



# READING IRELAND

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*Reading Ireland* is published bi-annually and is available to subscribers at a cost of \$40 for four issues. The aim of the magazine is to provide in-depth analysis of Irish Literature, past and present, along with opening a window onto the best of contemporary Irish poetry, prose, drama and culture.

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## Introduction



Welcome to the spring / summer 2018 issue of *Reading Ireland*, which focuses on Irish Folklore. We would like to begin by thanking Dr. Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, Director of the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin (UCD), for his assistance and advice with the preparation of this issue. In addition to making the resources of the National Folklore Collection readily available to *Reading Ireland* Dr. Mac Cárthaigh was instrumental in connecting us with numerous Irish and American scholars and folklorists who have contributed to this issue. We would also like to thank Cuan Ó Seireadáin, the Curator at the Gaelic League, for his support.

Irish folklore, based on oral vernacular narratives, customs and beliefs, has existed for centuries, passed down from generation to generation in communities and counties throughout Ireland. It was not until the early nineteenth-century however, that many of these stories and traditions began to be transcribed and preserved. With the advent of the Irish Literary Revival in the 1880s the preservation and recording of the oral past intensified. By the early twentieth-century a recognition of the importance of this oral history expanded beyond writers and artists, culminating in 1935, when *The Irish Folklore Commission* (Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann), was established by the Irish government. The commission was tasked with the job of collecting and recording the folktales, legends and oral narratives of the people of Ireland, and in the process preserving a cultural consciousness that was in danger of fading away. In 1970, the extensive archival holdings of *The Irish Folklore Commission* were transferred to the newly-established Department of Irish Folklore at UCD. This archive now represents one of the largest collections of vernacular folk literature in Western Europe and is a testament to the rich material culture of both rural and urban Ireland. It is appropriate therefore to open this issue with an introduction to the work of *The Irish Folklore Commission* and the archive housed in the National Folklore Collection.

Next, in his provocatively titled essay, “Does Irish folklore exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” Diarmuid Ó Giolláin provides an historical overview of the cultural importance of Irish folklore and argues for its continuing relevance as a living tradition in contemporary society. Ó Giolláin makes a compelling argument for appreciating the global value of local traditions, “not as commodities to be monetized, but as part of a common human heritage.” Pádraig Ó Tiarnaigh then provides a detailed assessment of the achievements of *The Irish Folklore Commission* in terms of its work and scope. As Ó Tiarnaigh makes clear, the national and international importance of the archive it amassed is thanks to the efforts of folklore pioneers such as founder-member and Celtic scholar, Séamus Ó Duileagra (1899-1980), and the countless special collectors who were active in the field from 1935-1970.

As noted above, engagement with folklore was one of the defining characteristics of the Irish Literary Revival. The folklore collecting efforts of Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932), and the Irish language scholar Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), brought Irish storytelling to an even

greater international audience. Hyde, who was also the founder of the Gaelic League and in later life the first President of Ireland, was appointed president of the Folklore of Ireland Society at its inauguration in 1926. The literary revival heralded a deeper, more systematic exploration of Irish oral tradition, with writers such as William Butler Yeats (1865-1929) and John Millington Synge (1871-1909) drawing liberally and enthusiastically from it as a source of artistic inspiration.<sup>1</sup> For example, Synge incorporated native folklore motifs and themes in *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), which is based on a folktale told to him by an old Aran is-



Father Healy, Douglas Hyde, and four children of Connemara walking along a road.

Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

lander, Pat Dirane. Other plays based largely on folk themes include *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Yeats's interest in Irish folklore and oral culture began early in his life, in part through exposure in Sligo to the stories of Mary Battle, the servant of his uncle George Pollexfen, with whom he spent many summers. It was further strengthened by his friendship with Lady Gregory and his collaboration with her in collecting the folk beliefs of the local people on her estate at Coole Park, County Galway. As James Pethica observed, "as a store house of uncanny phenomena, ancient wisdom expressed in metaphysical or allegorical forms, and traditional models of story-telling, folklore appealed to him on occult, philosophical, and literary grounds."<sup>2</sup> In addition to incorporating folklore and mythology into his early poetry collections, Yeats published three works of folklore he either wrote or edited: *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888); *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892); and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893). Joseph Hassett's essay shows how Yeats's definition of Irishness matured into an inclusive concept that was heavily influenced by his exposure to "the imaginative possessions of the people near Coole." Hassett argues that this exposure held the poet to the course of being an Irish poet, "and simultaneously required him to expand the concept of Irishness beyond Hyde's insistence on a Gaelic core."

One of the most important mythic figures to influence Yeats was the tragic hero Cúchulainn. Paul Gosling considers the symbolic and cultural importance of *The Return of Cúchulainn and Emer*, a pageant staged by Fred Morrow at Castletown Mount, on the outskirts of Dundalk, County Louth, in 1911. As Gosling reminds us, this area is considered in folk and literary tradition to be "the place where Cúchulainn was reared by his mother Deichtine and

stepfather Sualtam Mac Róich.” The pageant, which was well attended, provides a glimpse of the cultural life of Ireland on the eve of the First World War, and also demonstrates how the legendary hero continued to be relevant in the folk celebrations of early twentieth-century communities.

Eilís Ní Dhuibhne assesses the legacy of the pioneering nineteenth century folklore collector Thomas Crofton Croker (1798-1854), whose 1825 book, *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland* was the first substantial collection of legends drawn from the Irish oral tradition. The book



Douglas Hyde with a local farmer of West County Galway, standing by a stone wall.

Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

was a major success, and Ní Dhuibhne examines Crofton Croker’s status in the broader European network of nineteenth-century folklore scholars, particularly the Grimm Brothers, Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859), who translated *Fairy Legends* into German in 1826.

Next, we switch from focusing on folklore collectors to a specific folk narrative. The phenomenon of *an féar gorta* (the hungry grass) is the subject of Ray Cashman’s essay. The belief in the hungry grass is linked to particular locations throughout Ireland where people were said to experience sudden weakness and an insatiable hunger if they travelled through such a spot. Cashman considers the lore of the hungry grass in the context of vernacular discourse about the Great Famine. As he rightly points out, this “extraordinarily traumatic experience is not so easily represented in conventional narrative,” and therefore “the belief that the hungry grass was a result of Famine deaths may speak volumes that cannot be expressed fully in a more expository way.”

Anne O’ Connor’s essay discusses contemporary scholarship on the numerous sacred sites, holy wells and popular pilgrimages of Ireland. As O’ Connor notes, Irish religious lore and legend is “an integral part of Ireland’s cultural heritage.” O’Connor sees a revival of interest in the holy wells and “patterns” or pilgrimages associated with them, which in her view “underlines the cyclical nature of folklore and the folk tradition as constantly changing and evolving process of communication and performance.”

We next profile artist and musician Dara Vallely, co-founder of the Armagh Rhymers, Northern Ireland's oldest professional theatre company and one of Ireland's most celebrated folk theatre ensembles. Dressed in elaborate animal masks and traditional clothing, the Armagh Rhymers incorporate music, song, dance, theatre and poetry recitals into their performances. References to the Irish rhyming or mumming tradition can be traced as far back as the mythological stories in the *Táin* and the tradition is carried out today by the Armagh Rhymers and various other mumming groups in Ireland. Also included with this interview is a photographic portfolio of the Armagh Rhymers in their stunning masks and costumes. Along with preserving the oral narrative tradition of mumming, the Armagh Rhymers honor the material culture of folklore with the incorporation of masks into their performances.

Contemporary Irish writers and artists continue to draw on Irish oral tradition and native cultural history, and we include in this issue a profile of Irish language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Arguably the most influential contemporary poet writing in the Irish language, Ní Dhomhnaill derives much of her imaginative intensity from folklore and the oral tradition of the West of Ireland, in particular the Gaeltacht region of County Kerry where she grew up. Ní Dhomhnaill is a frequent visitor to the National Folklore Collection for research purposes, and her aesthetic representation of the symbolic universe of Irish folk tradition is unique in contemporary Irish poetry. Although she writes exclusively in Irish she has collaborated with some of Ireland's most prominent English-language poets including the late Seamus Heaney and John Montague, along with Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, in translations of her work.

The material culture of folklore encompasses many different types of artifacts and objects. One such item is the Williamite Coat on display in the Louth County Museum. Originally owned by William of Orange (1650-1702), this leather jerkin was in private hands for several generations, and it is an interesting example of how popular belief, legend and history intersect within the same object. As recounted to the Folklore Commission, at some point in its history a steward on the owner's estate, knowing the history of the garment, distributed cuttings from the jacket to curious visitors, as one would distribute talismans from a sacred shrine.

We have three book reviews in this issue. Our first review by Declan Kiberd discusses Angela Bourke's critically acclaimed *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story*. Bourke, who writes and lectures widely on Irish oral tradition and literature, provides a fascinating account of the disappearance and murder of twenty-six-year-old Bridget Cleary in 1895. Kiberd, a former colleague of Bourke's at UCD, notes how Bourke draws on oral tradition, newspaper and court reports, popular culture and literature to show "how the past may persist in the present." Our second review concerns the meticulously researched *Traditional Boats of Ireland: History, Folklore and Construction*. Edited by Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh and published by Cork University Press in 2008, the book is a unique and comprehensive study of Ireland's maritime environment and its rich heritage of vernacular boat types. Next, we look at *Of Mermaids and Others* (2013), Cary Shay's welcome critical introduction to the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Two recent publications from Irish Academic Press, *Folklore & Modern Irish Writing* (2014), edited by Anne Markey and Anne O' Connor, and *Straw, Hay & Rushes in Irish Folk Tradition* (2015) by Anne O' Dowd, complete this section.

Given the nature of this publication it is not feasible to cover the field of traditional Irish music; however, readers would be well advised to review the website for Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann: <http://www.comhaltas.ie>. A fine reference book in this area is Martin Dowling's *Traditional Music and Irish Society: Historical Perspectives* Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2014.

Adrienne Leavy.

- 1 Gregory Castle argues that "As an artist, Synge felt he had to accommodate his work to the temporalities, memories and practices, but above all the *vitality* of a disappearing Ireland." "Synge and Disappearing Ireland," in *Irish Literature in Transition, 1880-1940*. Ed. Marjorie Howes. Vol 4 of *Irish Literature in Transition*. Eds. Claire Connolly and Marjorie Howes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Forthcoming.
- 2 James Pethica, "Yeats, Folklore and Irish legend" in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats* Marjorie Howes and John Kelly, editors. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.129.

## Spotlight on the National Folklore Collection and *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection*

### Introduction

*The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* was assembled in the years 1935 to 1970 and forms the core archival material held in the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin (UCD), one of Europe's largest archives of oral tradition and cultural history. With the foundation of the Irish Free state in 1922, following the War of Independence, there was a driving political and social impetus for establishing a clear sense of Irish nationhood and identity, following the historical system of British imperial rule. The years preceding Irish independence had seen a growing level of engagement and support for the suppressed ideals and traditions of Gaelic and Celtic culture, through the operation of such cultural organisations as The Gaelic League, The Irish Literary Society and The Gaelic Athletic Association. With the birth of the new state, the value of Irish vernacular and material culture was recognised as a tool for consolidating new ideas of what the Irish nation was and would grow to be, one respectful of its past and keen to safeguard its heritage, much of which was under threat, particularly in rural Ireland.



Seán Ó hEochaidh agus Séamus Mac Amhlaoibh, Na Sailleasai, Leitir Barra, Co. Dhún na nGall. 1956. Image courtesy of the National Folklore Collection.

The presence of such political support lent itself to the establishment of the Irish Folklore Society in 1927 and its subsequent reincarnation as the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935. Heavily influenced and supported by noted international scholars such as Swedish folklorist Carl Von Sydow, Norwegian linguist Carl Marstrand and German folklorist Kuno Meyer, whose scientific working methods they adopted, the Commission's objective was to *collect, preserve and disseminate* the vernacular tradition of the Island of Ireland. Recognising the threat posed to traditional ways of life, particularly in the rural Irish-speaking communities (Gaeltachtaí), seen as the last outposts of Gaelic culture, the Commission commenced its work with vigour in 1935. It deployed full and part-time collectors to all 32 counties of Ireland to collect data on folk traditions and customs, and vernacular culture, as detailed in *The Handbook of Irish Folklore*, published in 1942, for their instruction.

The collection forms a distinct, finite unit, representing the efforts of a dedicated group of collectors, archivists and scholars to preserve knowledge of the disappearing material and vernacular traditions and customs of a predominantly rural population at a moment of key social and cultural transition. Inspired and guided by the systematic, pioneering cultural

efforts of Scandinavian scholars to document their own folklore and cultural history, the Commission worked carefully and enthusiastically to document and record Irish material and oral culture at a point in time when the Gaelic language was in serious decline, while the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation had not yet eroded older cultural patterns and practices.

Following the dissolution of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1970, the Government of Ireland, with the agency of the Secretary General of the Department of Education, placed the library and archives of the Commission, and responsibility for personnel associated with it, with UCD on a permanent basis in 1971. A new Department of Irish Folklore was established by the College in the same year. It was tasked with caring for the Commission's collections, allied to its role of teaching Irish folklore, the first course of its kind in Ireland.

### **The Collection**

The collected body of material that makes up *The Irish Folklore Collection* encapsulates the following fourteen broad research areas: 1) Settlement and Dwelling; 2) Livelihood and Household Support; 3) Communications and Trade; 4) The Community; 5) Human Life; 6) Nature; 7) Folk-Medicine; 8) Time; 9) Principles and Rules of Popular Belief and Practice; 10) Mythological Tradition; 11) historical Tradition; 12) Religious Tradition; 13) Popular Oral Literature; 14) Sports and Pastimes.

Within these fourteen areas *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* comprises varied documentary formats which include audio, visual, manuscript and rare printed materials, spanning all aspects of human endeavour and traditional knowledge, from material culture to oral literature, language and artistic expression. More specifically, *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* contains many unique items of national and international significance including:

A collection of early wax cylinder sound recordings, including a recording from the inaugural Feis Ceoil Festival held in 1897 (the first traditional Irish music festival of its kind during the cultural revivalist period).

Several thousand acetate disk records of native Gaelic speakers dating from the 1940s/50s.

A substantial collection of high quality magnetic tape/reel-to-reel recordings dating from the 1950s through to the 1960s.

Audio and film footage from the 1940s of internationally renowned storytellers such as Peig Sayers, and performances of Irish folk drama such as “Wren Boys” and “Mummers” (traditional Irish performances carried out at specific times of the year with distinctive costumes).

Almost 4,000 manuscripts consisting of interviews with informants as well as native hero tales and sagas, wonder tales, local legends, poetry, historical tradition and place-name lore, in both Irish Gaelic and English. They also contain invaluable descriptions of Irish material culture, including vernacular architecture, and traditional Irish society generally.

Several early manuscripts from the 18th and 19th centuries including a manuscript copy of the influential *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (A History of Ireland), by Seathrún Céitinn / Geoffrey Keating, noted for its decoration and artistry.

Some 90,000 archive photographs (film negatives and transparencies) taken by Commission fieldworkers throughout Ireland, and a substantial collection of paintings and drawings, some of which are of especial historical importance, such as Daniel McDonald's *The Discovery of the Potato Blight in Ireland* (1847), and Lady Elizabeth Butler's *The Eviction* (1890). Through its online portal - [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie) – this rich collection of archival material is now being digitised and brought to the attention of a wider national and international audience. This initiative, launched in December 2013, is a joint University College Dublin / Dublin City University digitisation project, *Dúchas.ie*, funded jointly by the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht and University College Dublin, and supported by the National Folklore Foundation.

### Further Reading

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Briody, Mícheál. "The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, ideology and methodology." *Studia Fennica, Folkloristica* 17 (Helsinki 2007).

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Sanderson, Stewart. "A Golden Chain: some Irish Folklore Connections," in *The Importance of Irish Folklore* Sanderson, S. and John McQueen eds. Dublin, 1991, pp. 5-18.

### Contact Details

The National Folklore Archive is open to the public Tuesday – Friday, 2:30pm – 5:30pm each week, save for specific holiday periods. All collections are closed to the public in August each year for conservation, cataloguing and maintenance work. For specific queries on the collection or to schedule a research appointment, please contact the National Folklore Collection at the following address:

Newman building, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4.

Telephone: 01-716 8216 (from Ireland)

011-353-1-716 8216 (from the United States)

E-mail: [béaloideas@ucd.ie](mailto:béaloideas@ucd.ie)

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Editor's Note: *Reading Ireland* would like to thank Dr. Críostóir Mac Carthaigh, Director of the National Folklore Collection and the Custodian of *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection*, for his assistance in the preparation of this essay. Dr. Mac Carthaigh can be reached at [criostoir.maccarthaigh@ucd.ie](mailto:criostoir.maccarthaigh@ucd.ie)

1 Throughout this essay the preferred spelling is that utilized in Ireland rather than the United States. Hence words such as "organization" are spelt as "organisation," "recognized" is spelt as "recognised," "vigor" is spelt as "vigour," etc., etc.

# Does Irish folklore exist in the 21st century?

by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin

The word “folk-lore” first appeared in 1846 by in a letter to the English weekly literary review, *The Athenaeum*, by Ambrose Merton (the pen-name of William Thoms, chiefly remembered today for his coinage of the word). He listed “the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time,” and proposed instead of “what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature” that “a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore -*the Lore of the People...*” be used.<sup>1</sup> If the word is originally English, and the international prestige of the London “Folk-Lore Society,” founded in 1878, helped to model the concept of folklore and the scholarly societies devoted to it in other countries, the origins of the idea of folklore are German. The concept of *Volksgeist*, a spirit or genius peculiar to each people, is associated with the philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder, and his *Volkslieder*, from 1778-1779, is a collection of poetry supposedly expressive of this national spirit, both the literary works of those writers who were true to their own native traditions -a Shakespeare or a Goethe -and folksongs, the anonymous artistic products of the least cosmopolitan and hence the most authentic stratum of the people, the peasants.

If Herder was reacting against the overbearing influence of contemporary French models on German culture, by challenging Enlightenment universalism, he made a strong case for the value of difference, of cultural specificity. Old nation states through their institutional longevity and concentration of political power accumulated cultural heritage over centuries, visible in great cathedrals and palaces, in sumptuous art collections and in the masterpieces of a Shakespeare, a Molière or a Cervantes. Pascale Casanova sees the development of European national movements in the nineteenth century “as a symbolic assertion of equality between the various national collectivities” on the cultural, political and economic level,<sup>2</sup> and, as she put it,

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By granting each country and each people the right to an existence and a dignity equal in principle to those of others, in the name of ‘popular traditions’ from which sprang a country’s entire cultural and historical development, and by locating the source of artistic fertility in the ‘soul’ of peoples, Herder shattered all the hierarchies...<sup>3</sup>

Folklore was a key part of Romantic nationalism and modern literatures in several European languages began in textualized folk traditions, when particularistic sources were reworked into modern and universalizing forms: novel, drama, national literature. The first work of literary significance in the Finnish language, for example, was the epic, *Kalevala*, synthesized from the collection of folksongs made by the rural doctor, Elias Lönnrot, and published in 1835. But if *Kalevala*’s sources were recorded from Lönnrot’s own contemporaries, they were not read as illustrative of the present, but as messages from the past: they recounted the ancient history of the Finns.

Unlike other western European countries in which a high culture was cultivated in the Middle Ages, in Ireland relatively few traces of that culture have survived. The main reason for this was the destruction, often deliberate, caused by the 16th and 17th century English conquest. The most famous of Irish medieval manuscripts, the Book of Kells, probably preserved in Kells from the 9th century, narrowly escaped. In 1654, after the Cromwellian conquest, English cavalry were billeted in Kells' parish church, leading the governor of the town to send the book to Dublin for safe-keeping.<sup>4</sup> Modern Ireland was constructed on the ruins of Gaelic Ireland. This historical discontinuity influenced the debate about the past into the nineteenth century, whether Ireland was saved from barbarism by medieval English intervention, or whether foreign invasion brought a premature end to the country's sophisticated medieval civilization. The vindication of Irish civility became an important goal, especially for Catholics and for liberal Protestants. Anglo-Irish antiquarians used the expertise of the remnants of the old native learned class to investigate Ireland's history and native culture, and the collection and dissemination of this research for an Anglo-Irish public took place in a slow process from the early 17<sup>th</sup> to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Joep Leerssen points out that, "in so doing ... they created the middle ground needed for the transfer of information that eventually was to create a new, non-sectarian audience for the heritage guarded by that tradition."<sup>5</sup>

If the Irish language was gradually marginalized socially and geographically, various scientific societies devoted themselves to it, beginning with the short-lived Dublin Gaelic Society, founded in 1807. Later scholarly societies began to interest themselves in folklore, now a legitimate part of the antiquarian field, beginning with the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, established in 1849 as the Kilkenny Archaeological Society, with the aim "to preserve, examine and illustrate all ancient monuments and memorials of the arts, manners and customs of the past, as connected with the antiquities language, literature and history of Ireland."<sup>6</sup> The first usage of the word "folklore" in Ireland was in the pages of its journal.

