AN ACCIDENTAL PROTEST SINGER

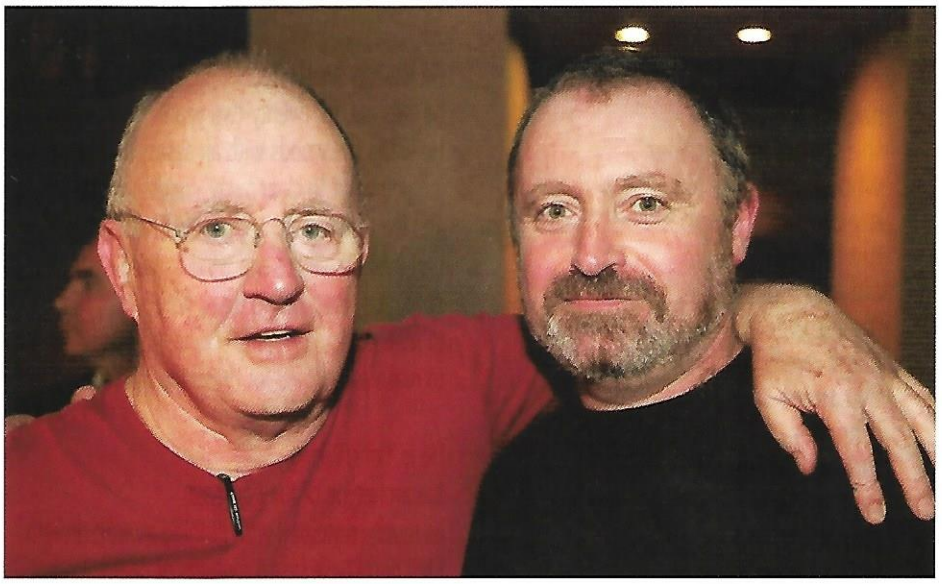
Mick Blake

ON JULY 4th, 2007, our former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, was the guest speaker at the Irish Congress of Trade Unions Conference in Bundoran. In the course of his speech, he suggested that anyone who was "cribbing and moaning" about the economy, or who dared suggest that the boom years of the Celtic Tiger would be followed by a recession should "commit suicide".

A couple of years later, shortly after we lost our sovereignty, I attended charity book sale in the community hall in Leitrim Village. I stumbled upon a book by historian Gerard MacAtasney entitled *"Leitrim and the Great Hunger—A Temporary Inconvenience"*. In an extract taken from the *Leitrim Roscommon Gazzette* of September 1845, there was an account of an Agricultural Show in Carrick-on-Shannon. The local landlords congratulated each other on their recent affiliation into the Royal Agricultural Improvement Society of Ireland. Lord Leitrim himself addressed the assembled masses and sang the praises of the agricultural policies of Leitrim and Roscommon.

In the midst of all the back-slapping and speeches, one Mr Smith of Mohill pointed out that he had heard reports of a devastating potato disease, rampant in mainland Europe, and moving in the direction of Ireland. The fact that the tenant farmer population depended almost exclusively on potatoes for sustenance should be a cause for concern. Mr Smith's warning went unheeded, "lost in a sea of self-indulgence".

The similarity between these two events was striking. I eventually managed to mould the idea into a poem, and later set it to music. The song *"Leitrim (A brief history)"* came into being. I combined it with a series of still photographs which I borrowed from various online sources, and uploaded it to youtube, unsure of how it would be received. Three thousand people watched it over the next two days, and that was it.



■ **Christy Moore pictured with Mick Blake**

I was now a writer of protest songs.

I followed *"Leitrim"* with *"Catch cries"* (based on the poetry of WB Yeats, especially "September 1913"), *"The Giveaway"* (on the continuing sell-off our natural resources), and *"Oblivious"* (on the reluctance of the Irish to protest).

