

***Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann:* The National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin**

Ríonach uí Ógáin

Ireland is renowned for its storytelling, folklore, and vernacular traditions. *Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann*: The National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin (<http://www.ucd.ie/folklore/en>) is Ireland's primary repository for such materials of traditional vernacular culture. The Collection is a public archive, currently accessible for the most part in person; certain elements, however, are available online, and the intention is to make significant portions of the Collection available on the Internet in the near future.¹

This current essay is divided into three main sections. It begins by placing the Collection in its cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts. It then addresses the Collection itself and the material it has to offer in terms of folkloristics and other aspects of social and cultural research. The final section offers an example from the archive in the form of a single sheet of music transcription and its collecting that underlies the importance and urgency of ongoing ethnographic fieldwork as well as its potential.

Cultural and Historical Context

In the nineteenth century, as a reaction against the industrial age and also in connection with the advancement of nationalism, attention was given to antiquarianism and what might be called popular culture. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, storytelling and folk tradition in Ireland began to be recognized as relatively untapped aspects of cultural expression. Some work had previously been undertaken in the compilation of Anglo-Irish tales and novels, and many of these writers belonged to what was at the time the English-speaking minority. People then began to turn to Irish-language material. The American collector, scholar, and linguist, Jeremiah Curtin, was one of the first to collect in Irish-speaking districts of Ireland. He visited Ireland on three occasions and published a number of books. His first book was *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*, published in 1890. Although Curtin collected from Irish speakers, he did so through English and then published in English. Dubhghlas de hÍde (Douglas Hyde) was the first President of the Republic of Ireland and professor of modern Irish at University College Dublin, and he was the first to collect and publish stories in Irish. His passion for collecting tales and lore

¹ See, for instance, <http://www.duchas.ie>, <http://digital.ucd.ie/>, and <http://www.bealbeo.ie>.

came from his love of Irish. In addition to the cultural and language revivals, there was also a broader political revival, with people collecting and using vernacular material for a number of reasons. Collecting tales was viewed as having particular merit, and the notion of a romantic, idealized past was often seen as reflected in the material itself—a view that would eventually underpin an attitude to Irish culture, language, and folklore more generally. While this work of collecting, publishing, and promoting was taking place through Irish, parallel work was taking place in the Anglo-Irish community—W. B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and George Millington Synge are among the names most closely associated with these efforts. By the early twentieth century a particular emphasis was being placed on tales, legends, and beliefs. In addition, scholars began to come from abroad to study Irish language and literature.

Traditional Material Found in the National Folklore Collection

The person largely responsible for the establishment of *Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann* (the Irish Folklore Commission) in 1935 was Séamus Ó Duilearga (James Hamilton Delargy), who was Professor of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin (UCD), Honorary Director of the Commission, and editor of *Béaloideas: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society* for a number of years. Ó Duilearga was an assistant to Dubhghlas de hÍde at UCD. Before the Commission was established there were two preliminary organizations devoted to Irish folklore: *An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann* (the Folklore of Ireland Society) founded in 1926 and *Institiúid Bhéaloideas Éireann* (the Irish Folklore Institute) founded in 1930.

The Collection is successor to the Irish Folklore Commission, which was established for the purposes of collecting, safeguarding, and disseminating the oral traditions of Ireland (Briody 2007). The Commission was established by the government of Ireland under the auspices of the Department of Education, and it appointed a number of full-time and part-time collectors of folklore throughout Ireland. The establishment of the Commission was influenced by similar developments in Scandinavia and other areas; for instance, a number of individuals such as the Swedish folklorist Carl von Sydow played influential roles in the establishment, formation, and development of the Commission, and later the Collection. Seán Ó Súilleabháin, archivist with the Commission, also spent several months in Sweden where he adapted the Swedish system to Irish tradition; his publication of *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* was a cornerstone in providing guidance for fieldworkers and in establishing a cataloging system (Ó Súilleabháin 1942). The chief subject areas this handbook encompasses are: Settlement and Dwelling, Livelihood and Household Support, Communications and Trade, The Community, Human Life, Nature, Folk Medicine, Time, Principles and Rules of Popular Belief and Practice, Mythological Tradition, Historical Tradition, Religious Tradition, Popular Oral Literature, and Sports and Pastimes. This handbook now dictates the structure and cataloging process in the archive.