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The Great Famine represented another major discontinuity. In 1849, Sir William Wilde wrote:

In this state of things, with depopulation the most terrific which any country ever experienced, on the one hand, and the spread of education, and the introduction of railroads, colleges, industrial and other educational schools, on the other, -together with the rapid decay of our Irish vernacular... can superstition, or if superstitious belief, can superstitious practices continue to exist?<sup>7</sup>

By 1890, some 40% of the Irish-born were living abroad. Perhaps half the population spoke Irish in 1841, four million people or more, which proportion had dropped to 14.5%, less than 700,000 people, by 1891. Nevertheless, there were some positive developments. The work of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars Petrie, O'Donovan and O'Curry on the architecture, music, history and literature of medieval and early modern Ireland made it possible for literary writers such as Samuel Ferguson and Standish James O'Grady to assimilate aspects of the native Irish tradition into 19th century Irish literature in English. This was one way of re-asserting an Irish cultural continuity. The other way was to draw on the cultural authenticity of folklore, to see it as a thread that continued to link a medieval Gaelic aristocratic Ireland with the present. Both strategies were at work in the writings of William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory or John Millington Synge, each of whom both reworked medieval Irish literary themes and used -and, indeed, collected -folklore.

Douglas Hyde's 1892 manifesto, "The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland," a lecture given to the National Literary Society, argued that Ireland, by rejecting the *Volksgeist*, made itself incapable of any worthwhile cultural creation and denied its own claims to recognition as a separate nation. The Gaelic League was founded in 1893 with the aim of preserving and strengthening the language and creating a modern literature in Irish. The spoken dialects, rather than the earlier 17<sup>th</sup> century literary standard, were chosen as the basis of a new literary Irish, and since the spoken language was completely rural, those who set about learning Irish immersed themselves in a vibrant peasant culture with a rich oral tradition. From the beginning, the cultural festivals of the Gaelic League encouraged the collection and performance of folklore. As with Lönnrot in Finland, textualized oral traditions helped to provide a new literature. Hyde pioneered this approach, with his bilingual anthology of oral poetry, *Love Songs of Connacht* (1893), which had a great impact. Folklore texts filled the gap for reading material since only a handful of books in Irish were in print, and they were to be a major part of the League's publications, while folklore-influenced creative writing dominated the prose literature of the Gaelic Revival for a long time.

With Irish independence, the revival of the Irish language became an official national aim. Those who promoted the Irish language also urged the collection of folklore in Irish since, like the language, its existence was threatened by emigration, by language shift and by cultural change, and official support was won. The Folklore of Ireland Society was founded in 1927, the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930 and finally the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) in 1935. Using a dedicated staff of full-time ethnographers and supplemented by voluntary efforts and by a project of using elementary school children, the IFC accumulated a collection of some 2,000,000 pages, the greater part in Irish, collected from some 40,000 informants and covering the spectrum of traditional rural life and especially the domain of oral literature -folksongs and stories.

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The writings of Séamus Delargy, director of the IFC, give eloquent testimony to the national importance of folklore. He stressed the remarkable continuity in the Gaelic tradition from a medieval aristocratic culture, explaining that, after the destruction of the native elite in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the common people saved "in spite of all persecution some of the culture of the upper classes and admitted it into their age-old treasury of oral tradition." Thus "a large part of our medieval literature exists in oral form..."<sup>8</sup> Speaking of the fragility of the language, he wrote:

The real importance of the language still living on the lips of the old inhabitants of the Gaeltacht was not understood... When these old people die there will be an end to the Middle Ages in western Europe, and the chain which still links the present generation to the earliest settlers of Ireland will be broken. There still lives amongst them a culture which belonged to the whole nation.<sup>9</sup>

The Irish language bestowed a historical legitimacy on the Irish state and through it asserted a historical continuity that could be traced through oral tradition from today back to the Middle Ages. The Battle of Kinsale in 1601 represents the conventional end of Gaelic Ireland. The election as first President of Ireland of Hyde, the scholar who had done more than anyone else to take the Gaelic tradition from its position of marginality and place it at the center of Irish cultural life, then took on a special significance. At his inauguration in 1937,

he was greeted by *Taoiseach* Éamon de Valera with the words: “In you we greet the successor of our rightful princes and, in your accession to office, we hail the closing of the breach that has existed since the undoing of our nation at Kinsale.”<sup>10</sup>

The decline of traditional rural life motivated folklore studies in the 19th century. If before the Second World War, agriculture still provided a major part of employment in Ireland and in other European countries, today its role is negligible. The gradual breakdown of the congruence between social class and culture came to challenge the concepts of “high,” “folk,” “popular,” and “mass” culture. The culture industries -the television and movie studios, the record companies, book publishers, often using a small number of digital platforms -provide cultural products to all social classes. The intense cultural circulation of today complicates the notion of folklore. If, a few generations ago, in rural Ireland one heard and played only folk music, to be a folk musician today means to make conscious choices between musical styles one has grown up with and that are freely available to all. This does not mean that there are no continuities; there obviously are, but there are also many more hybrid forms, hybrid experiences, hybrid trajectories and conscious choices. The famous Connemara *sean-nós* singer, Joe Heaney (Seosamh Ó hÉanaí/Joe Éinniú, 1919-1984), recently celebrated in Pat Collins’ Oscar-nominated film, *Song of Granite* (2017), first came to the US in 1965 to perform at the Newport Folk Festival, later performing with the avant-garde composer John Cage on *Roaratorio* (1979) and in his final years took up a position as artist-in-residence at the University of Washington in Seattle.<sup>11</sup> The pieces of traditional rural furniture, once made by carpenters, wheelwrights or other craftsmen, that have come down to us are today highly regarded collectors’ items,<sup>12</sup> often holding pride of place in modernist dwellings. There may be continuity in the work of traditional boat-makers and in the prominence of the boats in specific districts, but *currachai* or *naomhóga* are now more commonly made for racing than for fishing.

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The local and cultural specificity of folklore that attracted Romantics and cultural nationalists has today taken on surprising new meanings. The local, for example, offers a traceability that has become an important value, so that it has become the repository of food safety for consumers and of authenticity for gourmets. The spread of the French concept of *terroir*, indicating both land understood in terms of its agricultural quality and the expression of those qualities in, for example, the taste of food and wine, indicates one aspect of the renewed importance of the local. Regional food specialities have been named in order to protect them and to market them. Already in 1935, the French Institut National des Appellations d’Origines (INAO) was founded and its remit was much later extended from wines and spirits to cover food products. It uses panels of experts to define traditional products and their areas of production.

In 1992, the European Union followed suit with labels such as the Protected Designation of Origin, the Traditional Specialty Guaranteed and the Protected Geographical Indication -held by Connemara Hill Lamb and Timoleague Brown Pudding, for example. Their aim includes encouraging diversity in agricultural production, protecting product names and helping consumers to make informed choices. The Slow Food movement, founded in Italy in 1986 “to defend regional traditions, good food, gastronomic pleasure and a slow pace of life,” has become an international movement.<sup>13</sup> The Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity,

founded in 2003, has the ambition to “promote the study and defense of the food, farming and artisan heritage of every country... and to protect the typical characteristics and features thereof.”<sup>14</sup>

If Herder challenged universalism with the exaltation of cultural specificity, today cultural specificity is understood not only as the mark of local authenticity and national identity, but as the guarantor of global diversity. The Convention on Biological Diversity was signed by representatives of one hundred and fifty governments at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and recognized that biological diversity was not just about “plants, animals and micro organisms and their ecosystems.” Among its main recommendations were the following:

[to] respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and [to] promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and [to] encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge, innovations and practices.

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was signed in 2003 and to date 176 countries have ratified it, Ireland being one of the most recent signatories. Other such instruments include the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Implicit in these is the notion that difference should not die, whether because each ecosystem, each culture, each language is a separate bank of information that may offer different solutions to various problems of the human condition now or in time to come -rather like the Svalbard Global Seed Vault stored on a Norwegian Arctic island that holds more than a million samples -or because the recognition of diversity is an effective means of broadening cultural citizenship. This has provided a new way to validate cultural and linguistic difference. In 2017, the Irish Folklore Commission’s collection was added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, where it joins the Book of Kells, added in 2011. UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity now includes Uilleann piping, added in 2017, with the application for hurling currently pending.

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Local traditions, either a centrifugal source that threatened political unity or the proof of authenticity that underlined national identities, are now seen both as the foundation for identities in a globalized world and as a bank of diversity necessary for the future of humanity. It is not just the old question of “thinking globally, acting locally,” but of appreciating the global value of existing local traditions, not as commodities to be monetized (the fact that the UNESCO conventions are legal instruments is some protection in this regard<sup>15</sup>), but as part of a common human heritage. This has to be seen as a very promising development.

1 William Thoms, “Folklore and the Origin of the Word.” In *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore*, Alan Dundes, ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. 9-14.

2 Pascale Casanova, “Combative Literatures.” In *New Left Review* 72 (2011), pp. 123-134.

3 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M.B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 76-77.

4 Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “What Happened to Ireland’s Medieval Manuscripts?” *Peritia* 22-23 (2011), pp. 191-223.

- 5 Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael. Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century*. 2nd ed. Cork: Cork University Press, 1996, p. 287.
- 6 <http://rsai.ie/about/> (accessed 28 March 2018).
- 7 William R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1979 [1852], pp. 9-10.
- 8 Séamus Ó Duilearga, "Volkskundliche Arbeit in Irland von 1850 bis zur Gegenwart mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der "Irischen Volkskunde - Kommission", *Zeitschrift für Keltische Philologie und Volksforschung* xxiii (1943).
- 9 Séamus Ó Duilearga, Seán Ó Conaill's Book: Stories and Traditions from Iveragh. Trans. Máire MacNeill. Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1981, p. xiv.
- 10 Gearóid Ó Cruaioich, "The Primacy of Form: A 'Folk Ideology' in de Valera's Politics." In J.P. O'Carroll and John A. Murphy (eds.), *De Valera and His Times*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1986, p. 53.
- 11 See Sean Williams and Lilis Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song Man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- 12 See Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993.
- 13 See [www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-history/](http://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-history/) (accessed 28 March 2018).
- 14 [www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/what-is-the-foundation/statute/](http://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/what-is-the-foundation/statute/) (accessed 28 March 2018).
- 15 The World Intellectual Property Organization has also given careful consideration to the question of folklore. Intellectual property regimes normally recognize personal ownership, but the fact that folklore is a collective phenomenon makes it difficult to give it legal protection. See <http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/folklore/> (accessed 28 March 2018).

## Diarmuid Ó Giolláin



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A street trader exchanges sweets and toys for bottles in a Dublin suburb. c 1950

Image courtesy of the National Folklore Collection

# **Bíonn siúlach scéalach: Ceanródaithe & bailitheoirí Choimisiún Béaloideas Éireann**

## **Bíonn siúlach scéalach: Pioneers & collectors of The Irish Folklore Commission<sup>1</sup>**

In 1935, under the guidance of the Irish Government, The Irish Folklore Commission was founded and immediately began its work. The Commission, a cultural organisation which had been founded due to the implacable work and foresight of its main pioneer, Séamus Ó Duileagra – James Hamilton Delargy – began a new era in the story of folklore in Ireland. The collection of folklore was the main aim of the Commission. There was, at the time, a strong opinion amongst folklorists, both national and international, that the stories, songs, proverbs, superstitions and all aspects of the oral tradition were quickly dying out, and that some of the most valuable material, of both linguistic and cultural importance, had already been lost forever due to the deaths of the countries most gifted and culturally devoted storytellers and preservers of folkloric tradition, namely the quickly coming end of an older generation who preserved and practiced these oral customs. As a result of this, pioneers in the field of folkloristic and anthropology, which included Ó Duilearga, decided to act upon what had become a crisis and set out to collect and archive the material which still remained in the memories of the living bearers of tradition.

Patricia Lysaght, Professor of Irish, Celtic and Folklore at UCD explains the brief of the Commission:

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The Irish Folklore Commission, set up by the Irish Government, became operational on the first of April 1935, and it continued in existence until 1971 when it was replaced by the Department of Irish Folklore. The Commission's brief was to undertake the collection, preservation, classification and publication of all aspects of Irish folk tradition (Lysaght, 1993: 49).

The current archive at UCD is testimony of the achievements of the Commission and the fulfilment of its mission. This paper looks to assess these achievements in terms of the work and scope of IFC and the national and international importance of the archive it managed to build. Reviewing the main research questions of my PhD thesis (Ó Tiarnaigh, 2015), this paper will also attempt to assess the IFC in terms of its philosophy and mission, mirrored and implemented by its main pioneers, Ó Duilearga, de Valera, and employees, namely those collecting in its name. These research questions are based around the Commission's awareness of and reaction to 20th century developments within the folkloric tradition whilst focusing on the collection and archiving, and ultimately look to investigate the basic methodologies used by collectors in the field alongside the problems they encountered during this process to help examine their awareness as employees of a movement of both national and international importance.

What therefore, is Irish folk tradition, what does it entail, what parts of cultural life does it include or exclude? Or more important, how is folklore generally defined by leading contemporary scholars? In his 1979 publication entitled *'the Dynamics of folklore'*, scholar Barre Toelken provides the following explanation, stating that "folklore is a word very much like 'culture'; it represents a tremendous spectrum of human expression. Its primary characteristic is that its ingredients seem to come directly from dynamic interactions among human beings in communal-traditional performance contexts". (Toelken, 1979: 28), touching on the principal characteristics that it must be a) oral transmitted and b) culturally expressive to the audience.

Which brings us to our next question? Why should folklore be studied? Why should it be collected, or a question I am sure was on the minds of many citizens of the Irish state in 1935, why should state money be spent to finance its collection?

In the words of Norwegian folklorist Reidar Christiansen (1959: 1):

Why should folktales be studied? The immediate answer is to point to the fact that folktales constitute a body of international fiction, international to a degree to which no other type of literature has ever had a chance of attaining. The pedigree of folktales takes us back to a remote past; by their conservatism these tales preserve ideas belonging to past periods.

### **Folklore collecting: An International Concept?**

We can trace the beginning of the folklore movement in Ireland to international origins, namely that of the Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, possibly the worlds most famous folklorists. The works of the Brothers Grimm inspired and encouraged folklorists from nations worldwide to collect. Through the collection of folklore the Brothers Grimm realised the true potential of the oral tradition in terms of the preservation of a national heritage. Michaelis-Jena, 1970, writes:

They [Grimms] had become keener and keener on their country's oral tradition, and about 1806 they began writing down popular tales, realizing that this 'buried gold' was in danger of being lost, and it was time to preserve an important heritage. Jacob and Wilhelm encouraged each other in their zeal. They infected many friends with their enthusiasm, and slowly the work which against all expectations was to make the name Grimm known all over the world, began to take shape (Michaelis-Jena, 1970: 47).

They began this mass folklore movement, a movement that had a widespread impact, a movement that definitely, even if indirectly, influenced the founding of the Folklore Commission in Ireland, 120 years after the publication of their primary German collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* – 'Children and Household Tales' (1812) and exactly 100 years after the publication of Jacob Grimms *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835) – 'Teutonic Mythology'. According to the main leaders of romanticism it was the Brothers Grimm who brought about a scientific change in the folklore universe, promoting it as an acceptable modern research field. Boyer writes: 'In the early nineteenth century, as the modern discipline of folklore was forming out of the impulses of antiquarianism and historical philology, the work of the German Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm represented a major step towards systemization for the new discipline'.

More than 10 years after the publication of *Deutsche Mythologie* a 19<sup>th</sup> Century English folklorist, William John Thoms, used the work of the Grimms as a reference point for his own pioneering work in the fields of folkloristics and anthropology. In 1846 Thoms penned a letter to the academic journal *The Athenaeum* and it is in this published letter that we first see the use of the word 'folklore'. The author, Thoms, attempts in his correspondence to classify and link together all types of anthropological and cultural material previously published by the journal through this terminological categorisation. Defining his compound, Thoms notes:

Your pages have so often given evidence of the interest which you take in what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature (though by-the-by it is more a Lore than a Literature, and would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folklore, - the Lore of the People) (1965 [1846]: 4).<sup>2</sup>

From Thoms essay we can derive that he understood the current health status of traditional storytelling and oral traditions, recognising that they were nearly lost from existence and that the amount that remained desperately needed to be manually added to the pages of history, to help form an accurate picture of national heritage and customs. Thoms qualified his text with the following request:

I am not without hopes of enlisting your aid in garnering the few ears which are remaining, scattered over that field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop.

No one who has made the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time his study, but must have arrived at two conclusions:- the first, how much that is curious and interesting in these matters is now entirely lost – the second, how much may yet be rescued by timely exertion (Thoms, 1965 [1846]: 5).

Thoms optimism was not to fall on deaf ears in Ireland.

### **A New Folklore Movement in a New Ireland?**

Delargy's work as a folklorist began long before the foundation of the Commission. In 1925 the first attempt was made to set up a folklore society in Ireland. This attempt, pioneered by County Antrim duo, Delargy and linguist Fionán Mac Coluim, failed. Writing to Norwegian Folklorist, Professor Reidar Christiansen, the following year Delargy managed to attract international support and momentum and in November 1926 Delargy and fifteen others convened to discuss the basis of a folklore Society. It was agreed to found such a society with the aim to collect, examine and publish the folklore of Ireland (Briody, 2007: 76). The Folklore Society of Ireland was officially established January 11 1927 at a meeting chaired by Douglas Hyde. As part of the Society, these pioneers also agreed upon the launch of an academic journal to be published twice annually on behalf of the society under the title *Béaloides – Folklore*. The journal would serve as an integral part of the folklore movement in Ireland, becoming a temporary archive for the material collected between the founding of the Society and that of the Commission in 1935.

The Society not only used the journal for publication of collected material, but Delargy used it himself to regularly update his subscribers through sometimes bilingual editorials. The editorials regularly reviewed the societies mission statements, methodology and called for volunteers to submit items of folklore, that they had either collected or recorded from family members, for publishing.

The first editorial finely detailed the aims and mission the society had set itself:

AN Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann (The Folklore of Ireland Society), established in Dublin in January of this year, has for its object the collection of the traditional folklore of Ireland, of which a considerable amount still remains unrecorded, and is fast being lost with the passing of the old people in all parts of the country. In addition to this work of recording and preservation, the Society will endeavour to publish annually a certain amount of the material collected, and this it proposes to do, for the present, in its Journal *Béaloideas*, of which this is the first number (Ó Duilearga, 1927: 3).

Delargy continued to address the Society's aim to finally establish international misconceptions concerning Ireland and its folklore, saying:

The aim of our Society is a humble one-to collect what still remains of the folklore of our country. We are not yet in a position to form an accurate judgment of its merits, but of this we are certain that the nonsensical rubbish which passes for Irish folklore, both in Ireland and outside, is not representative of the folklore of our Irish people (Ó Duilearga, 1927: 3).

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Finishing his editorial with methodological advice for volunteering collectors or any academics sympathetic to the cause he had whole-heartily explained, in that, his inaugural address to his members, contributors and readers, Delargy sent out a battle cry, a plea for assistance that echoed some the opening words of Pádraig Mac Piarais' Proclamation from the GPO over a decade before:

Many persons throughout the country, in spite of wars and civil strife, and that still more potent enemy, carelessness, have still in their possession collections of folklore made at various times during the last 30 years. I Urge most earnestly upon those of our readers who may have in their possession collections of the kind to communicate with us. We do not hesitate to bring forward a noble-if at times a misapplied-quotation, and we ask them to help us do-churn gloire De' agus onora na hÉireann (for the glory of God and the honour of Ireland) (Ó Duilearga, 1927: 3).

The Folklore of Ireland Society set out to include a wide range of Irish traditions in its scope. Although placenames itself may not qualify as 'folklore', the explanation of placenames can be attributed as being an integral part of the Irish oral tradition, and therefore was included as part of the research criteria that fell under the work of the folklorists.

This methodology was announced and explained as part of the December edition of the Society's journal, *Folklore / Béaloideas*, 1928:

“Owing to the peculiar conditions which prevail in Ireland, we are strongly of the opinion that as wide an interpretation as possible be given to the term Folklore. There is a crying need in Ireland for a thorough investigation of Irish dialects (of which little is known) and also of placenames, a much neglected but vastly important field of research. Until these and other matters are the object of organised investigation by societies or institutes constituted to deal with them, we deem it advisable to bring them within the scope of our work” (in *Béaloidias*, 1928).

Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha, Irish language writer and teacher, a renowned nationalist and republican activist before the Easter Rising, was appointed President of the Society, Douglas Hyde as Treasurer, Fionán Mac Coluim, who played a large role as a teacher and folklore collector on behalf of Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League) at the beginning of the twentieth century, appointed secretary and his fellow-Antrim man Delargy was to take the more active role as Archivist and Editor of the journal. The personnel was quite a monumental, and historic move, giving that several were on opposing sides during the Irish Civil War of the same decade. Putting aside their political differences the pioneering member of the Society dedicated their best efforts to fulfilling the targets that were laid out before them. Ó Siochfhradha, who operated mostly under his literary penname ‘An Seabhac’ (‘The Hawk’), strongly promoted the idea that the work of the Society carried a large ethnological importance on both a national and an international level, stating that the importance of Irish folklore was based upon ‘making scientific comparison with the folklore of other peoples, to demonstrate the historical growth of humanity, to measure the development and decline of old religions, etc’ (in *The Irish Independent*, 1928).<sup>3</sup>

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This was only beginning.<sup>4</sup> Delargy can be looked upon as Ireland’s spokesman, Ireland’s representative in the international field of folkloristics at this time, who took Ireland’s integration of folklore in terms of its importance in the field of cultural nationalism, and promoted it among some of the biggest names in anthropology during the beginning of the twentieth century. Seamus Delargy, after spending 6 months travelling and studying as an apprentice folklorist throughout Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Estonia and Russia, returned to Ireland in 1928 to begin a movement that would take 7 years to become a reality. It was towards the end of 1928 and the start of 1929 that Delargy began the work that would ultimately lead to the formation of the IFC in 1935, an end product that contemporary Tyrone folklorist Professor Séamus Ó Catháin, former head of the Irish Folklore Department at UCD, would describe as “the fulfilment of his life’s mission”. In a book edited by Ó Catháin in 2008, there are presented detailed manuscript diary entries and correspondence letters from Delargy’s travels, illustrating the importance of the trip in terms of networking, training and the overall ‘*Formation of a Folklorist*’. Ó Catháin described “Delargy’s study tour [as] a resounding success, resulting in the acquisition of new knowledge and new contacts, new languages, new ideas and the establishment of new horizons for himself and for his country” (Ó Catháin, 2008: xii).

Upon his return Delargy was compelled, in order to increase the possibility of success of his initiative, to link his movement to current politics to help win government support and funding. He successfully secured funding through several meetings with Dáil TD/MP Michael Tierney and Minister Earnán de Blaghd. In November 1928 a one off grant of £1000 was agreed with a promise of £600-700 continuation grant on an annual basis thereafter (Ó

Catháin, 2008: 90). This money was made available in 1930 and prompted the immediate foundation of the Irish Folklore Institute which elected future Irish President Douglas Hyde as its President and Delargy as Director and Editor. An additional £500 was made available for fieldwork and £300 to develop a library and archive. The Irish Folklore Association continued its voluntary work throughout all developments and is still in operation today, publishing annual and special editions of its folklore journal. In 1932, at an AGM of the association, Delargy announced that the Institute had successfully collected 2 million words on 50,000 pages which were held in the Institutes archive, (Ó Muimhneacháin, 1977: 2).<sup>5</sup>

But Delargy believed further developments were possible and simply looked upon the founding of a Folklore Institute as a stepping-stone to bigger and better things. As he worked towards his long-term goal, Delargy spent a lot of time in discussion with Éamon de Valera, who, at the time, was President of the Irish Executive Council on behalf of Fianna Fáil. The director of the Folklore institute played upon de Valera's well published love for preserving the older way of life, realising that, in the words of Michael Briody (2007: 108) 'that he had a sympathetic ear in the President of the Executive Council, and that at last his ambitions for Irish Folklore were within his grasp' (Briody, 2007: 108).<sup>6</sup>

In hindsight, de Valera himself must be praised for following through on his much-heralded views on this romanticism and preservation of the Gaelic tradition, finally agreeing to give Government backing, financially, to an Irish Folklore Commission, under the care and guidance of Delargy. In a memorandum sent from Delargy to de Valera in 1946, eleven years after the initial founding of the Commission, requesting additional funding to sustain the then current operations of the Commission, Delargy states himself the role de Valera played during the negotiations prior to Government backing in 1935, beginning his correspondence with the line 'the commission was set up in 1935, mainly through the foresight of Mr. de Valera'.<sup>7</sup>

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Folklore scholar Linda Degh, who specialises in the emancipatory use of folklore in politics and communities, helps display the important link between folklore and the nation, a link that de Valera was only too happy to exploit in order to reinforce the idea of national independence in Ireland at the time:

Degh explains:

European ethnology, or folklore, originated in the political struggles of various minority population groups for ethnic recognition through certain culturally distinctive features, even though they were politically affiliated with large empires. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, specific forms of folklore and folklife played a decisive role in the claims of ethnic groups for national independence and became instrumental in the establishment of modern nations. Thus the independent schools of ethnography of the newly founded nations catered to the reinforcement of ethnic identity and the rise of national pride through the definition, propagation, and perpetuation of ethnic values (Dégh, 1975: 114).

We cannot underestimate the importance of the role played by Von Sydow in the establishment of a folklore commission. Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, a prominent Swedish and internationally recognised folklore scholar, would come to play a huge role in shaping the

future of both Delargy and the Irish Folklore movement. Not only did he strongly influence Delargy, both on a personal and on an academic level, but he seemed to influence some of the main authoritative figures in Ireland at that time, in both academia and government. In a letter written by the then famous Eoin Mac Neill, prominent Irish Republican volunteer and co-founder of the Gaelic League in 1893, to president of the executive council, Éamon de Valera, dated 6<sup>th</sup> July 1934, upon hearing of the government's announcement to grant the wishes of Delargy to establish a national folklore commission, Mac Néill admiringly points the finger of influence to the expertise and role of von Sydow for his continuous endeavour to support of the Irish cause, and assists de Valera seek his council on the matter:

Dear Mr. President,

The Government, as I understand, having decided to make provision for the collection, study and preservation of Irish folklore, has under consideration the means by which such provision should be applied... There is fortunately in Dublin at present one of the chief European experts in folklore, Dr Von Sydow of the University of Lund. He has told me that he is altogether in agreement with me and that he desires an opportunity to speak to you on the subject. Von Sydow has a unique affection for Ireland. In the crisis of 1920-21, he held meetings all over Sweden in support of the Irish cause. It is a matter of national policy and of national reconstruction. Dr Von Sydow will tell you that Ireland is regarded in point of her folk tradition as one of the most important, perhaps quite the most important, country in Europe (Mac Néill, 1934: 1-2).<sup>8</sup>

Von Sydow himself was not quiet on the subject, and became somewhat an activist and a continuous source of support for Delargy through the years of the Irish Folklore Institute. Presenting de Valera with a memorandum during a meeting between the two in 1934, von Sydow himself explains the national and international importance of government support and financing for such a project, namely a Commission, and obviously playing on de Valera's well-known bias for Gaelic heritage and culture, as he emphasised Ireland's status as one of the main nations in terms of folklore in the continent:

The position which Ireland has in the field of folklore and oral tradition is unique in Europe. Tradition here is still alive, elsewhere moribund or dead. Collection of material should be undertaken immediately and carried out for a number of years... so as to ensure that all matters of special national and scientific importance should be covered. I am convinced, Mr. President, and my viewpoint is shared by all the Scandinavian and German scholars with whom I have been in touch on this matter, that you are in a position not only to do your country a very great service, but to place the whole scientific world under a great deal debt of your gratitude to you by having the folklore of Ireland placed on record for all time.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of continued and focused pressure on de Valera, he finally proposed that such a Commission would be established as a department of the government, owing to the fact that it would be fully financed by the government. There was an additional recommendation that the Commission developed links as a university department within UCD, due to Delargy's previous academic links there and this was agreed due to the success of university directed national folklore movements in the Nordic countries, and this therefore is how von Sydow

proposed it be carried out in Ireland. The Irish Parliament, An Dáil, set aside £3,250 as an annual grant-in-aid for the Commission under the original plan that it would operate for five years. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 1935, the members of the Institute met for the last time and arranged for all possessions, collections and monies of the Institute to be handed over to this new Commission (Ó Catháin, 2008: 95). The Irish Folklore Commission was founded April 2nd, 1935. At its first meeting the education minister Tomás Ó Deirg addressed the committee, announcing and declaring the three main parts of the coming process that needed to be fulfilled; they were: 1) propaganda for the Commission looking to raise public attention to the cause, 2) the collection of materials in the field, and 3) the use and exploitation of the materials collected, the output, in terms of academic study and publication (Briody, 2007: 133). Delargy himself was appointed Director of the Irish Folklore Commission, a post he maintained until the end of its work in 1970.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Irish Folklore Commission and its Collectors:**

The next step was to appoint collectors, the ground staff, the fieldworkers. Originally, in 1933, it was Delargy's plan to employ academic or professionals to undertake the collection process, he proposed targeting four groups; postgraduate university students, Irish language teachers, primary or secondary school teachers with fluent Irish, or young men with sufficient education to take on the work. This wasn't, however, how it worked out. In fact, Seán Ó Súilleabháin, fulltime archivist for the Commission and collector for the Institute, claimed in 1953 that they deliberately avoided any person with an academic background, but rather natives of the West, of the farming working class, and of the Gaeltacht. He said:

We didn't look around among university students to act as collectors, for we have found that any attempt we have made in Ireland to have university students do collecting has been largely a failure. We looked among fishermen along the coast, and to young primary teachers who had not yet got positions in schools, and from them we picked our collectors. Because they were of the people they had not been spoiled, as we say in Ireland, by university education and by city ways. Because anyone who does go among the people must go among them as one of themselves and have no high-faluting nonsense about them. He must become as they are and talk to them in their own language. (Ó Súilleabháin, Seán, in Thompson, 1976 (1953): 4).

In 1966, again reviewing the types of collectors appointed in 1935, Ó Súilleabháin is quoted to have said that 'none of them was a university graduate; they were devoted men who knew their local Irish-Gaelic dialect well, had an intimate knowledge of country life, and a deep respect for the custodians of an ancient, orally preserved culture' (Ó Súilleabháin, 1966: xxxiv-xxxv).

The Commission employed 6 fulltime workers in their first year, Liam Mac Coisdeala, Galway, Tadhg Ó Murchadha, Kerry, Seán Ó hEochaidh, Donegal and Proinnsias de Búrca, also Galway, were the first to be appointed. Of the 6 appointed in the first 12 months, only one of these ended up being academically qualified, that was Liam Mac Meanman, of Donegal, who held a BA in Celtic studies from UCD under the direction of Delargy himself, who had set Mac Meanman folklore collecting assignments as part of his undergraduate work. Mac Meanman's role in the Commission was to be a small one, however, finishing his work

as a fulltime collector after two years, after amassing 10,000 handwritten pages of folklore for the Commissions archive . (Ó Catháin, 1992: 294). Ó hEochaidh was to remain with the commission until the end, becoming a grandmaster collector, renown within his field of expertise and subject of many academic articles and media productions.<sup>11</sup> His relationship with the director, Delargy, became that of a friendship almost instantly. Delargy, travelling to Ó hEochaidh's native Teelin to train him for the work, imparted with him some of his political and cultural bias', along with his hopes and aspirations for the newly established Commission. On one of their many excursions in South West Donegal, Delargy and Ó hEochaidh tackled the infamous Sleive League Bunglas Cliff walk – the scene of the highest sea cliffs in Europe, and it was here looking out over the west coast of Ireland that Delargy delivered his famous sermon to Ó hEochaidh, now known as the seminar ar an sliabh – the mountain top seminar. Delargy explained to Ó hEochaidh his mission and the importance of this mission, highlighting the significance of his impending role as a collector in fulfilling this task. Writing in his diary afterwards, Delargy said:

We enjoyed the climb [Sliabh Liag] immensely. On the top I talked to Seán about the vast importance of the work he is about to begin and I urged on him to do his best for the honour of his native county and of the **dead generations** whose lore he is about to collect (Ó Duilearga, 5/8/1935 - CB: Lch 47-48).

It is hard to believe Delargy's choice of words were merely random, or without a deeper meaning. Again we can make a very strong link to Proclamation of 1916, read by Pearse at the GPO in Dublin, echoed first by Delargy in his editorial of the folklore society's journal, *Béaloides* in 1927, and now here, in Teelin, 8 years later, referring the apprenticeship of Ó hEochaidh, and remembering the 'dead generations' that both Pearse and the Commission now strove to represent:

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom (Forógra na hÉireann, 1916).<sup>12</sup>

Ó hEochaidh's training did not stop at wise words or rousing speeches, Delargy was a firm believer that there was a primary necessity to train all fulltime collectors regarding methodology in the field. In Ó hEochaidh's case, Delargy came to Teelin on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1935. Understanding that Ó hEochaidh had previously shown he had experience collecting stories, Delargy began to teach him different methods to entice specific types of folklore from his informants, along with correct transcribing and recording protocol. Ó hEochaidh's main lesson, was perhaps, his training to use his new equipment. Professor Seamus Ó Cathain (1989: 54). explains through his apprenticeship Ó hEochaidh had the opportunity to learn modi operandi of a professional collector from the grandmaster himself and that he specifically learned the correct use of his recording equipment, the Ediphone, and the necessary skills needed to transcribe this material into the Commissions notebooks. In other instances, Delargy is said to have been a more severe and laborious in his trainings, in the case of Nioclás Breatnach, Delargy made him sit listening exams, 'a rigorous test to ascertain if his ear was sharp enough to detect subtleties of pronunciation' and dialect (Briody, 2007: 235). The ediphone was the collectors main aid. In time it would be replaced with smaller more

efficient recorders. A large, and quite heavy, recording device the collectors would travel around their catchment area, usually an entire county, using a bicycle, with the ediphone on their backs. ‘Recording was made on to the Ediphone’s wax cylinders (1000 to 1500 words each) and the material was transcribed into standard notebooks which were sent to the Commission in St. Stephen’s Green in Dublin’ (Ó Giolláin, 2000: 133). When the wax cylinder would be filled with an informant’s narrative, it would be replaced. These cylinders would then need transcribing to manuscript form in the collectors’ spare time at home. The technicalities of the device, were not without fault, and regularly became a hindrance during a story or performance, especially if the cylinder would stop during a story, the informant would be thrown off track as the collector changed the reel or fixed the problem. Collector ‘Seosamh Ó Dálaigh says it interfered greatly with the ‘continuity of the tale’, and forced the collector to remember where the narrator stopped, as he or she, depending on his or her age or alertness, might not necessarily remember.’ (Briody, 2007: 244). In terms of the informant, the storyteller, the introduction to new modern technology of this kind stunned and surprised many of them. In one story, coming from the diary of Seán Ó hEochaidh during a collection, he writes:

D’fhosgail mé amach an machine agus chuir mé isteach eiteán. D’innis an Baoghallaigh sgeál beag a chéad uair le teibheaint an dóigh a rabh an gléas ag obair. Nuair a chualaidh sé caint an Bhaoghallaigh a teacht araist de is beag nach dteachaidh sé amach as a chrann-cuachta. Ní chuirfeadh rud ar bith amach as a chionn nach h-é an diabhal a bhí a’ caint (CRBÉ 421: 81).

[I opened up the machine and put in a cylinder. I asked Boyle, my assistant, to recite a story first to show how the machine worked. When the old man heard Boyle’s talk coming out of the machine afterwards he nearly fell off his chair. He couldn’t get it out of his head that it wasn’t the devil speaking back to him.]

26

Along with the ediphone, from 1937 onwards the collectors were equipped with somewhat of a guide, a manual, for use in the field. Completed and published in Irish by Seán Ó Súilleabháin in 1937, the *Lámhleabhar Béaloideas* (or the *Folklore Handbook*), a publication which was later revised and published in English under the title ‘*Handbook of Irish folklore*’ in 1942, became an essential part of the collectors’ methodology. Ó Súilleabháin had realised that on many occasions the collector thought himself to be finished with a certain informant, believing to have exhausted every possible topic of folklore, and so developed his handbook in accordance with the Uppsala classification system to list and index of topics and categories that fell within the Commission’s understanding of the broad field of folkloristics, from topics ranging from the community, farming fishing, nature, cures and remedies, the weather, time, to superstitions and magic, history, proverbs, rhymes, oral literature and hobbies. (Ó Súilleabháin, 1937: vii – xi).

Delargy insisted that his fieldworkers collected, transcribed and recorded their material verbatim, syllabically identical as it was spoken by their informants. This approach being in stark contrast to the methodology employed by the Grimms, which sought about somewhat manipulating and editing the material with earlier, literary base texts. Delargy’s aim was to create an archive of material to exactly represent the stories of the people, with no dialectal or standardised changes being made to manuscript texts from the field.

It was also a key requirement of the job that the collectors keep daily field diaries. These diaries were to be completed during or after each days work and would be returned to the head office in Dublin. Many argue that the diaries were to serve a watchdog purpose, to keep track of government employed agents who were operating fulltime on the far coast of the country. Academic Michael Briody explains that...

Each of the Irish Folklore Commission's full-time collectors was required to keep a diary of his field work in which they were instructed to record certain kinds of contextual information in respect of recording sessions and visits to narrators. In these diaries collectors were also expected to give an account of themselves when at home transcribing, and, to some extent, even during their leisure hours (Briody, 2005: 27).

Delargy, on this issue, stressed the contextual and linguistic importance of the diaries, as they were to be written in Irish, for future generations of folklorists, anthropologists and scholars saying that:

Each collector will be expected to keep a diary in which he will record his experiences as a collector, details as to the area investigated, the results obtained, etc. It is felt that these diaries will be of a very considerable value and interest both from a folkloristic, and (as they will be written in Irish) a linguistic point of view (Ó Duilearga, 10/1/1935).<sup>13</sup>

An abstract, below, clearly shows that the collectors fulfilled this requirement and sometimes used it as an outlet for their feeling on any matter they felt important enough to include, and also looked at the diaries as a possible mode of feedback regarding their jobs. 27

Here Ó hEochaidh, after a lengthy two page rant on his views on the Irish language and current politics, refers to the scholarly interest these documents will inevitably attract:

Níl am ar bith a dtéighim i gcionn dialáin nach bhfuil na rudaí seo a rith fríd mo chionn, agus 'sa deireadh i n-áit dialán a bheith scríobhtha agam sciordann sé isteach 'na chunntas mhór fhada. Ach b'fhéidir lá ínteacht go mbeadh na tuairimí seo suimeamhail (CRBÉ: 1289: 61)

There is no time, when I sit to write this diary that all these thoughts aren't running through my mind, and in the end, instead of having written a diary entry on y days work, it turns into a big long outburst. But, maybe someday, somebody will find these opinions, my opinions, interesting.

The National Folklore Collection in UCD is testimony to the works of these collectors on behalf of the folklore of Ireland. If approximately between 1 and 1.5 thousand words can be transcribed from a single ediphone cylinder, and we estimate Ó hEochaidh transcribed 60 cylinders, 54 given to him by Delargy during his apprenticeship, and 6 others he filled himself, in a period of little over 4 weeks, approximately between 60-90 thousand words, the equivalent of a PhD thesis, imagine, the work he completed in 35 years, being the main fulltime contributor to a huge archive. Ó hEochaidh was later to be awarded with an honor-

ary doctorate by Coláiste na hOllscoile, Gaillimh, Galway in 1988 (see Ó Madagáin, 1989). Overall the work of these collectors will be remembered for how much they achieved with so little support. Michael Briody sums up their legacy, stating:

The full-time and special collectors of the Commission, these men, less than twenty-five in all, are the real heroes of this story. They were the backbone of the Commission, who made tremendous personal sacrifices in amassing this great collection: working much of the time for pitiable wages, and being overworked much of the time also, while receiving no extra financial reward. Each of them has a story to tell, which, by means of their diaries, correspondence, and other documentation, will, I hope, some day be told. (Briody, 2007: 476).

### **The Irish Folklore Commission: Appraising a legacy**

How is the work of the Commission, therefore viewed? What were the main achievements, pitfalls or disagreements surrounding the 35 years of work? Máirtín Ó Cadhain, in a now famous lecture given to the Writers Association in Dublin on February 11 1950, criticized the Commission's aims and basic principles. Ó Cadhain believed a certain amount of attention needed to be paid to the 'living' folklore, the organic tradition that was alive and well amongst the current generations. He openly condemned the Commission for collecting what he described as the 'dead clay'. Ó Cadhain, one of the greatest Irish language and literary scholars of the Twentieth century questioned the use of the collection of the Commission if it was to do nothing to preserve and promote the regeneration of the oral tradition as an organic part of Irish culture. Undermining the work and achievements of the Commission, he asked: "Ab é an t-aon rud a bheas le cur ag Gaeil na fichiú haoise ar an Edifón sin gur bhailíodar cúpla milliún leathanach de bhéaloideas?" [Are a couple of million pages of folklore the only thing the Gaels of the twentieth century can claim to have achieved on that Ediphone?] Ó Cadhain argues that further work must be done to highlight the importance of the 'living clay', quoting Arthur Robinson Wright in his nineteenth century publication 'English Folklore', Ó Cadhain argues 'we must consider what is being generated by the folk before our eyes'.

28

He argued that the importance of folklore lay in preserving that of it which remained as a 'live wire', transmitting 'the electricity of humanity through the complex of our mechanical lives'. He pointed out that everywhere in the Gaelic world, from the Hebrides to the Aran Islands, new verses were being composed, but that very little of these compositions got into print (Ó Giolláin, 2000: 152).

Ó Cadhain's disagreement with the Commission and Delargy could serve as the topic of an entire doctoral thesis, encouraging current debate in recent publications about the ethos and target material of the Commission.

But, overall, when contemporary scholars reflect upon the success and pitfalls of the Commission, upon the work of Delargy, the support of de Valera, and the mission undertaken by the collectors, there is no doubt they will discover a preservation process intertwined with cultural nationalism and the cultural revival of a post-independence nation. Delargy's cultural mind-set was the corner-stone for the success of the Commission, along with the

previously mentioned support from the Fianna Fáil government during its early years, as they attempted to preserve an image of the 'old-Ireland' on which they aimed to build a new nation. Delargy succeeded in spreading his concepts amongst those who worked at the very core of the Commission, especially the collectors. Despite the disputes and disagreements between Delargy's brainchild and Ó Cadhain, contemporary academics and folklorists must look upon the work of the Commission as a feat achieved on behalf of the nation.

