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Title of proposed paper: ‘Welcome Napoleon?’ – France and the French in Irish Songs of Liberation, Rebellion and Resistance

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Abstract

Although political songs and balladry were common across most European countries, Ireland is one of the few countries in which their long-term popularity and survival in the living folk tradition continued almost unabated. Songs filled with political imagery and carrying subversive messages were written both in Irish and English from the 17th century right down to the winning of Irish independence from Britain in 1922. The many reversals suffered by Irish separatism and its supporters over the centuries meant that heroes and potential ‘champions of Irish liberty’ were usually in short supply. Irish hopes were often pinned on help from outside, from continental Europe, frequently France. The imaginations of the folk poets and of professional political agitators who composed propaganda songs were, for example, moved by the achievements of the ‘Wild Geese’, the Irish emigrées who fought in continental armies and, in time, by hopes stirred by the French Revolution. The figure of Napoleon, reimagined as the hero who could end English oppression, appears in many songs found in even the most remote parts of Ireland. This presentation will explore aspects of this rich Franco-Irish strand of Ireland’s traditional folk song tradition.