances or of special pleading did not exist and as with the determination of guilt, so with punishment. This was also the responsibility of the community and did not involve professional officers. In theory the law was rigid but in practise, because of communal participation and the very inflexibility of the law which demanded death or freedom, ensured that compromise and the exercise of mercy were applied more often than not.¹⁸ The differences between the early modern system of justice and the modern day equivalent might be compared to the differences between direct Athenian democracy and the professional representative democracy of modern liberal states.

Despite the differences in approach to criminal law in Tudor and Stuart England and the modern day many of the attitudes to vagrancy and the homeless have remained the same. In fact some powerful views on the homeless seem to have come directly from the sixteenth century. The belief that the homeless, and Irish Travellers in England can be included in that group for the purposes here, have elected to be in that condition is widespread. Many people, subsequently, do not see the homeless or Travellers as victims or requiring different treatment from the state, in any way. According to this view the modern state is partly responsible for supporting the indolent way of life by its profligate spending on social services for the homeless. The quote ‘poverty resulted from improvidence, insobriety and “character deficiency”.’ is not that much different from the quote in the previous paragraph.¹⁹ Sociologists like Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray see the increase in homelessness as a product, not of economic circumstances, but of a culture of poverty, engendered and spread generationally like a great disease from parents who had elected to live without work and on welfare. In times of economic hardship it is convenient for the fortunate with security to view the poor, the homeless, the Travellers, the ‘Gypsies’ and other groups on the fringes of society as being responsible for their own condition through laziness and even genetic ineptitude.²⁰

The first legal response to increased unemployment in Tudor England was the Act of 1531 when the initial attempt was made to differentiate

¹⁷ Touchstone, ‘Eastward Ho!’ (1605) as quoted in Herrup, *the common peace*, p. 4

¹⁸ Herrup, *the common peace*, pp. 2-6, 165.

¹⁹ Humphries, *no fixed abode*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-6.