Apart from mission focus and ideological problems that aggravated the likes of Ó Cadhain, the Commission was not without its drawbacks. The archive of the Commission experienced continuous delays in dealing with the vast amount of material that it was receiving on a weekly, monthly and annual basis, from collectors and contributors nationwide. This problem posed a direct threat to one of the fundamental outputs proposed by Education Minister Ó Deirg during its founding meeting, the use and exploitation of material. The Commission received approximately 50,000 pages of folklore in manuscript form from the Institute of Irish Folklore and by the end of 1937 this had almost tripled to 143,235 pages in total. By this stage only 24,500 of these pages had been properly catalogued with the index system agreed upon – that of the classification system used in the folklore archive in Uppsala, Sweden, and used by chief archivist Ó Súilleabháin in his *Handbook of Irish folklore* (Briody, 2007: 325). It is obvious that there may have been perhaps, an eagerness to pursue the collection of material and this eagerness was prioritised over the handling and archiving of the material. Ó Súilleabháin did apply for further assistance in the archive, and his request was granted with the appointment of Máire Mac Neill as assistant archivist. Unfortunately this was still not adequate and several years before the Commission wound up its operations in 1970, Ó Súilleabháin is quoted to have said in an international publication that archival, indexing and cataloguing matters were far from satisfactory, but that the blame was not to be laid at the door of the Commission and admitted that 6 or 7 archivists employed on a fulltime basis would be needed to complete this work. Looking at the table (on screen) we can see the proportionate increase of manuscript pages in comparison to the amount catalogued by the staff of the Commission. The figures show that by 1970, the end of the Commission's collecting tenure, only 180,000 pages had been properly indexed and archived, a mere 25% of the 720,000 manuscript pages that had been amassed over the previous 35 years. From these figures we can see a clear failing in the archiving, which was one of the fundamental aims of the Commission, but in direct contrast to the accomplishment of the collectors, enabling us to put this archiving failure down to the overwhelming success of the collection process. In more recent years huge efforts have been made to digitise much of the material in the collections and this work is currently on-going.

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In the end the motto and the aims of the Commission were publicised far and wide by achieving what they set about to in 1935. The archiving process is a mechanical one and can be completed in time, whilst the collection of the material had a very obvious and very real, a very organic time restriction on it, their mission, to protect what remained, before it perished. In 1970 the Commission's work was essentially finished, transferring all of its collections to the Department of Folklore and the National Folklore Collection in Belfield, UCD. According to folklore scholar Diarmuid Ó Giolláin the department and the collection had reached over two million words by the end of the 1970s. It is no surprise that the mission and achievement of the Commission is applauded by all, the positives by far outweighing the debates and the negatives. There is material now available in the National Folklore Collec-

tion, manuscripts and recordings that describe a life and a world that may no longer exist, unpublished research material that will be the source of future study for generations to come.

Séamus Ó Catháin is quoted to have put the legacy of the Commission on par with any other movement or project in 20th century, claiming that “The Irish Folklore Commission would become one of the most important cultural agencies at work in twentieth-century Ireland and one of the premier research institutes of the Irish State” (Ó Catháin, 2008: 100).

- 1 This article is based on an abstract from the author’s unpublished doctoral PhD thesis *Bailitheoirí Choimisiún Béaloideas Éireann: Ról, Caidrimh agus Modheolaíocht* (Ó Tiarnaigh, 2015, Ulster University). This work seeks to provide additional commentary to preceding works from other scholars in this field, especially around the life and work of fulltime folklore collector Seán Ó hEochaidh. See: Michael Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: history, ideology, methodology* (Helsinki, 2007); Séamus Mac Géidigh, ‘Seán Ó hEochaidh—Saol agus Saothar’, *An tUlach* 60 (1983), 4-8. Séamus Ó Catháin, ‘Printiseacht Phroifisiúnta Sheáin Uí Eochaidh, Lúnasa 1935 – Eanáir 1936’ in Watson, Seosamh (eag.), *Oidbreacht Ghleann Cholm Cille* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1989), 49-85; idem., ‘In Memoriam Seán Ó hEochaidh (1913-2002)’, *Béaloideas* 70 (2002), 227-30, Lillis Ó Laoire, “‘The Gaelic Undertow’: Seán Ó hEochaidh’s Field Trip to the Bluestacks in 1947’, in Potts, Donna L. (eag.), *The Landscape’s Fierce Embrace: The Poetry of Francis Harvey* (Newcastle, 2013), 73-89; Breandán Ó Madagáin, ‘Óráid ar Bhronnadh Chéim Oinigh ar Sheán Ó hEochaidh’, *Béaloideas* 57 (1989), 167-70; Aodh Ó Máirtín, *Seán Ó hEochaidh i gCloch Cheann Fhaola* (Tráchtas M.A. Ollscoil na Cathrach, Baile Átha Cliath, 2003); idem., *Niall Ó Dubhthaigh: a shaol agus a shaothar* (Tráchtas Ph.D., Coláiste na hOllscoile, Corcaigh, 2010); Pól Ó Seachnasaigh, *Eagrán de na scéalta idirnáisiúnta ó na Cruacha Gorma a bhailigh Seán Ó hEochaidh do Choimisiún Béaloideas Éireann*, (Ph.D Thesis, Ollscoil na hÉireann, Má Nuad, 2012); Pádraig Ó Tiarnaigh ‘Bhí go maith agus ní raibh go holc: scéal an bhéaloidis i dtógáil a náisiúin’ in *An Reiviú: Léann Teanga*, (NUI Galway, 2016), 79-88.2
- 2 Apart from significant terminological importance, Thoms’ letter also served another purpose, to magnify the immediate attention needed regarding the collection of this folklore, the theme of imminent demise brought before the readers of the journal in an almost Armageddon-esque type call for a nationwide effort to collect what Thoms deemed to be all that was left of a dying tradition. A similar call to arms would be evident during the early years and mission statement of the folklore movement in Ireland in the 1920’s and 30’s.
- 3 Irish Independent, 13/1/1928, lch. 5
- 4 At a series of lectures given by previously mentioned Norwegian Folklorist, Reidar Christiansen, at UCD on 28 June 1927 and 1 July 1927, under the titles ‘*The Value of Folklore*’ and ‘*Irish Folklore*’, Delargy began his international networking. Being introduced to Swedish scholar and Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, a man who in future years would help to shape the future of Irish folklore, Delargy began to pursue the possibility of gaining international publicity and support for the movement. During a very deliberate meeting between von Sydow and the President of UCD, Dr. Denis Coffey, it was agreed to award Delargy a £100 travel bursary to study international folkloristics in Sweden and beyond (Briody, 2007: 88).
- 5 Between 1932 and the end of the Commission’s work in 1970 over 720,000 pages of folklore were collected. Delargy was Director throughout.
- 6 Delargy knew too well the preferences de Valera held for Gaelic lore and heritage and played on this, engaging him in with memoranda creating a common-ground between the two, understanding that ‘their views of rural life were very similar and were rooted in nineteenth-century Romanticism, involving an idealisation of a ‘changeless’ peasantry’ (Briody, 2007: 109).
- 7 National Archive of Ireland, Cartlann Náisiúnta na hÉireann: Department of the Taoiseach / Roinn an Taoisigh: R/T S 6916B, Meamram, 11/12/1946, Delargy to de Valera. Pg. 1.
- 8 National Archive of Ireland, Cartlann Náisiúnta na hÉireann: Department of the Taoiseach / Roinn an Taoisigh, D/T S 9244: 6/7/1934 – Letter from Eoin Mac Néill to de Valera regarding the foundation of the Commission.
- 9 National Archive of Ireland, Cartlann Náisiúnta na hÉireann: Department of the Taoiseach Roinn an Taoisigh: D/T S 9244: Meamram, 14/7/1934, Carl Wilhem von Sydow to Valera, pg. 1.
- 10 The archival material of the Institute of Irish folklore, approximately 50,000 manuscript pages, were directly transferred and became the foundation of the Commissions new archive.
- 11 See: Ó hEochaidh 1937, 1955, 1966, 1967; also Ó hEochaidh & Wagner, 1962-3, 1963, for samples of his published works.
- 12 Curtis agus MacDowell, 1968: Irish Historical Documents. 317-8.

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Mowing oats with a scythe. Statia O' Hare holds a stick (a pitch fork) to press back the oats while her father, Mickey O' Hare, mows. Dromintee, Co. Armagh, 1930s.

Image courtesy of the National Folklore Collection.

# Bound Together by Imaginative Possessions: The Influence of Folklore on W.B. Yeats's Concept of Irishness

by Joseph M. Hassett

Yeats's poem "The Statues," written in the last year of his life, declared a vision for the future on behalf of "We Irish." What did he mean by "We Irish" and what was his warrant for speaking on their behalf?

Yeats's struggle to define Irishness was, in many respects, a contest between two places: Duras, site of the conversation between Yeats and Lady Gregory that led to the founding of what became the Abbey Theatre; and Coole, Gregory's home, and the center from which she and Yeats collected the vicinity's vibrant folklore.

Both Yeats and Gregory emphasized that the conversation that gave birth to Yeats's Irish theatre occurred at a particular place – Duras – and under what Yeats called the "friendly eyes" of Duras's owner, Count Florimond de Basterot. Yeats placed the conversation

...in the grounds of a little country house at Duras, on  
the sea coast, where Galway ends and Clare begins.  
[Gregory] had brought me to see the only person in  
Galway, perhaps I should say in Ireland, who was in any  
sense her friend – Florimond, Count de Basterot.

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DeBasterot was a devoted follower of the French advocate of racial purity, Arthur de Gobineau, whose essay *The Inequality of Human Races* started from the proposition that "every assemblage of men...acquires on the very day of its birth, hidden among the elements of its life, the seed of an inevitable death." That seed is the purity of its blood, which leads it to dominate other assemblages of men, with whom it intermarries, and thus "degenerate[s]" because it has no longer the same blood in its veins, continual adulterations having gradually affected the quality of that blood" (*id.* at 25). For de Gobineau, "the blood of the civilizing race is gradually drained away by being parceled out among the peoples that are conquered or annexed..." (*id.* at 33).

Given de Basterot's devotion to de Gobineau, conversation about an Irish theatre under de Basterot's friendly eyes was likely to allude to notions of a racial element in literature and literary movements. De Basterot's memoirs reflect an obsessive concern with the effect of his "mixed blood" on his temperament. Moreover, contemporary references to the Count emphasize his preoccupation with racial theory. Arthur Symonds describes "this strange, attractive figure, the traveler, the student of race, the student of history, with his courtly violence, his resolute pieties, his humorous prejudices softening the rigor of a singular spiritual equanimity..." Lady Gregory recalls "his talks of race, to which he attributed all good or bad habits and politics..." Yeats could not have escaped hearing these same conversations.

Yeats's Irish theatre thus ran a risk of defining itself in exclusionary racial terms. Indeed, the theatre born at Duras might have found a congenial animating doctrine in the Celtic exclusivity championed by Douglas Hyde in his famous 1892 lecture on the necessity of de-Anglicizing Ireland, where he emphasized that "we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because in spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this island is and will ever remain Celtic to the core." Yeats could have found elaborate scholarly support for a blood-based, racial definition of Celtic literature in the classic essays by Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold. In sentiments that would have been congenial to both de Gobineau and de Basterot, Renan's famous essay on "The Poetry of the Celtic Races" argued that "[i]f the excellence of races is to be appreciated by the purity of their blood and the inviolability of their national character, it must needs be admitted that none can vie in nobility with the still surviving remains of the Celtic race." Indeed, Renan localized these theories in the west of Ireland, noting that a change was perceptible "when one buries oneself in the districts of Ireland where the race has remained pure from all admixture of alien blood." (*Id.*1-2.) Arnold's essay was not as blatant as Renan's, but his study of the Celtic element in literature assumed racial distinctions of the kind made explicitly by Renan.

Fortunately, there was another place with a pull more powerful than that of Duras that drew Yeats in an entirely different direction from the path toward Gaelic exclusivity charted by Renan and Hyde. Yeats's introduction to Duras coincided with his introduction to Coole, and his warm reception there in the summer of 1897. Significantly, Lady Gregory's interest in the folk beliefs of the people living in the vicinity of Coole renewed and energized the interest in Irish folklore instilled in Yeats by his mother and his Sligo relatives, and expressed in his two anthologies of previously published folklore and his own work as a collector and recorder of Irish folklore, *The Celtic Twilight*, the first edition of which was published in 1893.

37

Gregory's familiarity with living local sources of folklore propelled her and her visitor's shared interest in folklore into high gear. Gregory's diary for August 1896 emphasizes the importance of folklore in her relationship with Yeats, noting that her meeting with Yeats at Duras had the result that "I have been collecting fairy lore since his visit, & surprised to find how full of it are the minds of the people and how strong the belief in the invisible world around us."

Yeats experienced exactly the same thing. "It was at Coole," he wrote, "that the first few simple thoughts that now, grown complex through their contact with other thoughts, explain the world, came to me from beyond my own mind." (*Au* 378.) One of the most enduring of those thoughts was, as Yeats put it, the "nearness of the dead to the living" – another way of expressing what Gregory called "the invisible world around us." Yeats's phrase appears in one of the six essays he published between 1897 and 1902 recounting the folk beliefs that he and Gregory had gathered near Coole, and which Gregory collected into a manuscript. The essays recite example after example of how an invisible spiritual world coexists side by side with the material world, and weaves its way in and out of the material world in a never-ending flux. Two aspects of this interaction are particularly emphasized. First, the essays refer again and again to instances in which "those [the people] have seen die constantly visit them for a little while." (*Id.* at 98.) Secondly, the stories repeatedly show how "the spiritual race...snatches out of our life whatever horse or cow, or man or women it

sets its heart on,” the person or object so removed being thought of as ‘away’ ” (*id.* at 230), and “some spirit or inanimate object bewitched into their likeness remaining in their stead” (*Au* 379). These living beliefs accorded precisely with Yeats’s esoteric studies, which posited a constant intermingling of the material and spiritual worlds.

Moreover, Yeats was impressed by the fact that his experience at Coole showed the importance of the poet in preserving and expressing folk belief. As Robert Welch has pointed out, Yeats was particularly struck by the fact that the great nineteenth century poet Raftery was still remembered and quoted by the people in the neighborhood of Coole. Looking back on his folklore-gathering activities when he wrote “The Galway Plains” as an introduction to Gregory’s *Poets and Dreamers* in 1903, Yeats recalled how “[a] great part of the poems and stories in Lady Gregory’s book were made or gathered between Burren and Cruachmaa,” where “Raftery, the wandering country poet of ninety years ago, praised and blamed, chanting fine verses, and playing badly on his fiddle.”

At Coole, Yeats found a fruitful definition of the relevant cultural entity, and its relationship to its members. It was not race or nation, but community: “There is still in truth upon these great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by stories and poems which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action.” (*E&I* 213.)

For Yeats, the vibrant imaginative possessions of the neighborhood around Coole created a community that could not be found in “England or any other country which takes its tunes from the great cities and gets its taste from schools and not from old custom . . .” (*E&I* 213.) England, he maintained, “may have a mob, but it cannot have a people.” (*Id.*)

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The happy conjunction of Yeats and the imaginative possessions of the people near Coole held the poet to the course of being an Irish poet, and simultaneously required him to expand the concept of Irishness beyond Hyde’s insistence on a Gaelic core. In the first edition of *The Celtic Twilight*, published in 1893, Yeats had written that an aspiring poet’s verses, “with their wild music as of winds blowing in the reeds, seemed to me the very inmost voice of Celtic sadness, and of Celtic longing for infinite things the world has never seen.” In the revised edition of 1902, Yeats appended a footnote stating, that, “I wrote this sentence long ago. This sadness now seems to me a part of all peoples who preserve the moods of the ancient peoples of the world. I am not so preoccupied with the mystery of Race as I used to be, but leave this sentence and other sentences like it unchanged. We once believed them, and have, it may be, not grown wiser.” In the *Samhain* for 1908, Yeats made clear the significance of the Galway folk tradition to his concept of Ireland. “Ireland is always Connacht to my imagination,” he wrote, “for there more than elsewhere is the folk tradition that is the loftiest thing that has come down to us within the ring of Ireland.” “I only escaped from many misconceptions [about Ireland],” he wrote, “when, in 1897, I began an active Irish life, comparing what I saw about me with what I heard of in Galway cottages.” (*Id.* at 235.)

Yeats’s folklore-influenced, inclusive definition of Irishness reverberated throughout the Irish Literary Revival because, as John Wilson Foster put it, the “protean figure of Yeats, poet, playwright, fictionalist, field-collector, anthologist, theorist of folklore, and student of matters spiritual,” stood at “the center, radius, and circumference” of issues about the

concept of folklore, its impact on revival literature and the reaction against folklore by both revival and post-revival writers.

The impact of Yeats's introduction to Coole and its folklore was heightened by his simultaneous discovery of a theory of folklore that provided him, as poet and dramatist, with a perfect role as the expresser and interpreter of the folk beliefs he was collecting near Coole. In 1896, the year in which Yeats first sat under the friendly eyes of de Basterot at Duras, and likely heard de Basterot's commentary on racial theory, J. J. Stuart-Glennie published an essay that proudly announced an entirely "new basis for the science of folklore." In a footnote, Stuart-Glennie conceded that the "new basis" was actually identical to de Gobineau's theories of the inequality of human races and the origin of civilization in the conflict between unequal races. (*Id.* at 4n.) Stuart-Glennie posited the superior race or culture as the interpreter of the folk beliefs of the lesser culture.

Yeats published a review of Stuart-Glennie's essay in the October 1896 *Bookman*. The review shows that Yeats was intrigued by the "general conflict theory" and Stuart-Glennie's suggestion that civilization "began when a race of superior intellectual power compelled or persuaded a race of lesser intellectual power to feed it and house it, in return for the religion and science which it had thus found the leisure to make..." Yeats notes that

This theory, if established,... will reconcile the theories of writers like Professor Max Muller, who believes the great ancient mythologies, to have a profound and complex meaning, with the theories of writers like Mr. Andrew Lang, who believes them a survival of the beliefs of savages; for the men of the higher race could invent no more certain way of prolonging their own rule than to change the childish beliefs about them into a complex mystery of which they were themselves the prophets and guardians: all that was merely instinctive and spontaneous coming from the many and from the dominant few all that was intellectual and deliberate.  
(*Id.*)

39

While professing insufficient scientific knowledge to confirm Stuart-Glennie's theory, Yeats is powerfully drawn to it: "I am, however, convinced that some such theory will be established in the long run; being no democrat in intellectual things, and altogether persuaded that elaborate beauty has never come but from the mind of a deliberate artist writing at leisure and in peace." (*Id.*)

Reading Stuart-Glennie's essay today, one can almost wonder if he had in mind a picture of Yeats and Gregory sitting comfortably on the garden path at Coole giving expression to the folk beliefs of the surrounding neighborhood. The intolerable racial ideas animating Stuart-Glennie's essay had this serendipitous aspect: they required a cooperative effort between the creators and interpreters of folklore to produce works that required collaboration.

Yeats's focus on the reality of life in the vicinity of Coole propelled his thinking beyond the race-based theories of Renan and Arnold. In Yeats's "The Celtic Element in Literature," published in 1897, he asserts that "I do not think any of us who write about Ireland have built any argument upon" the ideas of Renan and Arnold. (*E&I* 174.) He points out that Arnold failed to understand that what he called the "Celtic element" in literature, was not uniquely Celtic at all, "but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature" that could be found in "[a]ll folk literature, and all literature that keeps the folk tradition . . ." (*E&I* 176-79.) Yeats's point is that the so-called "Celtic element" in literature manifested itself in Ireland because its "literature that keeps the folk tradition" has set itself "against the rationalism of the eighteenth century...[and] the materialism of the nineteenth century." (*E&I* 187.) In other words, the "Celtic element" in literature is not so much "Celtic" as a reflection of ancient idealism.

In fact, these precise words – "ancient idealism" – were chosen by Yeats in the original version of the manifesto for the theatre that he and Gregory discussed at Duras in the summer of 1897. Yeats's draft, prepared in his own handwriting, asserts that "[w]e hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted & imaginative audience" and "will show that Ireland is . . . the home of an ancient idealism..." (Foster 184.) This "ancient idealism" was still in Yeats's mind when, in writing "The Statues" at the end of his life, he thought of the Irish as "born to that ancient sect."

In focusing on the "ancient idealism" revealed in the folklore gathered around Coole, Yeats had succeeded in finding a way of defining Irish literature in terms of something broader than an Irish nation or an Irish race. Thus, in a letter to T. P. Gill in November 1898, Yeats argued that the case for the Irish Literary Theatre was that it would reveal and develop "an actual school of Irish spiritual thought in literature":

People should be asked to support the Irish Literary Theatre on patriotic grounds, but they should first be made to feel [sic] that there is an actual school of Irish spiritual thought in literature & that their patriotism will support this. Ireland is leading the way in a war on materialism, decadence, triviality as well as affirming her own individuality. That is our case. (*CL2*,302.)