The emphasis of ethnographic fieldwork in the early days of the Commission was on the *Gaeltachtaí*, or Irish-speaking districts of Ireland, and on the storytelling traditions. Full-time collectors were provided with sound-recording equipment for use in the field. In keeping with technological progress, sound-recordings were made on ediphone cylinders, on acetate discs, and in the latter years of the Commission with tape-recorders. The Commission paid particular

attention to the collecting of music and song. Collectors, who lived and worked in various places in Ireland, transcribed their fieldwork into notebooks, which they then posted, along with the sound-recordings, to the Head Office in Dublin. Collectors were encouraged to take photographs of the storytellers, their houses, and aspects of vernacular tradition and architecture. Caoimhín Ó Danachair (Kevin Danaher) was an ethnologist with the Commission and played a pioneering role in the establishment of the photographic and sound archives.

During the lifetime of the Commission, a number of innovative schemes took place. These included the Schools' Scheme (1937-38), in which the Department of Education, the Schools' Inspectors, Primary School teachers, and the pupils in the senior classes took part (Ó Catháin 1999). The pupils, aged for the most part between eleven and fourteen years of age, collected information from their parents, grandparents, relatives, and neighbors and wrote a weekly essay on subjects such as "My Home District," "A Local Song," or "Famous People." The results of the scheme amount to some 500,000 handwritten pages by pupils and, in some instances, teachers who made a significant contribution to the Schools' Manuscripts Collection.

In many ways, the approach to collecting and even the traditions to be recorded reached beyond the physical island of Ireland. For instance, the influence of Celtic languages in general as making up the folklore corpus was evident from the outset. Séamus Ó Duilearga was committed to recording Scottish oral tradition, and with the appointment of Calum Mac Gilleathain (Calum Maclean), the Commission's brief was extended to Scotland. Mac Gilleathain began his fieldwork in Scotland in 1946. As a result of a visit by An Taoiseach Éamon de Valera to the Isle of Man in 1947, the Commission also made sound recordings of the last native speakers of Manx, with Caoimhín Ó Danachair traveling to the Isle of Man in April 1948 and recording a number of hours of material from eight speakers. In addition, the Commission established a wide network of voluntary collectors and contributors following the creation of the questionnaire system (Ní Fhloinn 2001). The questionnaire system allowed for immediate documentation of a particular aspect of tradition throughout Ireland and a number of significant publications drew on the results of questionnaire replies.

The National Folklore Collection

The Irish Folklore Commission was disbanded in 1970 and its staff and holdings transferred to University College Dublin. A major role of the National Folklore Collection (NFC) is to preserve and disseminate those holdings and to augment the Collection by means of fieldwork, donations, and purchases. Fieldwork is the core process by which tradition is documented for inclusion in the NFC, and in turn a greater awareness of the Collection itself helps to promote pride in Ireland's oral and material cultural heritage. Progression towards full, online accessibility will therefore ensure the Collection's greatest impact and potential as it contributes new value to the cultural life of Ireland at home and abroad.

The National Folklore Collection is a unique repository in terms of research potential: it offers the world of scholarship access to this national and international resource for study and research. An important part of the Collection's mission is to promote new insights into, as well as a greater appreciation and deeper understanding of, Irish cultural heritage as found in the

Collection. This folklore archive is the manifestation of documented tradition and represents the voices of over 100,000 contributors.

The NFC's moving images and sound archive includes over 10,000 hours of audio material and 1,000 hours of film and video. These particular aspects of the Collection highlight the fact that the history of sound and film recording forms part of the documentation of tradition. The audio archive of the National Folklore Collection houses some 1,100 wax-cylinder recordings of folk narratives, folk song, and folk music. Approximately one-third of the wax cylinders in the NFC were recorded by full-time collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission. The earliest of these contain recordings dating as far back as 1897 to the first national Feis Ceoil competitions, which were held in Dublin and Belfast. The sound archive also contains rare Irish-language recordings made by eminent collectors such as Luke Donnellan (1878-1952) in south Armagh, Lorcán Ó Muireadhaigh (1883-1941) in Omeath, County Louth, and Piaras de Hindeberg (1912-1982) in County Waterford. This unique collection of wax cylinders spans almost 60 years of folklore recording up to the mid-twentieth century. Following a successful application to the Heritage Council of Ireland and other bodies in recent years, a selection of them was published online at <http://www.bealbeo.ie/>.

