

The Coulin

(An Chúileann / Cúilfhionn / Chúilfionn / Chuilin / Coolin / Coulin (Le Atrugad), (The) Coolin' / Coolun / Coulin / Cuilin, The / My Fair-Haired Beauty / One, Had You Seen My Sweet Coolin, In This Calm Sheltered Villa, (The) Lady Of The Desert, Oh! Hush The Soft Sigh, Oh! The Hours I Have Passed, Though The Last Glimpse Of Erin.)

From the Traditional Tune Archive (formerly the Fiddler's Companion):

"The Queen of Irish Airs" maintains Francis O'Neill (1913). There are many versions of this ancient and celebrated air "of which Bunting's and Moore's are not among the best: they are both wanting in simplicity," states Joyce (1909), who prints the tune as collected by Forde from Hugh O'Beirne (a Munster fiddler from whom a great many tunes were collected). He considers Forde's version "beautiful...(and) probably the original unadulterated melody," and adds that it is similar to the version he heard the old Limerick people sing in his youth during the 1820's. Grattan Flood (1906) states it is probable the air dates from the year 1296 or 1297, believing it must have been composed not long after the Statute, 24th of Edward I, in 1295, which forbade those English in Ireland (who were becoming assimilated into the majority Gaelic culture) to affect the Irish hair style by allowing their locks to grow in 'coolins.' The original song, told from a young maiden's point of view, berates those Anglo-Irish who conformed to the edit by cutting their hair, and praises the proud Irishman who remained true to ancestral custom (the Gaelic title "An Chuilfhionn," means 'the fair-haired one'). The Irish Parliament passed another law in 1539 forbidding any male, Irish or Anglo-Irish, from wearing long or flowing locks of hair; this enactment, relates Flood, is the source of the claim printed by Walker in 1786 in Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards as the impetus for the song. [Ed. note: Grattan Flood is notorious for inaccuracies and unsubstantiated claims; his information should be viewed as suspect until confirmed.]

Walker states:

In the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Henry VIII [i.e., 1536–1537], an Act was made respecting the habits, and dress in general, of the Irish, whereby all persons were restrained from being shorn or shaven above the ears, or from wearing Glibbes or Coulines (long locks), on their heads, or hair on their upper lip, called Crommeal. On this occasion a song was written by one of our Bards, in which an Irish Virgin is made to give the preference to her dear Coulin (or the youth with the flowing locks), to all strangers (by which the English were meant), or those who wore their habits. Of this song the air alone has reached us, and is universally admired.

Thomas Moore used the tune printed by Walker (who had no words) and wrote his own verses to the air. A.A. Lloyd writes that an informant, John Doonan, told him the song The Coolin was the work of one Maurice O'Dugan, who flourished in the latter half of the 16th century, but in this version the title refers to the hair style of a blond girl (A.A. Lloyd). In fact, the Irish word cuileann (sometimes chúilfhionn) means "fair lady" (a male character would be Cúilfhionn).