Adumbrating the theme of "The Galway Plains" that England "may have a mob, but it cannot have a people" as did the community around Coole, Yeats emphasized, in an essay heralding the founding of The Irish National Theatre, that "Victor Hugo has said that in the theatre the mob became a people..."(*UP2* 141.)

The case for the National Theatre as creator of a people was tested when the Theatre's production of Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* provoked public dispute as to whether the Irish National Theatre was either Irish or national. As Roy Foster puts it, Synge's "story of marital infidelity and financial calculation presented a view of Irish rural life which was too much even for the *Irish Times*." (Foster 298.) *A fortiori*, the *United Irishman* was not pleased. Arthur Griffith asserted that the Irish National Theatre was "no more Irish and national than

the Elizabethan Stage Society.” The argument against Synge alleged that he was insufficiently Irish, and that his play was critical of Ireland.

As happened so often, Yeats’s father, the redoubtable John Butler Yeats, saw the issue clearly. In an essay in the *United Irishman*, he quickly conceded that the play was, indeed, critical of “our Irish institution, the loveless marriage.” But it was self criticism – “self accusation” – as J. B. Yeats called it, because Synge was undeniably Irish. J. B. Yeats wisely rested Synge’s Irishness, not on his blood; rather, the case rested on operational facts: “...he lives in Arran, speaks Irish and knows the people. He is, besides, a man of insight and sincerity, that is to say, a man of genius. Such men are the salt of Ireland.” (*Id.*)

In a follow-up piece three weeks later, J. B. Yeats applied the same reasoning to the Irish National Theatre Society itself. The Theatre, he said,

is national, as the Shannon and the Wicklow mountains  
and the Lakes of Killarney are national, because it has  
grown up on Irish soil and out of it, and has become, as  
it were, one of the natural features of the country.

John Butler Yeats’s trenchant commentary found fertile ground in his son, whose letter on the subject, reprinted in the 1904 *Samhain*, defined national literature as “the work of writers who are molded by influences molding their country, and who write out of so deep a life that they are accepted there in the end.” (*Ex* 156.)

41

Yeats’s perceived duty as an Irish poet to express an ancient idealism that survived in Ireland was so profound that his meditations on the subject found expression in the spirits that spoke through the medium of his wife. The spirit named Carmichael, as expressed in the voice of the sleeping George Yeats on December 14, 1920 suggested that “[n]ations begin by being pure and because pure conquered. They then absorbed into themselves the conquered & became impure.”

Carmichael, however, departed from de Gobineau in responding to Yeats’s request that he “describe a pure race to me.” Carmichael’s answer echoed John Butler Yeats’s letter to the *United Irishman* defending *The Shadow of the Glen*. Carmichael described a pure race – not in terms of blood, but in words that echoed John Butler Yeats’s notion of a national theatre as one that has “grown up on Irish soil and out of it, and has become, as it were, one of the natural features of the country.” Carmichael said that pure races “have lived long in one place & have become perfectly fitted to that place. Its animals, its plants, its scenery; & their songs are fitted to it also...” In a thought dear to Yeats’s heart, Carmichael’s next observation emphasized the importance of the artist in fashioning a culture: “[w]hen people have unity of culture the transference of thought & image goes through the whole people. In the past pure races have been made by blood, but bloods are now so mixed that in the future they will have to be made by culture.” Again, Carmichael echoes the position taken by Yeats and his father in response to the controversy over *The Shadow of the Glen*, and to be repeated in “The Statues,” where the artist will be the fashioner of “We Irish.”

So convinced was Yeats that a great artist or man of genius could create a “race” by pure force of intellect or imagination that, in a lecture delivered to the Irish Literary Society on 30 November 1925, he asserted that Berkeley, in a pronouncement on behalf of “We Irish” had created the modern Irish intellect:

The modern Irish intellect was born more than 200 years ago when Berkeley defined in three or four sentences the mechanical philosophy of Newton, Locke and Hobbes, the philosophy of England in his day, and I think of England up to our day, and wrote after each: “We Irish do not hold with this,” or some like sentence.

Clearly, the “We Irish” invoked by Berkeley were defined in terms of Berkeley’s philosophy, not by his blood. As Hone and Rossi noted in their biography of Berkeley, for which Yeats provided the introduction, “...so far as can be ascertained, Berkeley himself had no trace of pure Irish blood, and he belonged by association and religious sympathies to a comparatively recent English colonization.” Indeed, as Yeats pointed out in his introduction to “The Words Upon the Window-Pane,” “[a]s a boy of eighteen or nineteen [Berkeley] called the Irish people “natives” as though he were in some foreign land...” (*Ex 348*.) Nonetheless, the association between the “ancient idealism” of Ireland and “the re-birth of European spirituality in the mind of Berkeley” (*Ex 337*) conjoined in the phrase “We Irish,” and energized Yeats’s imagination. Adumbrating the “ancient sect” of “The Statues” – Yeats’s introduction cites “the shudder in my spine when Mrs. Patrick Campbell said, speaking words Hofmannsthal put into mouth of Electra, “I too am of that ancient race.” (*Id.*) Berkeley and Swift are united in Yeats’s mind as men of genius who could speak on behalf of “We Irish.” In the preface to *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*, he delights in Swift’s observation “that the saying, vox populi, vox dei ought to be understood of the universal bent and current of a people.” (*Ex 357*.) That “bent and current” could be heard “through such men as had won or inherited general consent” (*id.*). The “won or inherited” disjunction is significant: one need not inherit a right through blood to express the bent and current of a people; it could be “won” by dint of creative work as well. There is more than a little truth in Denis Donoghue’s suggestion that Yeats’s “We Irish” is based on the notion of an Irish “mentality.” More simply, the “Irish” of “We Irish” are a community, like the community Yeats found around Coole.

42

While Yeats’s notion of “We Irish” would not qualify for inclusion in Colm Toibin’s imaginary book, *Not Inventing Ireland* – a tome “in which writers ignored the idea of Ireland and concentrated on communities or formal questions and made the whole idea of Irish nationalism a sick joke or a burden or a lie” – Yeats’s “focus on communities – people who communicate about particular ideas that become accepted in a particular place—is a construct for Irish writing that is open to expansion and inclusion.

Yeats’s notion of the artist’s duty to preserve the ancient idealism of Ireland was stung into expression when he read the second edition of Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, which was published in April 1935. Toynbee argued that the aspirations of “Jewish Zionism and Irish Nationalism” reflected a capitulation by two ancient cultures to the lure of “Nationalism...” Using a word, “Irishry,” that Yeats would adopt in “Under Ben Bulbin,” Toynbee

argued that “[i]f Jewish Zionism and Irish Nationalism succeed in achieving their aims, then Jewry and Irishry will each fit into its own tiny niche in the colossal structure of the modern Western World as one among sixty or seventy national communities all organized on the standard Western pattern.” (*Id.*) Thus, Toynbee argued, the establishment of the Irish Free State, a pivotal event in “The Statues,” “signifies that the romance of Ancient Ireland has at last come to an end, and that Modern Ireland has made up her mind, in our generation, to find her level as a willing inmate in our workaday Western World.” (*Id.* at 426.)

Yeats answered Toynbee in “A General Introduction for my Work,” written in 1937 insisting that “[i]f Irish literature goes on as my generation planned it, it may do something to keep the “Irishry” living...” (*Id.* at 517.) “It may be indeed,” he suggests, “that certain characteristics of the “Irishry” must grow in importance.” (*Id.*) What must grow in importance is the belief of ancient Ireland in the intermingling of the material and spiritual worlds. Specifically, Yeats argues that his investigation of contemporary spiritualism convinced him of the reality of what he and Lady Gregory had found at Coole, the vicinity’s belief, as he had put it long ago, in the “nearness of the dead to the living.” Yeats concludes that:

I think I now know why the gamekeeper at Coole heard the footsteps of a deer on the edge of the lake where no deer had passed for a hundred years, and why a certain cracked old priest said that nobody had been to hell or heaven in his time, meaning thereby that the Rath had got them all; that the dead stayed where they had lived, or near it, sought no abstract region of blessing or punishment but retreated, as it were, into the hidden character of their neighbourhood. I am convinced that in two or three generations it will become generally known that the mechanical theory has no reality, that the natural and supernatural are knit together... (*E&I* 518.)

43

Indeed, the intertwining of the natural and the supernatural was one of what, in the drafts of “Under Ben Bulben,” written contemporaneously with “The Statues,” he called his “principles” and later “his convictions.” An early draft asserts that “[t]he soul out lives all things & makes itself bodies as it pleases.” (*Id.*) This notion explains why “man stands between two eternities,” that of his family – changed to “his race” – and that of his soul. (*Id.* at 13-15.)

These ideas clicked around the notion of ancient Ireland in the final poem’s assertion that:

Many times man lives and dies  
Between his two eternities  
That of race and that of soul  
And ancient Ireland knew it all (*VP* 637).

Ancient Ireland knew the core beliefs of the “ancient sect” of “We Irish,” the nearness of the dead to the living, the intermingling of the material and the immaterial. That is why the poet of “Under Ben Bulbin” urges “Irish poets” to

Cast your mind on other days  
That we in coming days may be  
Still the indomitable Irishry.(VP 640.)

“The Statues,” like “Under Ben Bulbin,” reflects a heroic struggle to preserve the beliefs of ancient Ireland around the notion of “We Irish.” In “The Statues,” Yeats analogizes the poet who could give expression to Irishness to the Greek sculptors whose calculations created a form that so perfectly expressed a communal ideal that Greek youth climbed the statues at midnight to press “[l]ive lips upon a plummet-measured face.” (VP 610.) Yeats at once argues and urges, in a confusing verb form that is part prayer and part command:

We Irish, born into that ancient sect  
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide  
And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked,  
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face (VP 611.)

In Yeats’s mind, the struggle to preserve ancient idealism pitted the poet against the spread of urban democracy. As he had put it as long ago as his 1896 review of “Greek Folk Posey,” he was “no democrat” in intellectual things. The growth of urban populations and the decline of Coole troubled him deeply. But his construct of “We Irish” as a category of writing was a fruitful one, both for him and for other Irish writers because it eschewed fixed racial categorization and invited participation based on shared ideas. The specific content he gave to the construct was limited by his own time and place, but the construct itself beckons to others to make it at once more expansive and more inclusive.

Thus, for example, while Yeats’s “We Irish” does not include any element of the communities in Northern Ireland, the construct leaves room for the suggestion in one of Yeats’s Senate speeches that a united Ireland could be achieved “by creating a system of culture which will represent the whole of this country...” (SS 87.) That inclusive idea can be traced to Yeats’s appreciation of the binding effect of the shared imaginative possession of Irish folklore.

- 1 W.B. Yeats, “The Statues” in Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, eds., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1957). (“VP”) 670.
- 2 W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955) (“Au”) 397-98. The conversation led to the creation of The Irish Literary Theatre, which ultimately morphed into the Abbey Theatre.
- 3 Gobineau, Arthur, Comte de, *The Inequality of Human Races*, trans. by Adrian Collins (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1999) (“de Gobineau”) 2.
- 4 Florimond de Basterot, *Souvenirs D’Enfance & De Jeunesse: Notes Biographiques et Ethnographiques* (Paris: Imprimerie Générale Lahure, 1896) (“de Basterot”).
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## Joseph M. Hassett



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House of Pats Ó Conaill,  
Cill Rialaigh, 1934

Image courtesy of the  
National Folklore Collection

## Folklore and Pageantry in Edwardian Ireland: Fred Morrow and *The Return of Cúchulainn and Emer* (1911)

By Paul Gosling

Folklore like history is subject to social trends and cultural agendas. One striking example is the treatment of the Irish hero, Cúchulainn (hound of Culann) in Irish lore and literature. As the legendary boy-warrior of the medieval Ulster Cycle tales, he was originally cast as the hero of Emain Macha (Armagh) and the defender of the Ulaid (Ulster). In the centuries immediately before and after AD 1000, stories centering on Cúchulainn were immensely popular in the halls and households of Scotland and Ireland. However, post AD 1200, they were gradually replaced by the Fionn Cycle tales which focus on the adventures of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and the Fianna. By the early 1700s, memory of Cúchulainn and his feats had all but passed from popular memory, his legacy preserved only in manuscripts and amongst the ever-diminishing circles of Gaelic storytellers.

However, in the later nineteenth century, there was a revival of interest in Ireland's medieval literature. Writers such as Standish Hayes O'Grady were pivotal in reintroducing the stories of Cúchulainn into popular imagination. Beginning with a two volume *History of Ireland – The Heroic Period* (1878) and *Cuculain and his Contemporaries* (1880) – he began to recast the Irish legends in literary form, producing several historical novels including *The Coming of Cuculain* (1894). Many subsequent writers including W.B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, George Russell (AE) and Patrick Pearse acknowledged their debt to O'Grady's rendering of these stories and used them as springboards for their own work. One measure of this is the so-called Cúchulainn cycle of plays composed by W.B. Yeats between 1903 and 1939. Another is Pearse's projection of Cúchulainn as a role model for Gaelic masculinity and resistance. This is reflected not only in his writings and speeches but also in his dramatic works, including the *Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn*, an outdoor play in Irish, first staged at St Enda's School, Dublin in June 1909. This was by no means the first example of outdoor theatre in Ireland for as Joan Fitzpatrick Dean has demonstrated in *All Dressed Up*: 'by 1908 much of the English-speaking world was pageant-mad [and] Ireland was not only drama-mad but Cúchulainn-mad as well' (2014, 56).

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Post 1922, when the Irish Free State was established, Cúchulainn was given a new role, this time as a symbol of service and sacrifice for the new nation. The key event in this process was the casting and installation of Oliver Sheppard's statue of Cúchulainn in the General Post Office, Dublin at Easter 1935. Thereafter, images of this statue have been reproduced in two and three-dimensional forms for myriad official and commercial purposes down to the present day. Despite this, the character of Cúchulainn has lost none of its potency, a fact due in no small part to two contemporary re-brandings of this ever-youthful hero, both stemming from the period of The Troubles (1969-1998). In the first, Cúchulainn has been re-cast as a symbol of militant republicanism with its aim of a united Ireland, most strikingly exemplified by the erection of statues of the warrior at grave-plots and memorials honoring deceased IRA volunteers. The second re-branding, this time by extreme loyalist militants, views Cúchulainn as a defender of Northern Ireland against Irish nationalism, most notably

in a series of wall murals in east Belfast. In this returning again and again to a key cultural character, we can see historical memory not so much being re-enacted as created anew each time (cf. Sisson 2015).

### ***The Return of Cúchulainn and Emer Pageant, Dundalk, 1911***

One vivid example of the cultural potency of Cúchulainn was a pageant enacted on Tuesday, 15th August, 1911, some 50 miles north of Dublin on the east coast of Ireland. The venue was an ancient tree-clad earthwork on the western outskirts of Dundalk, the county town of Louth. That afternoon, a crowd of over 700 people thronged the grassy ramparts of Castletown Mount to see 50 actors from Dublin perform an historical tableaux billed in the newspapers as a ‘Grand Pageant, Cuchulainn’s Return’ (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** General view of the 1911 pageant in progress in the deep ditch on the north side of Dún Dealgan. Only a small portion of the audience is discernible amidst the trees on the slopes of the earthwork, the women sitting, the men standing. At least 39 actors are visible, most notably the two lines of dark-haired girls in white dresses, directly behind which are lines of boys, each carrying a shield and spear. At the centre are Emer and Cúchulainn, seated and flanked by 10 principal actors including those featured in Figures 3 and 4. The photograph was taken by Horace Kwiatkowski or his daughter Hilda Maria, who ran a professional photographic business in Dundalk at this period. Note the white bicycle wheel at left which was edited out when the photograph was reproduced as a postcard (Source of photograph: Noel Ross).

The pageant was the culmination of some eighteen months work by the fledging County Louth Archaeological Society (established 1903). In January 1910, the Society had not only bought Castletown Mount but had begun refurbishing the eighteenth century castellated house on its summit as a museum. Fuelled by heady optimism, they also re-named the site as Dún Dealgan, a radical but historically accurate re-branding.

Though the Mount is in outward appearance a motte-castle built by the Anglo-Normans in the late 1180s, the presence of a souterrain and a standing stone indicate that it is a multi-period site whose origins lie in prehistory (Fig. 2). Moreover, in folk and literary tradition it is widely attested as the place where Cúchulainn was reared by his mother Deichtine and stepfather Sualtam Mac Róich. Under the name ‘Delga’, the site is recurrently mentioned in



**Figure 2:** Dún Dealgan *alias* Castletown Mount is an impressive and complex earthwork. The fact that it is known today by a third *alias* – Cúchulainn’s Castle – only adds to its multifaceted cultural and archaeological history. This late winter view from the north-east shows the scale of the mound and its surrounding ditch (motte-castle, built c.1187). Note also the tower on its summit (castellated house, built 1780) and the whitish pillar in the foreground (standing-stone, Bronze Age in date, 2500-800 BC). The presence of a souterrain (drystone cave) beneath the mound suggests that the motte-castle was built atop of an early medieval ringfort of the period c.500-900 AD (Photo: Paul Lynch).

the medieval saga *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (the cattle-raid of Cooley) as a place from which Cúchulainn harried the Connacht army of Queen Medb during her quest to capture the prize-bull Donn Cúailnge (brown bull of Cooley). It also features in the riotous story, *Mesca Ulad* (the drunkenness of the Ulstermen), wherein we read of Cúchulainn hosting a bonfire at Dún Dealgan for his kinsmen at the festival of Samhain (Halloween).

As the full title of the pageant implies – *The Return of Cúchulainn and Emer* – the subject matter was a traditional one; the story of Cúchulainn’s courtship and marriage to Emer, the daughter of Forgall Manach of Lusca (Lusk, Co. Dublin). Dating back to the tenth century, *Tochmarc Emire* (the wooing of Emer) describes how Cúchulainn becomes smitten with Emer but has to overcome many obstacles to win her hand. Eventually he triumphs over all and she elopes with him. Though the story ends with the couple going to Emain Macha (Armagh), the presumption in lore is that Emer would have come to reside at Dún Dealgan, Cúchulainn’s hilltop home overlooking Dundalk Bay. The ‘return’ element of the title was however, novel, clearly proclaiming that this pageant was no mere recounting of a one thousand year old story but a clarion call announcing the reclamation of the site by the local community.

While contemporary reports of the Dún Dealgan pageant were published, memory of the event soon faded. This was in part due to the momentous cultural and political upheavals of the succeeding years – the outbreak of the First World War (1914), the Easter Rising of 1916, the parliamentary elections of 1918, the ‘War of Independence’ (1919-21), the creation of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland in 1922, not to forget the short and bitter ‘Irish Civil War’ which followed (1922-23). During the latter, the museum at Dún Dealgan was vandalised and destroyed resulting in the partial loss of its collections and the scattering of its records. Amongst the latter there is likely to have been documentation on the opening ceremonies, including the now lost ‘Synopsis of Pageant’ as well as the ‘programme for performers’ (Gosling 2016, 541). As a result, the only reminders of the pageant are a set of four black-and-white photographs which were published as postcards (Figs. 3-4). Nonetheless, with the newspaper accounts and some fortuitously preserved papers in the Louth County Archives, it is possible to reconstruct the principal chorographical elements of the day (Table A).



**Figure 3:** This photograph, along with three others, was published as a set of ‘Dundalgan Series’ postcards by ‘W. Tempest, Dundalk’ in September 1911. The postcards are captioned ‘The Return of Cúchulainn and Emer. Pageant at Dun Dealgan, 1911’ or variations thereof and appear to have had print runs of 250 apiece (‘C.C.L.’ on reverse). Of the five actors featured, only two are identified – Emer and Cúchulainn (third and fourth from left). Note the sophistication of the actors’ garments. Most of the elaborate metalwork fittings worn by Emer (headband) and Cúchulainn (brooch) and their attendants (shoulder roundels) are probably the work of Jack Morrow, a skilled metalworker and brother of the pageant director, Fred Morrow (Source of postcard: Noel Ross).



**Figure 4:** Another view of the principal actors in the 1911 pageant at Dún Dealgan. This heavily retouched postcard image shows Emer mounted side-saddle on a dun-coloured horse, with a female companion and two warriors in attendance. None of the actors have been identified to date apart from being described as an ‘Oireachtas pageant troupe’ from Dublin (Source of postcard: Noel Ross).

### Fred Morrow and Pageantry

When combined, these records indicate that the Cúchulainn and Emer pageant was a typical example of how ‘Cúchulainn-mad’ Ireland was in the early years of the twentieth century. As an outdoor historical drama, it was also illustrative of the Edwardian fashion for open-air theatre ([www.historicalpageants.ac.uk](http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk)). But it was innovative in that it was performed at a genuine historic location rather than the more typical venues of the time: school grounds, stately gardens or city centre locations. Moreover, its sponsor was a novel one; a recently established provincial archaeological society rather than a city-based educational institution (e.g. Scoil Enda) or a national cultural organisation (e.g. Conradh na Gaeilge) as was then the norm. These apart, its most significant aspect is as an exemplar of the creative work of its director, Fred Morrow, a neglected figure in twentieth century Irish theatre (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Fred Morrow in 1908 (Source: Sheehy 1908, 26).