Detailed transcripts of interviews conducted by folklore collectors from the 1930s to the present are bound in volumes and stored in the Manuscript Archive of the NFC. A series of finding aids provide detailed references to relevant proper names and to subject matter. Most of the material in the Collection has been assembled by full-time collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission and its successors, and collecting activity is ongoing. A large proportion of the material taken down by full-time collectors consists of transcripts of field recordings in both Irish and English, made initially on wax-cylinder recording machines. Other information collected by means of the questionnaire system includes descriptions of seasonal customs, beliefs, practices, and historical tradition, as well as information regarding Ireland's material and social culture. The specialist library contains books, periodicals, and offprints on Irish and comparative folklore, ethnology, and related fields.

As part of a UCD initiative towards creating a digital repository, access to material in the following subject areas from the National Folklore Collection is available online at <http://digital.ucd.ie/>: the Urban Folklore Project, containing sound recordings and images from around Dublin recorded in 1979-80; the Schools' Manuscripts Collection, with its substantial selection from County Galway and representative samples from other parts of Ireland; a selection of general photographs relating to oral tradition; the 1945 questionnaire replies related to the Irish Famine (1845-52); examples of traditional music; the questionnaire on Tinkers (Travelers); the questionnaire on Emigration to America; and a selection of children's games.

In December 2013 the scanned images of manuscript pages and a searchable database were made available (<http://www.duchas.ie>) for the Schools' Manuscripts Collection for four counties—Dublin, Mayo, Donegal, and Waterford. The project is being funded by UCD and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and is a joint venture with FIONTAR Dublin City University. It is anticipated that this site will be augmented in the next few years and that the entire Schools' Manuscripts Collection will eventually be accessible in this way. These are the initial steps to making the Collection digitally available in a way that offers researchers and members of the public global access to original sources. Similarly, *Béaloideas: The Journal of*

the Folklore of Ireland Society is available online through JSTOR, and issues contain material from the National Folklore Collection in addition to analytical, folkloristic articles.

Further information on the Collection and guidelines as to its use are available at <http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/en/>. The Collection is open to the public Tuesday-Friday 2:30-5:30 pm; the Reading Room and Sound Archive are the primary means for physical public access to original material. The scope and breadth of the enquiries handled by the Archive on a day-to-day basis are extensive. Queries are received from the media, academic staff, and postgraduate researchers, as well as from those involved with local and community projects, all while research is being undertaken in the Archive for numerous purposes, including environmental impact statements, postgraduate study, personal interest, publications, local newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, drama and theater information, and museum exhibitions. In addition to working with in-person visitors, the Collection's staff also deals with queries by email, post, and phone.

Excerpt from the National Folklore Collection

A selected example from the archive can act as a case study to represent the wealth of material, the research potential, and the significance of the Collection as a whole. Full-time collectors were early on required to keep a diary in which they documented their day-to-day work as ethnographic field collectors. The following item presents a translation from Irish of the first two diary entries by field collector Séamus Ennis, who worked as full-time collector of music and song with the Irish Folklore Commission 1942-47:²

Thursday, July 2, 1942

I left Dublin at 2.30 P.M. and reached Ballinasloe at 11.30 P.M. where I slept.³

Friday, July 3, 1942

I left Ballinasloe at one o'clock in the afternoon. I went to Oranmore, where I spoke to an old man. He sang "Is í Nóirín Mo Mhian" ["Nóirín Is My Desire"] for me. His rendering of the air was so bad that I was unable to recognize a single note, but I deciphered one verse that I had not heard previously:

I slept in Castlebar,

At the edge of your bed and you did not hear me.

I stretched out my arm to kiss your mouth,

² The extract is contained in National Folklore Collection 1295:1-2. For an account of the collector and for the complete edited and translated diary, see *uí Ógáin* 2009.

