

Variations on an Irish Theme (ca. 193

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

Notes by Jon Becker, editor for the Collins project

“Well-contrasted, diatonic and pentatonic passages countered elsewhere by elaborate chromaticism, simplicity balanced by richer textures.” That is how music writer Erik Eriksson described a different Collins work, titled *Variations on an Irish Tune*.

That 15-minute work likely was the foundation for *Variations on an Irish Theme*; on the title page of the copyist’s manuscript, someone wrote: “abridged, simplified.”

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Collins also composed three orchestral variations: *Irish Rhapsody*; *Hibernia (Irish Rhapsody)*; and, *Variations on an Irish Folk Song*.

All five works explore the melody of the Irish-American folksong “O! The ‘Taters over here are small”:

oh, the praties they grow small over here, over here, [repeat]
oh, the praties they grow small and we dig them in the fall,
and we eat them coats and all, over here, over here.

oh, i wish that we were geese, night and morn, night and morn, [repeat]
oh, I wish that we were geese for they fly and take their ease
And they live and die in peace eating corn, eating corn.

oh, we’re trampled in the dust over here, over here, [repeat]
oh, we’re trampled in the dust but the Lord in whom we trust
he will give us crumb from crust over here, over here.

[repeat first stanza]

Both the Gaelic “praties” and the American slang “taters” refer to potatoes; the song probably was written after the Irish Potato Famine, 1845-9. Gaelic scholar Brian Hart, writes:

There are some odd words used in these lyrics that indicate that it was translated from Irish Gaelic into English in America. The use of the word ‘fall’ is an Americanism you wouldn’t find in Ireland. Also, the use of the term ‘corn’ in reference to grain—grain was used to pay rent in Ireland in famine times and was not eaten—gives greater significance to these lines. . . . [the use of this air] may reflect pastoral nostalgia, or a romanticism of Ireland and especially the famine, as most Irish-Americans trace their ancestry back to the great diaspora caused by that famine—a sentiment still held onto today.

Obviously the melody of “O! The ‘Taters” had great interest for Collins. Perhaps the doleful tune was sung in the Joliet, Illinois home of his Irish immigrant parents.