Wilfred Morrow (1875-1949) was the sixth of eight sons of Catherine and George Morrow, a successful builder and decorator of Clifton Street, Belfast. He was born into a talented Presbyterian family who combined the practical skills of house renovation, interior design and decoration with a love of art and theatre. Amongst his brothers was Harry C. (1865-1938), *alias* Gerald MacNamara, a well-known actor and playwright, most notably for his play *Thompson in Tir-na-nOg* (1912); George (1869-1955), a celebrated cartoonist for the satirical magazine *Punch* and author of *Nothing Serious* (1920, 2nd ed. 1921); and Jack (John C., 1872-1926), a costume and set designer as well as a noted repoussé metalworker. Of the four other brothers, little is known of William but Albert (1863-1927), Edwin (1877-1952) and Norman (1879-1917) were also talented artists who earned their living variously as painters, interior designers, cartoonists and commercial illustrators. While all have attracted occasional notice for their varied accomplishments, they have not received the attention or credit they deserve as an artistic family group (see Crone 1928; indexes to Larmour 1992, Watt *et al.* 2000 and Sisson 2004). Yet when one considers their combined contributions to Irish theatre, the arts and crafts movement, painting and illustration, their legacy withstands comparison with that of the famous Yeats family (John, William, Jack, Susan and Elizabeth).

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Fred in particular, is a half-forgotten figure, despite being lauded in several quarters for his contributions to Irish theatre in the earlier twentieth century. For instance, in her autobiography *Splendid Years* (1955, 88), the actress Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh wrote that ‘the Morrow brothers, Jack and Fred, especially Fred, “made” the Theatre of Ireland [1906-12], much as the Fays had made the original National Theatre Society [*i.e.* Abbey Theatre, 1903– ]’. And Sam Hanna Bell, in his survey of *The Theatre in Ulster* (1972, 16) recorded

Table A: Reconstruction of the programme for *The Return of Cúchulainn and Emer* pageant at Dún Dealgan in August 1911 from contemporary documents (Sources: *Dundalk Democrat* August 19th, 1911, p.5; Dolan 1911; Tempest 1911: Louth County Archives).

<b><i>The Return of Cúchulainn and Emer</i></b> <b>Pageant Programme</b>	
Title	: The Return of <u>Cúchulainn</u> and <u>Emer</u>
Location	: The tree-clad slopes of Dún Dealgan fort, Dundalk, Co. Louth
Date	: Tuesday afternoon, 11 <sup>th</sup> August 1911
Admission	: Sixpence
Performances	: Two: 'so successful was [the] initial performance that it had to be repeated later in the evening'
Attendance	: At least 740 (based on gate receipts)
Director	: Mr Fred Morrow ( <u>Feardhorcha Mac Murchadha</u> )
Script	: None extant: a 'Synopsis of Pageant' possibly by Fr Henry Tohall ( <u>Enrí Ó Tuathghaile</u> ) is mentioned as is a 'programme for performers' by Fred Morrow
Cast	: '50 performers in native costume' including <u>Cúchulainn</u> , <u>Emer</u> , 'lady attendants', 'warriors', 'youths' and 'maidens'
Actors	: Not named but described as 'the Oireachtas pageant group' drawn from 'the branches of the Gaelic League in Dublin'
Extras	: Two greyhounds and several horses
Choreography	: 2.00pm - 'a great procession' from the town centre (Market Square) to Castletown (distance: 2 miles) 2.30pm - 'arrival of the chief and his bride [ <u>Cúchulainn</u> and <u>Emer</u> ] on horseback' - 'choruses, dances, songs performed before them' - 'the arrival of Mr. Bigger, heralded by his pipers' 4.00pm - opening ceremony by Sir Henry Bellingham and Mr. Francis Joseph Bigger - 'the flag was hoisted on the top of the castle tower'
Music	: - The ' <u>Cuchulainn War-Pipers of Whitecross</u> ', Co. Armagh - ' <u>Mr Callendar's</u> fine pipers from Dublin in Irish dress' - ' <u>Mr. Bigger's</u> personal pipers'

that: 'no account of the [Ulster Literary] Theatre [1902-34] can ignore the work of Fred Morrow who was its producer for thirty years'. Both of these assessments are based on Fred's contribution to indoor drama and make no mention of his work in pageantry. In fact, it is only recently that his pivotal role in the production and direction of pageants has been highlighted. In her ground-breaking work *All Dressed Up* (2014, 44), Joan Fitzpatrick Dean redresses this lacuna in the following terms: 'No one was more immersed in [the] production of historical pageants in Ireland between 1907 and 1914. Fred Morrow's ... enthusiasm crossed disciplinary lines between theatre and the visual arts, the political no-man's-land between ascendancy and advanced nationalists, and the religious divide between Protestants and Catholics'.

Herein lies the key to understanding the lack of acknowledgement of Fred Morrow's career. In crossing the 'disciplinary lines between theatre and the visual arts' his work fell outside the bounds of what is acceptable as drama. The integration of outdoor procession and piping with 'choruses, dances, and songs' as well as horses and hounds, as seen in the Cúchulainn and Emer pageant (Table A) bore all the hallmarks of innovative drama. However, it touched few of the bases of conventional theatre with its scripts, formal acts and fixed division of performative and audience spaces. Moreover, most surveys and repositories of theatrical history are predicated on the existence of a recognizable script, but if none existed or if it does not survive, then the drama is treated as if it never happened. While this is an outdated distinction, it continues to govern what is accepted as theatre and largely dictates what is studied and preserved.

Take for instance, the innovative Playography Ireland, an online resource of the Irish Theatre Institute ([www.irishplayography.com](http://www.irishplayography.com)). It describes itself as providing databases of 'all new ... plays written in English since ... 1904 [or] in the Irish language since 1901'. Note the

emphasis on ‘written’. No pageants are included, not even Patrick Pearse’s *Boyhood Deeds of Cúchulainn*. Yet the original Irish script of this highly regarded work not only survives but was published almost 50 years ago and its text has recently been fully translated (Dean 2014, Appendix). Moreover, as demonstrated in Table A, even in instances where a script does not survive, it is possible to reconstruct the main choreographical features of a pageant.

**An t-Oireachtas.**

**Great Attractions this Year.**

**Magnificent Pageant**  
IN ROTUNDA GARDENS,  
"A FEIS AT ANCIENT TARA."  
**AUGUST 7th, at 8 p.m.**  
Additional Performances—AUGUST 5th at 5 p.m., and  
AUGUST 7th at 3 p.m.  
Admission - 6d. Seats - 6d. extra.

**August 3rd, Grand Concert of Irish, Scotch  
and Breton Music.**  
ROUND ROOM, ROTUNDA, 8 p.m.  
ORATION by AN T-ACADAIR MAC DUIBHÍR.  
Reception of Foreign Delegates

**August 4th, 8 p.m., Rotunda (Round Room)**  
REVIVAL OF  
"SEAGHÁN NA SĠUAB,"  
AND  
"AN TINNCÉIR 7 AN-TSÍOÉÓIS."  
Produced by Oireachtas Special Dramatic Company.

**Aug. 5th at 8 p.m., Two New Competition Plays.**  
ROTUNDA, ROUND ROOM,  
Produced by Cíara na SĠúis SĠúisí.  
Admission to Evening Performances, 2/6 & 1/-

**Figure 6:** Press advertisement for the *Feis at Ancient Tara* in Parnell Square, Dublin which was part of Conradh na Gaeilge’s annual conference (An t-Oireachtais). This elaborate two-act pageant, performed five times between 29th July and 7th August 1911, was directed by Fred Morrow. It featured ‘some 200 performers ... from all the branches of the Gaelic League in Dublin’, 50 of whom went on to perform the *Return of Cúchulainn and Emer* at Castletown, Dundalk only four days later (Source: *An Claidheambh Soluis*, August 5th; *Irish Independent*, August 3rd).

Because of these notional distinctions, Fred Morrow’s legacy is completely under-represented on databases like Playography and the Abbey Theatre Archive where his list of credits runs to less than a dozen entries, the majority for staging. Yet in 1911 alone, Fred produced and directed three major pageants: the health-themed *Slainte* at the Uí Breasil Exhibition in the RDS, Dublin (May 27th - June 6th), *A Feis at Ancient Tara* in the Rotunda Gardens Dublin (July 29th - August 7th) and the *Return of Cúchulainn and Emer* at Dundalk (August 11th). While attendance figures for the Dublin events are unclear, press reports mention them as ‘attracting a great deal of attention’ and ‘several hundred spectators’. Moreover, these events were major undertakings; the *Slainte* pageant featuring very complex mannequins (illustrated in the *Weekly Irish Times*, June 3rd) while the cast of the *Feis at Ancient Tara* comprised ‘some 200 performers’ (Fig. 6).

### Conclusion

The *Return of Cúchulainn and Emer* pageant provides a glimpse of cultural life in Ireland just prior to the First World War. From a folkloric point of view, it demonstrates the strength of Irish folk tradition, in particular the way old stories can be revived and remodeled for the needs of a new generation. From a dramatic viewpoint, it illustrates the vitality of the visual arts in Ireland of the time, especially its openness to new forms of theatre. But it also demonstrates how communities and nations often choose to shed and/or forget aspects of their cultural history. Though pageants continued to be a feature of cultural life in Ireland post-independence, they increasingly became part of the state apparatus and/or played out particular historical orthodoxies. In fact, it was not until the emergence of community-based groups like Macnas in Galway City in 1986 that outdoor theatre regained the energy it had in those Edwardian years (Dean 2014). Even yet, however, pageantry is not afforded the status it deserves in terms of dramatic history and as Fred Morrow’s career demonstrates, there is still much to do in terms of honouring those who participated in the Irish national project, not in a uniform or with a gun but with innovative staging and inventive choreography.

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# Grimm Ripples. A Big Splash? The Impact Of The Grimms' Collections On Irish Folklore Collecting And Irish Folk Narrative Tradition

by Eilís Ní Dhuibhne

That the Grimms had a major impact on Irish folklore collecting, and on Irish folk narrative itself, is not in doubt. Stories from *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* have infiltrated Irish tradition, usually indirectly via translations and versions of the original book—evidence of this has been uncovered by a few researchers working on particular tale types. My article, ‘The Name of the Helper. *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in Ireland’, describes some of these influences.<sup>1</sup> But as early as 1936, Seamas Ó Duilearga noticed that one of his informants mixed stories apparently derived from the pure oral tradition with stories he had read, possibly in a copy of the Grimms’ tales.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, Ó Duilearga was less than alarmed by this phenomenon and found it interesting rather than dismaying – a reaction probably effected by the honesty of the storyteller, who simply told the collector that he had read some of his tales in a book. Although most oral narrators were not as frank about revealing their book sources to collectors, it is fairly easy to identify the fairy tales in Ireland which have been derived from printed sources for the Grimms’ tales – they are relatively few.

The relationship of the Grimms and Irish folklore began very auspiciously and could be characterised as a case of love at first sight, leading to an affair that was, however, as short-lived as it was intense. It began in 1825, flourished for a few years, and by 1830 had fizzled out, at least as far as the Irish party was concerned: at that point, Irish folklore research fell into a deep sleep during which it stirred on rare occasions, until it was thoroughly aroused some hundred years later. The scholarly and emotional attachment of Germans to Ireland fared better during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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How did the whole thing start? As always, the assertion that any specific event is ‘the first’ in a movement or school or tradition has to be tempered by qualifications. Interest in Irish language, folklore and literature in Germany and in Europe pre-dates the Grimms<sup>3</sup>. But the big splash can credibly be linked to the reaction of the great duo to a collection of legends about supernatural beings, entitled *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*, edited by an anonymous author, and published in London by John Murray in 1825.<sup>4</sup> The book was an immediate hit at home, and Wilhelm Grimm (also writing anonymously) reviewed the volume most enthusiastically in *Göttingische Gelehrter Anzeigen* in January 1826.<sup>5</sup> In fact by January 1826 the energetic brothers had already translated the book; apparently they carried out the translation during the summer of 1825 as a diversion from the boredom they endured in copying out the entire catalogue of the Library of Kassel, which tedious task was visited on them by their then boss, the Elector William II.<sup>6</sup> Wilhelm’s anonymous review, while undoubtedly expressing genuine admiration for the original work, could be regarded as a timely piece of advance publicity for the German translation of *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*, which appeared soon after his glowing endorsement, under the title *Irische Elfenmärchen*.<sup>7</sup>

The author of the original *Fairy Legends* was soon revealed to be Thomas Crofton Croker, an Irishman from Cork who lived in London. Rather strangely to our way of thinking the

Grimms had not informed the author, or the publisher, in advance of their project – copyright had been established in England in 1710 but did not extend to translations.

*Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* is credited with being the first collection of Irish folktales.<sup>8</sup> It was certainly the first substantial collection of legends drawn largely from Irish oral tradition.<sup>9</sup> In fact many books containing Irish folklore had been published before 1825, but Thomas Crofton Croker's was indeed the first collection devoted exclusively to Irish oral narrative, and he introduced Irish folklore to Europe and the world. Georges Zimmerman, in his comprehensive history of Irish storytelling, *The Irish Storyteller*, writes that Croker's book 'revealed Irish folklore to Europe.' He goes on to say that 'He represented the transition from miscellaneous antiquarianism to an intensive exploitation of oral literature, and was at first treated as an equal by the Grimm brothers.'<sup>10</sup> The book made Thomas Crofton Croker famous, partly thanks to the interest of the celebrated Grimm brothers in the work, but it won admiration from other quarters too, Sir Walter Scott being notable among its fans.<sup>11</sup>

Who was Crofton Croker? What motivated him and how did his work affect subsequent Irish folklore collecting and studies? How did he fit into the wider European network of 19<sup>th</sup> century folklore scholars? Why did he collect and publish legends, rather than wonder-tales? And what was his relationship to the Grimms? The remainder of this article will attempt to deal with these questions, and to examine Crofton Croker's contribution to Irish folklore collection and research.

### **Thomas Crofton Croker**

Although his is a household name among Irish folklorists, not a great deal of research has been carried out on Crofton Croker. One reason for this is that the investigation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish folklorists – or proto-folklorists, to use Georges Zimmermann's useful epithet – has in general been neglected in Ireland, mainly because the folklore collected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is so voluminous, fascinating, and seductive, and its investigation has deservedly attracted most scholarly attention among the small community of Irish folklorists. So, there is no biography or book-length study of Crofton Croker, and information on him is to be found in a handful of articles, introductions to re-prints of his books, and *en passant* in works devoted to legends, stories, or other writers. Richard Dorson devotes a chapter to him in *The British Folklorists*<sup>12</sup>; Georges Zimmermann has much useful comment in *The Irish Storyteller*<sup>13</sup>, as has Bo Almqvist in his introduction to *The Fairy Hill is On Fire*.<sup>14</sup> Brian Earls, who with Georges Zimmermann could be accounted the main expert on 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish folklorists, refers to Croker rather dismissively – with some justification in the particular context – in his article, 'Supernatural Legends in Nineteenth-Century Irish Writing.'<sup>15</sup> The most substantial article on Crofton Croker, focussing on his connection with the Grimms, is John Hennig's, 'The Brothers Grimm and T.C. Croker,' published long ago in 1946.<sup>16</sup> Hennig refers to the tendency of critics and writers to be dismissive and disdainful of Crofton Croker, to consider him 'an amusing charlatan.'<sup>17</sup> This is the impression I have always received of him from my folklore colleagues and the little that has been written about him from a folkloric point of view tends to focus on his faults – the main one being that he is an unreliable source for style, and sometimes too as far as content is concerned. Criticisms are generally rounded with some platitudinous praise. Kevin Danaher for instance concludes an introduction to a reprint of Crofton Croker's first book, *Researches in the South of Ireland* (1824), with

the warm accolade: ‘The reality is that Croker saw his fellow countrymen in a light unusually clear for his period, and within his limited opportunities wrote diligently, lovingly and almost invariably truthfully of them.’<sup>18</sup>

In addition to information available in scholarly articles, a number of early accounts in the form of obituaries and appreciations are available.<sup>19</sup> Most usefully, an extensive correspondence survives. Letters written by Crofton Croker himself are scattered among several libraries, including the National Library of Ireland, the British Library, the Library of Göttingen University, and the Public Record Office in Kew. Letters to Crofton Croker are held in Cork City Library. This invaluable source comprises seven volumes containing some 200 letters apiece i.e. c. 1400 letters. An index, compiled by Sheila M. Kennedy, and the first three volumes, containing letters received by Croker between 1816 and 1830, have been digitized recently and are available on-line.<sup>20</sup> The digitized volumes include the correspondence of Thomas Crofton with Wilhelm Grimm, and, in this instance, both sides of the correspondence, i.e. Croker’s letters as well as Grimm’s, are included.

Thomas Crofton Croker was born in Cork city in 1798, the year of a significant rebellion against English rule in Ireland and one which was brutally suppressed. His father was Major Thomas Croker of the 38th regiment of Foot – a Staffordshire Regiment which was based in Cork for a period. Thomas Crofton Croker grew up in the city. In the obituary written in *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* in 1854, the anonymous writer observes: ‘His education, we presume, was gained in Cork.’ Where? We don’t know. Possibly he had a private tutor. At the age of fifteen he was apprenticed as a clerk in a big merchant’s company, Mark and Lecky, in Cork. ‘Between the years 1812 and 1815 he made several excursions on foot with Joseph Humphreys, a friend, possibly one he made in Mark and Lecky – it was a Quaker company, and Joseph was a member of the Society of Friends. And ‘at this early period Crofton Croker commenced his collections of the legends and songs of the peasantry, and the observations of their character and manners which he interweaves into so many of his writings.’ During these walks he was ‘studying the character, manners, language and superstitions of the peasantry, by associating with them and listening to their songs, legends and local traditions.’<sup>21</sup>

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Crofton Croker left Cork for London in 1818, when he was twenty years old, and there he obtained a position as a clerk of the Admiralty. He rose to the rank of chief clerk and had a good salary and pension. One or two short visits to Ireland after that are documented but London was his home from 1818 until he died in 1854.

Crofton Croker was a talented visual artist and during his teenage excursions made sketches which were exhibited in Cork in 1817. He also wrote poetry and some of his early letters, written in his teens to Joseph Humphreys, refer to his poems and contain samples thereof. In the 1820s, after his move to London, he began to publish articles on Irish antiquities in newspapers. His first book was *Researches in the South of Ireland* published in London in 1824. It is a travel book of a kind, based on notes (or memories) of the hikes he took as a teenager, and observations made during a holiday with his future wife, Marianne Nicholson, and her brother Alfred, in 1821, during which they visited Cork, Limerick and Waterford. It was followed in 1825 by the aforementioned *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*, which launched Crofton Croker’s literary career. Subsequently he wrote a pantomime (for Terry’s theatre, The Adelphi), compiled more than one edition of a children’s annual, *The Christmas Box*, two novelettes, sequels to *Fairy Legends*, and other works – notably *Legends of the Lakes*,

in 1829. From 1829 he began to get elected to learned societies and was a member of several in London, Ireland, and Scandinavia. In short, like many of the early folklore collectors in other parts of Europe, he was very active on the cultural scene, always writing, talking, or going to meetings. He lived 'in the first circles of London literary life, enjoying a respected and easy intercourse with the most highly-gifted minds of our age, making himself large, agreeable and sometimes brilliant contributions to that commonwealth of mind.'<sup>22</sup> Archaeology, history and literature interested him as much as folklore and he was a keen collector of exotic artefacts. His house in Fulham, 'Rosamond's Bower,' was choc-a-bloc with antiques, pictures and books. The catalogue of his Nachlass which was auctioned after his death in 1854 included 605 objects – including such delights as an ancient Irish harp, an alligator, and the cap worn by Charles 1 at his execution.

What inspired Crofton Croker to take an interest in 'antiquities' in general and folklore in particular?

It is probable that the definitive answer to this question could be found in his extensive correspondence, most of which I have not as yet had the opportunity to read. However, clues are available in his published writing and in the historical context. Crofton Croker was an Irish Protestant, a member of the Anglo-Irish middle class in Cork, a substantial minority which was always distinguished by class and religion from the majority, the Irish Catholic peasantry. His father was in the army which had brutally suppressed the Irish rebellion of 1798 and which was to all intents and purposes an enemy of the people from whom Crofton Croker collected. Nevertheless, thanks to his social status, Crofton Croker was educated and literate. In the Cork he grew up in, there was a lively intellectual circle which was taking a keen interest in archaeology, in Irish language and culture. Although the great Irish cultural renaissance was not to happen until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when much in the politics and administration of the country had changed, a harbinger of that movement was developing already at the start of the century.<sup>23</sup> Crofton Croker belonged to a coterie of young people who took an interest in 'antiquities,' physical and verbal. His 'excursions,' as described in his first book, took the form of Sunday and holiday hikes with his friend Joseph Humphreys, when both were in their mid to late teens. They sketched ruins and old houses; they stopped in cottages and chatted to the country people, noting and remembering their stories and observing their customs and rituals. Like many of the 'proto-folklorists' of the time, they were young men enjoying the countryside, on walks with a purpose. Collecting folklore, is, as anyone who has done it knows, extremely enjoyable. Like all research, it is exciting because one is discovering new things about humanity and the world. For Crofton Croker, the realization that he was collecting stories which had been told for centuries but which nobody had written down before must have been thrilling, as soon as he realized what he had stumbled into. But as well as being intellectually fascinating, folklore collecting has the additional attraction of being sociable and unpredictable: the collector meets exceptionally entertaining and creative people, most of them highly intelligent – and it's clear from some of Crofton Croker's commentary that he appreciated this. Field work is also physically engaging: Crofton Croker walked for miles in the beautiful Cork countryside on his 'excursions.' Even today most folklore collectors are eager walkers; in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they had no choice. (It may be observed that as far as physical activity and social interaction is concerned, folklore field work is the polar opposite of internet research.)