³ Ennis appears to have undertaken this journey by bicycle, as he described it in a letter to Seán O Súilleabháin (July 8, 1942): "I set off with speed and raced through Kilbeggan around seven o'clock. I had tea there and had a rest. I set off again and arrived in Ballinasloe at 11.30 P.M."

You were not there and all I had was the blanket and myself.⁴

That was all he had that was of interest to me. I continued to Galway and stayed at Micheál Ó hOisín's house in Salthill. He plays the fiddle and pipes. I spent the night playing the whistle with him (that I had with me), the fiddle, and the pipes. He is one of the Ó hOisín family from Tuam (Amhráin Mhuighe Seóla) and he knows wonderful music. Amhráin Chlainne Gaedheal arrived from Dublin this afternoon.

Fieldwork is the lifeblood of a tradition archive. The above diary extract, originally written in Irish, may be regarded as representative of the daily documentation of their work by full-time collectors with the Irish Folklore Commission, where diaries now have a great deal to offer in terms of the study of oral tradition today. In current folkloristic analysis, the context of ethnographic fieldwork has assumed a central role, as it often offers crucial insights into matters of collector-informant contact and relationship, as well as matters of performance and style. The extract indicates Ennis' custom of comparing versions he had collected to those found in publications. The final line alludes to *Amhráin Chlainne Gaedheal*, a book of songs in Irish published in Dublin in 1905, edited and annotated by Micheál and Tomás Ó Máille (Ó Máille and Ó Máille 1905). A fresh examination of collectors' attitudes to literacy and to published material is facilitated by publication of such diaries and similar primary source material. In instructions to folklore collectors, Seán Ó Súilleabháin advised them to be wary of published material. Regarding the collection of oral literature, he wrote as follows (1942:555): "Be very cautious in dealing with a storyteller who can read. Make sure before you write down a tale that he has not learned it directly from a book, newspaper, or manuscript. All tales recorded should be genuine popular tradition so far as the recorder can determine."

An examination of such earlier field diaries underlines the fact that journals are core to ethnographic fieldwork today, but they also contribute to the larger picture of the emergence of a unique tradition archive and of the approaches to collecting traditional music and song employed in Ireland in the 1940s.

Additionally, a tradition archive should not be viewed as a "completed" repository. It is constantly being augmented as tradition itself changes and develops. Although the core elements of human life remain the same, with each generation they are viewed, practiced, and passed on in a different fashion. This aspect of documentation of

The image shows a handwritten musical score on aged paper. At the top, the title "Ceate na gCuach" is written in a decorative script, followed by the subtitle "(ceann de na fúrta is cluiche le Colm Ó hOisín)". The score is written on four staves of music. The lyrics are written in Irish below the staves. The first line of lyrics is "Ó' a Ceate na gCuach, an t-uaire leat (a) nise beic tinn 'Sgo bfuil an". The second line is "apnans go buan an-uairéirí ceate (a) léite mo éirí napa vragann dá' re". The third line is "Cuach (a) lúm 'r' a bfuil de nuise napa mbail' iú lé nís aca". The fourth line is "Tuire mo éirias 'r' ré 'uairéir nác b'ápa' r' nise". At the bottom, there are two footnotes: "* Buairéir buille léite le gac nó a luac." and "* luac dá' aca nác r' é".

Fig. 1. Transcription of "Ceate na gCuach" from fieldwork by Séamus Ennis from Colm Ó Caodháin, Glinsee, Carna, County Galway, Ireland in the 1940s.

⁴ In a letter to Seán Ó Súilleabháin (July 8, 1942), Ennis said he met an old man in Oranmore who sang a song in exchange for a pint. He also said that the old man did not have a note in his head. Ennis describes this encounter and sings a verse of the song in Ennis 1988.

Ó Súilleabháin 1942

Seán Ó Súilleabháin. *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*. Dublin: The Folklore of Ireland Society.

uí Ógáin 2009

Ríonach uí Ógáin, ed. *Going to the Well for Water: The Séamus Ennis Field Diary, 1942-1946*. Cork: Cork University Press.