Early last year, I chanced upon a video of an American hedge fund manager, bragging about how he gambled on the Bank of Ireland and lost, yet still managed to force the Irish government to pay out just the same. I wrote *"Mr Tepper"* to highlight the fact that Ireland, (which makes up 1% of the population of Europe) is paying 42% of the total cost of the European Banking crisis, and how the lost gambles of multi billionaires are being honoured with monies that should be used for our essential services.

Irish Water is yet another example of this— extra charges and taxes are imposed to fill the hole in the finances caused by successive governments bowing to pressure from Europe to pay out on the losing bets of unsecured bondholders, high risk gamblers, who can't believe their luck. The water charges may be a step too far though—it may take a lot to get Irish people to start protesting, but once they do, it's hard to get them to stop.

But enough "cribbing and moaning"...

To finish on a positive note, my most recent project was a song to raise awareness on the plight of the surviving children *of the recent conflict in Gaza, "Another Child, Another War"*. I was delighted to be invited by Christy Moore to perform the song at his recent fundraiser in Vicar Street. €28,000 was raised on the night which will go towards a much needed education fund for these children.

Leitrim (A brief History) can be found on the CD *The Rest is History* by the Moylurg Céilí Band. See lyrics on the opposite page.

All Mick's songs/videos are online, and can be viewed through his Facebook page, Mick Blake Music, or through his YouTube channel, Mick Blake.

LEITRIM (A BRIEF HISTORY)

Mick Blake

At Carrick-on-Shannon, 1845,
The Landlords of Leitrim in droves did arrive
They all to a man were invited to go to the Cora Droma Ruisc Agricultural Show
The streets were bedecked with farm produce galore,
And fashions the likes of which weren't seen before,
There were traders from Sligo displaying their wares, a band from Drumsna played enlivening airs.

When the show it had ended, the gentry repaired
To Church's Hotel, where a menu was served,
Of pedigree beef, fine lamb and fish, they feasted on every conceivable dish
The head of the table, Lord Leitrim, stood up,
And said "Gentlemen, let us now drain a cup,
To our Lord Lieutenant , Victoria our Queen, the finest monarch that Ireland has seen"

A farmer from Mohill rose from his chair,
And begged the indulgence of everyone there,
It falls upon me, Sirs, I regret to say, to temper with caution this wonderful day.
There's news of a curse that is born on the breeze,
A newly discovered potato disease,
There are tubers in Flanders, black in the ground,
But there other sources of food can be found
I fear that that this blackness is coming our way - alternative sustenance without delay
Must be found if our tenants are going to survive - For it's on the potato alone that they thrive

Lord Leitrim laughed, ordered more beer
Regarded the good Farmer Smith with a sneer
"This talk of blight and of shortage of food doesn't do my appetite any good"
So Farmer Smith, we beseech you and pray, do not to sully and darken this glorious day
With your message of doom and your pessimist's frown
We demand, Sir, at once, you desist and sit down,
For potatoes are plentiful and disease-free and potatoes are perfect nutritionally
To feed all the peasants and keep them content to pay us our somewhat exhorbitant rent

In Carrick on Shannon 2005, the town was expanding and the businesses thrived,
We were the landlords, a new king was crowned, a tiger whose unrestrained greed knew no bounds
A few brave dissenters warned "People, take care, there's a blight on our finances, please be aware that it's all built on nothing,
Why such a demand for houses of Clay on foundations of sand?"

Our valiant leader, rose up and said, "Begrudgers like you would be better off dead,
We'll be the first boom to never go bust - No need to change and no need to adjust
For Captain Fitzpatrick and Corporal Drumm will march all our destinies into the sun
And loose regulation will set our boys free, to do what they like with our economy"

Languishing here in my ghostly estate, The tiger is gone and the wolf's at the gate,
The ghost of that farmer from black 45, Still haunts the byways with told- you-so cries
"Still they won't listen, they don't want to hear, that the good times will end, that the swill disappears,
And all the pig troughing's no more in the offing till it's too late"

Now Lord Leitrim is gone and his tenant's are free,
There's a NAMA hotel where his home used to be
And a new type of Landlord lays claim our lands,
Speaking a language I don't understand