It seems likely that the accident of being brought up in an English speaking city, with a network of lively intellectuals who had a burgeoning interest in Irish antiquities and history, but which was on the doorstep of a bi-lingual rural community, the culture, literature and traditions of which were still almost exclusively oral, was the magic combination which kindled Crofton Croker's specific interests. Two of the necessary ingredients for inspiring the collection of folklore were literally within walking distance of his home: a literate intellectual network in Cork city, and a rich oral tradition in the immediate vicinity.

His move to London at the age of twenty separated him from his folklore sources, and that is a matter for regret. On the positive side, however, the move introduced him to another network which fostered his development. In London he came in contact with the great intellectual and cultural movements of the age, British and European: he was friendly with Thomas Moore, Isaac D'Israeli, Maria Edgeworth, and many writers and scholars.<sup>24</sup> He belonged to several learned societies. This surely served to sharpen his appreciation of the Irish tradition he had left behind in Cork, and to realise that there was an appetite for knowledge about it. London also gave him his publisher.

In London, Thomas Crofton Croker almost certainly encountered the work of the Grimm Brothers. He arrived in the city in 1818. In 1823, Edgar Taylor's translation of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, namely *German Popular Stories*, was published.<sup>25</sup> One year later, Thomas Crofton Croker's first book, *Researches in the South of Ireland*, appeared. The timing alone suggests a link.

### **Crofton Croker's Collections**

*Researches in the South of Ireland* is primarily a discursive travel book, a genre which was popular in 18th and 19th century Ireland. Its avowed purpose was to explain the Irish to the British:

*'Intimately connected as are the Sister Islands of Great Britain and Ireland, it is an extraordinary fact that the latter country should be comparatively a terra incognita to the English in general... Closer study would prove that in political feeling, in language, and in manners, and almost every particular which stamps a national character, the two Islands differ essentially.'*

*'To the history of past ages we must refer for the means of ascertaining the present state of any people'*<sup>26</sup>

The author has plenty to say about the differences between the Irish and the English:

*'Distinctions will be found between the peasantry of England and Ireland (for in the lower classes alone can national distinctions be traced).'*

*'The rough and honest independence of the English cottager speaks the freedom he has so long enjoyed, and when really injured his appeal to the laws for redress and protection marks their impartial and just administration; the witty servility of the Irish peasantry, mingled with occasional bursts of desperation and patriotism – the romantic sense of honour, and improvident yet unalterable attachments, are evidences of a conquest without system, an irregular government, and the remains of a feudal clanship, the barbarous and arbitrary organization of a warlike people.'*<sup>27</sup>

Although he presents the common stereotype of the Irish as witty, servile and romantic, he is less harsh than others in his assessment - as Kevin Danaher rightly noted in his introduction to an edition of this book<sup>28</sup>- and attributes blame to the English administration rather than to any native faults.

Like most travel books, *Researches* largely consists of descriptions of landscapes, towns, architecture, archaeology. What distinguishes it is that it also includes three chapters on folklore topics: 'Fairies and Supernatural Agency', 'Keens and Death Ceremonies', 'Manners and Customs.' There is also a chapter entitled 'Literature', which, while making some hyperbolic, if familiar, claims ('*The literary superiority of Ireland over the rest of Europe, in remote ages, has been a subject of national exultation*'),<sup>29</sup> contains very interesting ethnological information, e.g. -

*'Amongst the peasantry, classical learning is not uncommon; and a tattered Ovid or Virgil may be found even in the hands of common labourers. In Munster, the village schoolmaster forms a peculiar character; and next to the lord of the manor, the parson, and the priest, he is the most important personage in the parish.'*<sup>30</sup>

The chapter on Keens and Death Ceremonies is particularly impressive from a folkloristic point of view. It includes rich descriptions of the composers and singers of Keens (laments for the dead), as well as English translations of a selection of them. It also documents many folk beliefs and superstitions, and paraphrases legends and anecdotes:

*'I remember once overhearing a contest between a poor man and his wife, respecting the burial of their infant. The woman wished to have the child laid near some of her own relations, which the husband strongly opposed, concluding her attachment of her friends was superior to her love for him; but he was soon convinced by his wife's argument, that as her sister had died in child-birth only a few days previous, she would afford their poor infant suck, which nourishment it might not have if buried elsewhere.'*<sup>31</sup>

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Similarly, the chapter on Fairies and Supernatural Agency includes a number of legends, among them a well-known changeling legend.<sup>32</sup>

*Researches in the South of Ireland* is written in a plain style. The voice flows naturally, and the book contains few of the somewhat florid excesses that can mar Crofton Croker's subsequent publications. The rich accounts of legends, folk belief, and folk customs, drawn from his personal observation during his outings and holidays, are evidence of his deep interest in what was later called 'folklore.' His fascination with this material, and his good memory for it, must have been to some extent spontaneous and to some extent inspired by British and Irish antiquarians and travel writers, e.g. Arthur Young's *Tour in Ireland* (1778) or Richard Colt's *Journal of a Tour in Ireland* (1807). *Researches in the South of Ireland* does not include any Märchen, or fairytales, as such. Like Crofton Croker's next book, its favoured folk narrative genre is the legend. Above all, the book testifies to Crofton Croker's intense and pioneering interest in folklore - particularly in folklife and popular belief: the seedbed and the context of the legend genre.

*Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland* came hot on the heels of *Researches*, in the spring of 1825, and, as the title indicates, consists mainly of legends. This book was ground-breaking. Kevin Danaher, in his introduction to a 1969 reissue of the volume, claims that it was 'the first collection of oral tales published in Britain or Ireland'<sup>33</sup> which is stretching the truth.

Georges Zimmermann states that the book ‘placed Irish living narrative tradition on the European map, and encouraged others to publish similar material’<sup>34</sup>

The reason for its anonymous publication was not that Crofton Croker was shy – he had published a book under his own name just a year earlier – but that he was only partially its author. Apparently he had lost his original manuscript, and reconstructed it using material supplied by several of his acquaintances – Dr Maginn (a Cork associate, interested in Irish), Mr Humphries, David Richard Pigot, and Thomas Keightley - who himself in 1828 published a collection of stories, *Fairy Mythology*, which included wonder tales. Keightley complained about Croker’s lack of acknowledgment of his contribution, writing to the publisher John Murray and eventually to the Grimms about his grievances. The controversy surrounding the authorship had far-reaching consequences.<sup>35</sup>

As previously noted, the book was a major success. In his 1826 review Wilhelm Grimm wrote that he believed the book ‘depicted truthfully the domestic existence, thought mode of life and customs of a country we still do not know well.’<sup>36</sup> In 1826 a second edition was published, somewhat slimmed down to ward off Keightley’s attacks, and with Crofton Croker’s name on the title page. The Grimms’ translation, *Irische Elfenmärchen*<sup>37</sup> appeared in 1826 and, according to the anonymous obituary in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, in 1828 a French translation by A Dufour, entitled *Contes Irlandaises*, was published in Paris.<sup>38</sup> Irish folklore was launched on the international scene.

### ***Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland***

The collection includes 27 narratives about supernatural beings. It is divided into sections - The Shefro, the Cluricaune, the Banshee, The Phooka, and Thierna na Noge. Most of the narratives are migratory legends which continued to be told commonly in Ireland until relatively recently and which are listed in the small index of legends of the supernatural, *Crossing the Border*, compiled by Bo Almqvist<sup>39</sup> - The Changeling, the Leprechaun, stories of the Banshee. Others are not so readily identifiable and may belong to local tradition, while some of the stories are not legends but fragments of folktales. The narratives are interspersed with commentary which is rambling and sometimes not very closely related to the story to which it is attached – for instance, a story which explains how Peggy Barrett got the hump on her back includes a brief reference to hurling. The note contains an elaborate gloss on hurling, even adding an illustration of a hurl, and a small ball, lest the word ‘ball’ was unfamiliar to the reader, presumably.

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(Incidentally, this note is one of the few notes translated by the Grimms, as John Hennig points out.) The story of how Peggy Barrett got the hump on her back is singled out for mention by Georges Zimmermann in *The Irish Storyteller* because in it the writer - Croker or whoever it may have been – gives a full and engaging account of the storyteller, and also of her audience. This portrait provides us with a typical example of Crofton Croker’s style when he was at his best:

*Peggy Barrett was once tall, well-shaped and comely. She was in her youth remarkable for two qualities, not often found together, of being the most thrifty housewife, and the best dancer in her native village of Ballyhooley. But she is now upward of sixty years old and during the last ten years of her life has never been able to stand up straight... Peggy, like all experienced storytellers, suited her tales, both in length and subject, to the audience and the occasion. She knew that in*

*broad daylight, when the sun shines brightly... and men and women like ourselves are moving and speaking, employed variously in business and amusement... we want that spirit of credulity without which tales of the deepest interest will lose their power... At such time Peggy was brief, very particular as to the facts, and never dealt in the marvellous. But round the blazing hearth of a Christmas evening... when the winds of December whistled bleakly round the walls... at such time Peggy Barrett gave full scope to her memory, or her imagination, or both.*<sup>40</sup>

This fine account of Peggy Barton and the storytelling situation is something which tended to disappear from the reliable documentation of oral narrative in Ireland in the heyday of collecting, in the mid 20th century, when the focus was much more on the story than on the storyteller. Crofton Croker's descriptions remind me of those we find in the most up to date collections - by for instance Henry Glassie or Ray Cashman. Theirs is a different approach from that of the trained Irish collectors employed by the Irish Folklore Commission from 1935 onward, whose focus was primarily on the narratives or other material, although they documented basic biographical information regarding their informants and sometimes provided more detailed information in their diaries.

A problem with Crofton Croker's attention to detail and talent for describing character and situation is that there is always a possibility that he just made it up. The introduction to a story called 'The Lucky Guest' contains a brilliantly vivid account of the storyteller, Bridget Hogan -

*'She was seated in that peculiar position which the Irish name curriuibh. On one's hunkers. A position generally assumed by a veteran and determined storyteller. ... her haunches resting upon the ground, and her feet bundled under the body, her arms folded across and supported by her knees, and the outstretched chin of her hooded head pressing on the upper arm; which compact arrangement nearly reduced her whole figure into a perfect triangle.'*<sup>41</sup>

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It's a text book example of forensically close observation, unfortunately, however, Crofton Croker had never seen the storyteller whose hunkered pose he describes so well. He got her story in a letter from a correspondent and apparently added the colourful description of the storyteller's pose.<sup>42</sup>

Nor was he above inventing legends, or including invented legends in his collection. Brian Earls writes about what he calls a 'particularly brazen example' of Crofton Croker's tendency to invent 'folk stories' for his books in a fine article on the supernatural in Anglo Irish literature.<sup>43</sup> A story entitled 'The Soul Cages', which was contributed by Thomas Keightley, to *Fairy Legends*, is said to have been heard in Dunbeg Co Clare. The legend tells how fisherman releases the souls of dead sailors who have been imprisoned in lobster pots under the sea by the Merrow, or mermaid. Yeats, who copied the legend to one of the collections he compiled in the British Library as a young man to earn some money, noted that he had never encountered such a story anywhere else and concluded that it must have been a local legend in Dunbeg. However, later collectors discovered that this story was never known in that area. It seems to be a complete fabrication (although the culprit in this case was Thomas Keightley).

### Thomas Crofton Croker's Relationship with the Brothers Grimm

We can surmise that Crofton Croker was aware of the Grimm Brothers and their work, especially of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, from 1823 at the latest. And we know that the Grimms encountered *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland* in 1825. Crofton Croker initiated contact with them on 16 June 1826.<sup>44</sup> His letter elicited a reply, from Wilhelm, on 29 July 1826.<sup>45</sup> A second letter from Wilhelm to Crofton Croker is dated 26 January 1827<sup>46</sup> and the third and apparently final letter was written on 15 February 1828.<sup>47</sup> Wilhelm Grimm's letter of 26 January 1827 refers to a letter from Crofton Croker dated 23 December 1826 which I have not seen (and which is not in the Cork City Library collection).

The letters express mutual admiration, and discuss in some depth *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*. In his letter of 16 June 1826 Crofton Croker expressed his surprised gratitude that the Grimms translated his book. He apologizes for what we can infer as his carelessness -

*Gentlemen*

*I cannot express my surprise when I first heard that my little collection of the fairy legends of Ireland had been thought so highly of by you as to be deemed worthy of translation – I find it has indeed acquired a character of importance both here and on the Continent, than which nothing was further from my thoughts at the time of writing. Had I anticipated such success I should certainly have bestowed more pains on it.'*

He defends his style:

*'..Such is the English taste that I should much doubted the success of the volume without them and certain embellishments of the story – for if they had been related in the simple unadorned style used in Deutsche Sagen few if any purchasers would be found and the book would have been condemned even as unfit for the nursery.'*

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He continues, giving high praise to the 'spirit of fidelity' of the Grimms' translation, but concludes with a list of corrections – twenty-seven in all.

In his letter of 29 July 1826, in reply to Crofton Croker's letter of 16 June, after predictable niceties, Wilhelm Grimm apologizes for misunderstandings in the translation, caused by his lack of knowledge of Ireland, and promises the mistakes Croker has pointed to will not be repeated in the second edition. He encourages Crofton Croker to translate his and Jacob's essay on the Irish fairies – which Crofton Croker duly included in his second edition of *Fairy Legends*. Finally, he asks Crofton Croker to deliver something he has enclosed – perhaps a letter- to Edgar Taylor.

(From these two letters we have confirmation that Crofton Croker knew of the existence and seems to have had some familiarity with *Deutsche Sagen*, and that he was well enough acquainted with Edgar Taylor to be entrusted with delivering a letter to him.)

In his letter of 26 January 1827, which survives in the German original in Wilhelm's hand and in an English translation, possibly by a third party, Wilhelm thanks Crofton Croker for a letter of 23 December. He encloses notes – *Nachträge zur Quellen* - on analogous fairy beliefs in several countries (with the German letter – these notes are not translated to En-

glish). He writes that ‘I have already found out something about the good people in Africa’ and invites Crofton Croker to let him know if he wants any of the information he and his brother have gathered.

Wilhelm also gives scholarly advice:

‘If I might express a wish it would be that in the treatise itself that is in the exhibition of references, the tales and the traditions should not be mixed – for the generality of readers the book is.. what is called more entertaining, but the scientific examination is disturbed by the disposition of those points on which it really falls, and the clear and firm view of the subject is lost. I would wish the traditions of the different nations separated and geographically arranged and a printed list of the whole, which placed before or after might be considered as the argument (?) or source of the inquiry.’

This seems to be a criticism of the way in which Crofton Croker includes his notes and commentaries in the main text of the book - and perhaps a criticism of the descriptive passages, such as those mentioned above, giving pen pictures of the storytellers and their lifestyles blended with the story. Wilhelm is already aiming for a more scientific Aarne Thompson type collection.

He goes on to complain about Crofton Croker’s stylistic excesses:

‘This can only be sufficiently .. and commented when the traditions themselves are related as fully and circumstantially as possible, indeed your personal and poetical amplifications are here quite out of place, and to speak with perfect sincerity, quite inappropriate. Pardon however these observations and excuse my interference on this subject.’

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Following these harsh words, he reverts to flattery: in an example of over the top politeness, he tells Crofton Croker that he is a literary author to rank with Sir Walter Scott, before signing off and sending his brother’s good wishes.

Wilhelm’s letter of 15 February 1828<sup>48</sup> is polite and encouraging, and includes a gift for Crofton Croker, in the form of ‘a small work which I have just published, Prince Rodolphe.’ He asks Crofton Croker to stay in touch, as it were, but this letter seems to mark the end of the correspondence.

Apart from confirming the interest which the Grimms had in Irish fairy lore, the correspondence confirms that Crofton Croker was aware of some of his own faults as a documenter of folklore. It also confirms both that he knew of the existence of *Deutsche Sagn* (although no copy of that, or of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, was in his library), and that he was acquainted with Edgar Taylor, and so definitely would have known of, and perhaps read, *German Popular Stories*. Crofton Croker’s corrections to the Grimms’ translation of *Fairy Legends* suggest that he knew German, although one wonders, if this was so, why all Wilhelm’s letters were translated to English for him? The question of how well Crofton Croker knew German, or Irish, is thorny.

*Irische Elfenmärchen and Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*

*Irische Elfenmärchen* consists of translations of the legends and stories in the original work, with notes. To this the Grimms added two introductory essays, *Die Elfen in Irland* and *Die Elfen in Schottland*.

Crofton Croker complimented the Grimms on the fidelity of their translation (suggesting he could read it, or else that he had a helper). As far as overall content is concerned, *Irische Elfenmärchen* is indeed faithful to Crofton Croker's book. It includes every story in the original work, and preserves its arrangement into sections: *Das Stille Volk*, *Der Clurikaun*, *Die Banshi*, and so on – an arrangement which Karl Lachmann disliked.

Several minor changes were made, however. A number of Crofton Croker's titles were replaced with new coinages – in some instances one presumes because Crokers contain placenames which were too exotic for Germans. For example, 'The Legend of Knockshewonna' is rendered 'Das Weisse Kalb'. The Grimms reduced all his notes by 75% and placed them, with their own additions, at the end of the book rather than dispersed through the text. Most interestingly, they occasionally simplified Crofton Croker's florid style and in fact in some cases restored the legends to a style more likely to be in keeping with that of a real storyteller.

In fact they do this in the the first paragraph, in the first story in *Fairy Legends* 'The Legend of Knockshewonna.' It opens thus:

*In Tipperary is one of the most singularly shaped hills in the world. It has got a peak on the top like a conical nightcap thrown carelessly over your head as you awake in the morning. On the very point is built a lodge, where in the summer the lady who built it used to go on parties of pleasure; but that was long after the days of the fairies, and it is, I believe, now deserted.*

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(2. F.L.)<sup>49</sup>

This is rendered:

*In Tipperary liegt ein Berg so seltsam gestaltet, wie einer auf der Welt. Seine Spitze besteht aus einer kegelförmigen Kuppe, auf der ein kleines Haus zur Erlustigung in der Sommertagen aufgebaut war, das jetzt auch verödet seyn mag.*<sup>50</sup>

(36 I.E.)

Gone are the conical nightcap and the partying lady.

The third story, 'The Legend of Knockgafon' they called 'Fingerhütchen'. Their translation of this legends is mainly very faithful, probably because the original is written in rather natural transparent prose. But they balked at the following:

So he sat down under the moat to rest himself, and began looking mournfully enough at the moon, which

Rising in clouded majesty, at length,  
Apparently Queen, unveil'd her peerless light,  
O'er the dark heaven her silver mantle threw  
And in her pale dominion check'd the night.<sup>51</sup>

(FL 25)

Elfenmarchen simply leaves out the verse altogether:

“... setzte er sich unter dem Grabhügel, um ein wenig auszuruhen, und sah ganz betrübt den Mond an, der eben silberrein aufstieg.”<sup>52</sup>

(IE 43)

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Both these amendments reflect Wilhelm's advice to Crofton Croker in his letter of December 1826, cited above, – don't put notes in the main body of the text, and avoid poetic embellishments.

### **Conclusion**

Of particular interest to the Grimm Ripples symposium are the 'networks' of early folklore collectors and editors in Europe, and the interest in legends as opposed to wondertales.

Crofton Croker obviously had a hot-line to the greatest European folklorists of his time, perhaps of all time, the Grimms. He was fully immersed in the vibrant intellectual community in London and was on friendly terms with writers, scholars and thinkers. I haven't encountered evidence that he travelled in Europe himself – he did not meet the Grimms, for instance. But his friends and acquaintances did. Already in 1825 the Grimms had met a friend of Crofton Croker's, a Mr Cooper, in Kassel.<sup>53</sup> He was certainly in the loop of European antiquaries and proto-folklorists.

Why did he focus on legends, rather than wondertales? Is this due to the influence of *Deutsche Sagen*?

We know he was aware of the existence of the book. His library did not include a copy of *Deutsche Sagen*, but nor did it hold any other work by the Grimms (curiously enough.)<sup>54</sup> It was not translated to English until relatively recently. There is evidence that he knew sufficient German to make amendments to the Grimms' translation of his book; on the

other hand, certain facts suggest that he could not read their letters to him in the original. John Hennig, in his well-researched and authoritative article, writes that ‘the relationship between Croker’s notes [in *Fairy Legends*] and the geographical descriptions given in *Deutsche Sagen* is obvious.’<sup>55</sup> Crofton Croker either knew enough German to read it, or was able to consult colleagues who could help him do so.

There is a question mark concerning his knowledge of Irish, and this is pertinent to his collecting. In Ireland, until the mid-twentieth-century, there was a very rich tradition of Märchen, and other international folktales. The National Folklore Collection in Dublin holds one of the biggest wondertale archives in the world. It also holds an enormous collection of legends.

What is the difference between the two genres? We know the tried and tested distinction of Jacob Grimm: *das Märchen is dichterischer, die Sage historischer*. There is more to it than that. Legends are shorter. Many more people in the community know and can tell legends than know wonder tales, which demand special powers of memory and of narrative skill. Legends can be told quickly, at any time of the day, whereas wondertales require leisure time. In Ireland, they were usually told at storytelling sessions in particular houses, at night when the day’s work was done. Finally, in Ireland, the wondertales seem to have been told mainly in the Irish language, although there are exceptions to this rule.

Crofton Croker seems to have ‘collected’, or heard, legends during his Sunday walks in the countryside. It is unlikely that his schedule (as a full time clerk in the city), would have allowed him the leisure to attend long storytelling evenings in country cottages. It is also unlikely that what evidence suggests was his limited knowledge of Irish would have enabled him to understand lengthy and complex stories told in that language. Finally, he was at heart a sort of ethnographer or anthropologist, interested in customs and folkways, rather than in folk literature as an art form. The ‘fairy faith’, such a central part of Irish popular belief in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was clearly of great interest to him, and that belief is most clearly illustrated in the repertoire of Irish legends about supernatural beings. Possibly this combination of factors, rather than for any conscious predilection for the legend form, influenced him in his choice of material. However, it seems likely that his – and his publisher’s – decision to publish *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland* could have been influenced by *Deutsche Sagen* – as well as, clearly, by the much more famous and easily available *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*.

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I suggest, also that Crofton Croker may have paid little attention to the distinction between legends and wonder tales. He regarded the stories in his collections as fantasies, evidence of the superstitious nature of the Irish people. It is curious, also, that the Grimms entitled their translation of Fairy Legends *Elfenmärchen*, not *Elfensagn*. It is as if they also saw the distinction between Märchen and Sagn breaking down, in the case of the legends from the South of Ireland. And we know the distinctions can break down. Legends and folktales (though of course not true Märchen, ATU 300-749, ‘Tales of Magic’) can overlap – sometimes a legend type is told in folktale style, in Ireland, and vice versa. An example is ATU 1350, ‘The Soon-Consolled Widow’ – which occurs most oddly as an animal tale in *Kinder Und Hausmärchen*, ‘Mrs. Fox’ – in Ireland, this folktale is sometimes told as a first-person narrative, with legend characteristics.<sup>56</sup> In other words, this story occurs as folktale, legend, and even animal tale.

How can we sum up Crofton Croker's contribution to Irish folklore studies? As folklorists in Ireland have known, Crofton Croker is not a reliable source as far as the style of Irish oral narrative, or the precise content, is concerned. It is very likely that he over-estimated his knowledge of the Irish language,<sup>57</sup> and perhaps also of German (if he knew it at all). His research and collecting in the south of Ireland was mainly carried out when he was a teenager, and otherwise during one holiday of a few weeks and a speedy visit to Killarney funded by his publisher, also of a few weeks duration, in 1826. His stories and legends were sourced apparently from his memory and perhaps notes, and from friends and acquaintances. In short, he was a gifted amateur in the field of folklore collecting and studies.

Nevertheless, as most who have given any consideration at all to his work, he was a pioneer. If that book was not alone responsible for the start of the love affair of continental scholars with Ireland and Irish tradition, it certainly fanned the flames of the relationship. As Wilhelm Grimm pointed out in an essay on Irish folklore studies written in 1856, his work was groundbreaking: '*Bei den Iren brach TC Croker mit seinen Fairy Legends.. zuerst Bahn.*'<sup>58</sup> The Grimms introduced Irish folklore to Germany.

What was the legacy of Crofton Croker and the Grimms in Ireland? The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a continuation of the kind of folklore collecting and publication that Crofton Croker initiated. Several collections were published – names which occur are Patrick Kennedy, Speranza or Lady Wilde, Gerald Griffin, in the mid century. Towards the end, the writers of the Celtic Revival, led by Lady Augusta Gregory and Douglas Hyde, collected and published important collections. J.M. Synge collected stories which he used in his plays; W.B. Yeats had a keen interest although he could not be described as a collector, as such. But these ripples were rather weak. If the Grimms are the pioneers of systematic folklore scholarship and collecting which is faithful to the oral tradition, their legacy was not inherited fully in Ireland until the 20th century.

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Kevin Danaher sums up this situation very well at the end of his introduction to the 1969 edition of *Researches in the South of Ireland*:

*'Croker continued his researches and published other collections ..but the greater part of his life was spent in London, far away from the farmhouses and cabins of Munster. Other nineteenth century scholars failed to follow his lead; for them the country man moved back into the wings of the Irish stage, from which he was occasionally lured out by the novelist or playwright to display his capers. Not until the end of the nineteenth century was the sublime again glimpsed behind the ridiculous in the words and ways of the Irish country man; not until the nineteen-thirties was the validity of his tradition as a source of scholarly research again recognized, while even yet its study has not been accorded in Ireland the full academic status which is commonplace in Europe.'*<sup>59</sup>

Kevin Danaher is referring to the establishment, in 1935, of the Irish Folklore Commission, the organisation which collected millions of pages of folktales, legends and other folklore from then on. Folklore became an academic subject for the first time in Ireland in 1972, just a few years after he wrote these words.

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne Almqvist

- 1 Éilís Ní Dhuibhne Almqvist, 'The Name of the Helper. Kinder- und Hausmärchen in Ireland', *Béaloideas*, Vol 81, (2013):
- 2
- 3 John Hennig, 'The Brothers Grimm and T.C. Croker', in *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 41 (January 1946): 45. 'The attention which he and his brother devoted at once to Croker's collection seems to be expressive of the spontaneous general interest in Ireland of which at that time Goethe especially gave so many proofs.'
- 4 [Thomas Crofton Croker], *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*. (London, Murray, 1825)
- 5 Review by Wilhelm Grimm in *Göttingsche Gelehrter Anzeigen*, January 1826. Cited by John Hennig, 45. The review is reprinted in Wilhelm Grimm, *Kleinere Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Berlin 1882)
- 6 Albert Duncker, *Die Brüder Grimm* (Kassel 1884): 45. Cited by Hennig, art cit:46
- 7 *Irische Elfenmärchen*. Übersetzt von den Brüdern Grimm. (Leipzig, Fleischer, 1826). A copy of this first edition, with manuscript notes in the hand of Jacob Grimm, from the collection of the Grimms' friend Karl Lachmann, is held in the National Library of Ireland.
- 8 Kevin Danaher, Introduction to Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland*. (New York, Barnes and Noble, 1969):vii. (First edition of *Researches in the South of Ireland* appeared in 1824).
- 9 Bo Almqvist, 'Irish Migratory Legends of the Supernatural. Sources, studies and problems', in *The Fairy Hill is On Fire. Béaloideas* (Dublin 1991),18-19 and passim.
- 10 Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*. (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2001): 173.
- 11 Richard Dorson, *The British Folklorists*. (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1968) :49
- 12 Dorson, op.cit., 44-52
- 13 Zimmermann, op.cit., 73ff
- 14 Almqvist, art.cit. 18-19
- 15 Brian Earls, 'Supernatural Legends in Nineteenth-Century Irish writing', *Béaloideas* Vol.61-2 (1992-3): 101-2.
- 16 Hennig, art.cit.
- 17 Hennig: 50
- 18 Danaher, op.cit., vii.
- 19 E.G. Memoir of the Late Thomas Crofton Croker, Esq. *The Gentleman's Magazine* (October 1854): 397-8
- 20 <http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/cultureincork/thomascroftoncroker/>
- 21 *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1854): 398
- 22 S.Clarke, 'Rosamond's Bower, The Pryor's Bank, and the long shadow of Strawberry Hill', in *The Journal of the History of Collections*, July 2014, Vol 26, Issue 2: 289
- 23 Liam Mac Mathúna and Regina Uí Chollatáin, eds, *Saothrú na Gaeilge Scríofa is suímh uirbeacha na hÉireann, 1700-1850*. (Dublin, Ollscoil na hÉireann, 2016)
- 24 S Clarke, art cit: 289
- 25 Edgar Taylor, *German Popular Stories*. (London, Balwyn, 1823)
- 26 *Researches in the South of Ireland*: 2.
- 27 *Researches in the South of Ireland*: 2
- 28 Danaher, op.cit.,
- 29 *Researches in the South of Ireland*: 325
- 30 *Researches...: 326*
- 31 *Researches...: 69*
- 32 A legend about a woman who is believed dead, and whose husband remarries, returns from the fairy fort after a lengthy period. The husband now has two wives and must solve this problem in a pre-divorce society *Researches in the South of Ireland*: 87-8. Robin Flower collected a version of this legend from Tomás Ó Croimthín, on the Blasket Island. ( Robin Flower, *The Western Island* (1945): 135-7)
- 33 Danaher, op cit, vii
- 34 Zimmermann, op.cit., 180
- 35 Hennig, art cit:
- 36 Zimmermann: 179
- 37 Gebrüder Grimm, *Irische Elfenmärchen*. 1826. (Fleischer, Leipzig).
- 38 *Gentleman's Magazine* (1854). I have been unable to trace this French translation.
- 39 Crossing The Border. In *The Fairy Hill is On Fire. Proceedings of the Symposium onther Supernatural in Irish and Scottish Migratory Legends*, Dublin 7-8 October 1988. (Béaloideas 1991).
- 40 *Fairy Legends*: 297
- 41 Zimmermann: 179
- 42 Zimmermann: 179
- 43 Brian Earls, 'Supernatural Legends in Nineteenth-Century Irish Writing', *Bealoideas* Vol 60/1 (1992/03): 93-144
- 44 Cork City Library. Crofton Croker Correspondence. Vol 3, letter 8.

- 45 Cork City Library. Vol.2, letter 28  
 46 Cork City Library. Crofton Croker Correspondence. Vol 2,letter 60/61  
 47 Cork City Library. Crofton Croker Correspondence. Vol. 2, letter 15  
 48 This letter is Volume 3, letter 15, of the Crofton Croker correspondence in Cork City Library, and not in Vol. 2, as the index states.  
 49 Fairy Legends: 2  
 50 Irische Elfenmärchen: 36  
 51 Fairy Legends:25  
 52 Irische Elfenmärchen 43  
 53 Hennig, art.cit.,  
 54 Hennig, art.cit.: 45  
 55 Hennig, art.cit.: 52  
 56 Eilís Ní Dhuibhne Almqvist, 'Synge's Use of Popular Material in The Shadow of the Glen' (Béaloides,  
 57 There are mis-translations of elementary Irish words in Researches in the South of Ireland. For example, he translates 'Bean Sí' as 'White Fairy', mixing up the adjective Bán (white) with the noun Bean (woman). He also writes, in that book, that a keener in Cork translated her keens to English for him. There is not a single Irish letter in his voluminous correspondence. He undoubtedly knew some Irish but perhaps not very much.  
 58 Hennig, art cit: 51  
 59 Danaher: vii

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Peig Sayers, Dún Chaoin, Co.  
Chiarraí. c. 1947.

Image courtesy of the  
National Folklore Collection

# The Hungry Grass: Folklore and the Undead Past in Post-Famine Ireland

by Ray Cashman



*Famine Sod*  
Miriam deBúrca

Reading Ireland wish to thank Ray Cashman and Miriam de Búrca for permission to reproduce an image of de Búrca's Famine Sod

For centuries there have been recorded accounts of people traveling over particular spots in the Irish landscape and being overcome by sudden weakness and most of all an insatiable hunger. The hunger and lethargy associated is said to be severe enough to kill the victim, but he or she can be cured by eating even a small bite of food or, failing that, chewing on something such as shoe leather, swallowing the juices. Even smoking tobacco is said to break what may be experienced as something like a deadly spell that can nonetheless be broken. The hungry grass or *an féar gorta* names both the ordeal and the culprit.

Such an extraordinary somatic experience, linked to particular locations, makes for remarkable narratives that circulate, most often in the form of third-person legendary accounts and first-hand anecdotes, known by folklorists as memorates. In addition, archival materials—particularly those collected by the Irish Folklore Commission—include elicited belief statements that prescribe what one should do to ward off the effects of the hungry grass, or that identify the origin of the hungry grass, an origin usually taken to be supernatural.

Consider a typical example of a brief third-person account recorded in Bruncrana, Co. Donegal, from an elderly man interviewed for the Irish Folklore Commission's 1937-1939 Schools' Collection project:

People used to get "féar gorta" or get weak coming home from markets and fairs. This grass, if you walk on it, you will not be able to go any further without eating something. There is "féar gorta" at Mamore, at Slavery, and at many other places. There is hungry grass about a mile from Clonmany next [to] this parish. If anyone walks over it they get weak. My Grandfather, William McLaughlin, Carva, said that one day he and a young man were coming from Clonmany and the man got weak at this spot and he had a few cakes in his pocket and he gave them to him to eat and he got alright again. Any person

going to Clonmany always took a piece of oat bread with them for fear the hunger might overcome them at this spot.

Even in such a short text we have all the basic elements of severe hunger and weakness experienced at a certain place. More than a setting, this place triggers the phenomenon, which can be cured only by ingesting something, however minimal. In addition, there is mention of the custom that people in the past, being aware of the risk of the hungry grass, regularly carried food with them on journeys, usually small cakes or biscuits of oat bread, a motif that re-emerges time and again in hungry grass lore.

Note that the informant here, William McLaughlin—the same name as his grandfather—was 86 years old when his account was recorded in 1938, meaning that he was born at the very end of the Famine, which by conservative estimates killed one million people and forced another million to emigrate between 1845 and 1852. The population of Ireland, then, declined from roughly 8 million to 6 million, which is to say one in four people were gone in less than a decade on an island-wide scale, to say nothing of more desperate demographic shifts in the hardest hit areas. It is a truism that the Famine was a watershed moment in Irish history, and as you might expect there are further connections between the hungry grass and the Famine to explore.

First, however, consider additional context about the sources available for coming to understand this phenomenon and its verbal representations. There are published references to the hungry grass in nineteenth-century popular literature such as the short stories and novels of William Carleton as well as throughout nineteenth-century antiquarian writings such as that of Canon John O'Hanlon (aka Lageniensis) and William Wilde, father of Oscar Wilde. The hungry grass is also a frequent allusion in twentieth-century Irish literature such as Donagh MacDonagh's 1947 poetry collection and Richard Power's 1969 novel, both entitled *The Hungry Grass*. All of these speak to the wide circulation of the idea of the hungry grass, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, but its true antiquity is uncertain. Conceptual parallels to the hungry grass—though not named as such—can be found in William Camden's 1610 *Britannia* and arguably in the Ulster Cycle, which is set in the Iron Age but was written down starting in the twelfth century.

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Perhaps the most enlightening sources are those archived at University College Dublin in the National Folklore Collection. The NFC includes multiple repositories that offer references to the hungry grass. The Main Collection includes 2,400 bound volumes of materials collected mostly in the mid twentieth century, and it offers fifteen belief statements, memorates, and third-person accounts about the hungry grass, thirteen of which are in Irish, having been collected in Irish-speaking areas of the rural west coast (mostly Cos. Clare, Donegal, Galway, Kerry, and Mayo). An additional twenty-eight, mostly Anglophone texts come from the Schools' Collection, and these texts collected by senior primary school students come from counties all over Ireland, north, south, east, and west. Another six sources in English come from the Urban Folklore Project conducted in the Dublin metro area during 1980, and an additional sixteen relevant audio interviews recorded within the last twenty-five years.

The remaining sources include occasional references to the hungry grass, particularly memorates, recorded by contemporary fieldworkers and collectors. For example, in a 1996 article for *Folklore Forum*, Deborah Davis quotes a woman she met who experienced the

hungry grass in Co. Mayo, and Rónán Ó Gealbhainn interviewed ten people with first- or second-hand accounts of the hungry grass in Cos. Clare and Donegal for his 2004 Master's Thesis in the Irish Folklore Department at UCD. Serendipitously, I have recorded another four accounts of the hungry grass in Cos. Tyrone, Donegal, and Cork while pursuing other topics and projects.

With nets cast widely, it is possible to sort the available sources for such things as location, time period recorded, time period referenced, information about the narrator such as gender and age, or the genre of narrative, and then to visualize and consider patterns that emerge. One of the more interesting patterns concerns popular etiologies or beliefs about the origin of the hungry grass. That is, where do people say the hungry grass comes from and why does it keep happening at certain places?

The vast majority of relevant sources come from the early to mid twentieth century and very few from before the mid nineteenth-century Famine. So it may come as little surprise that the most common explanation (at least during this period, given these sources) is that the hungry grass occurs at locations where a victim of the Famine died. The somatic experience of the hungry grass, then, is understood as a kind of re-experiencing. It is a matter of later unfortunates treading on a place of past tragedy and being made to feel the ravenous hunger and debilitating weakness of a Famine victim just before he or she succumbed, at that very spot.

When I say “being made to feel hunger” note that where agency lies is rather ambiguous. That is, the available records are not clear about whether the ghost of the Famine victim is the force repeatedly inflicting this starvation experience on those who disturb his or her place of death (similar to the Hidarugami of Japanese folklore). But this possibility would be consistent with the traditional belief in Ireland that those who die a bad, untimely death—by murder, suicide, accident, or indeed starvation—will become restless ghosts haunting the places of their demise. Not unique to Ireland, this is an idea that is represented in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* by a number of entries (for example, motifs E272, E275, E279, E411.10).

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Alternately it could be that the grass growing over the place of a Famine death preserves the imprint of that tragedy, and through some supernatural means—such as contagious magic—place becomes empowered to subject passersby to the original victim's suffering. At such a spot, it is as if the progression of time halts, standing as still as place is immobile, leaving the Famine tragedy to play on a continual loop, absorbing new participants who stray into this unfortunate place-time collision. Any instance of the hungry grass, then, would be referred to as a “chronotope” by Mikhail Bakhtin or a “placeworld” by Keith Basso—a spot in the landscape where time, place, and event collapse into a kind of continual happening.

Of course, there are other folk etiologies of the hungry grass, but upon examination, the surface differences may mask deeper structural similarities. The second most popular theory in the available materials credits the fairies with either planting the hungry grass or turning grass hungry, as it were, at any spot where people have eaten outdoors but failed to leave a food offering or even let crumbs fall in tribute to the Good People. In Irish folk belief and narrative, the fairies comprise an alternate society parallel to our own. Countless fairy legends depict humans being rewarded for doing the fairies a good turn or being punished for crossing them; the idea of the hungry grass being retribution from forsaken, discourte-

ously treated fairies follows the same logic. As it is in the social contract between humans in this world, especially among the lower classes, mutually beneficial or at least peaceable human-fairy relationships in the world of narrative depend on unstinting generosity and generalized reciprocity. Fairy legends, then, offer a removed but relevant realm through which to contemplate proper social values and the consequences of transgressing them.

Perhaps the fairy explanation and the Famine explanation of the hungry grass co-exist because they are not necessarily in competition and may overlap conceptually. Indeed William Carleton carefully knits the two etiologies together in his short story “Fair Gurtha; Or, The Hungry Grass” published in the wake of the Famine. Both the fairy and Famine theories revolve around agents with whom no food is shared, and this causes a rupture and perhaps a permanent unluckiness in a world of limited good where open-handedness—or “dacency” as Carleton’s characters repeatedly refer to it—is required to keep luck in circulation and the bonds of community strong.

While a handful of archival and literary texts explain that the hungry grass occurs at places where a person met a violent or accidental death (a distant fourth most popular explanation), the third most popular explanation interprets the hungry grass as a place where a corpse was laid down on the way to a wake or funeral. That is, the deceased was only part way through traditional rites of passage, during a liminal travel event, and not yet properly and fully incorporated into the world of the dead. Often this corpse is described as “unshriven,” which is to say that the deceased had not been absolved of sin through confession and penance before death. This adds a layer of Roman Catholic association to the understanding that the deceased is in a vulnerable, liminal state and that contact with the earth gives rise to the hungry grass.

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Bear in mind that some reports of the hungry grass pre-date the mid nineteenth-century Famine, so perhaps we may see the Famine explanation as a novel iteration of an older idea that the hungry grass is caused by contact with someone whose death is somehow particularly calamitous—whether through untimely, tragic death or due to a failure to complete necessary rites, jeopardizing the soul of the deceased. As an ideal in Irish tradition, the “good death” includes being emotionally and spiritually prepared to die, typically at home among loved ones after a long life. This emic concept of the “good death” is still very much a part of wake and funeral customs and beliefs, in the same way, it would seem, that the emic concept of the bad death informs beliefs about the supernatural origin of the hungry grass.

Good and bad death are a part of life in every age, but it is hard to imagine a more relentless impetus for contemplating the circumstances, resonances, and repercussions of bad death than the Famine. More generally, there is good evidence to suggest that making that traumatic period meaningful at all—at the time and in subsequent generations—required creative recycling of previous, already meaningful representations of scarcity and social dissolution. Indeed, perhaps the severity of the mid nineteenth-century Famine would have required the *invention* of the hungry grass if it had not already existed to invite reclamation and repurposing.

True, this was not the first famine in Ireland, but the period from 1845 to 1852 was arguably the most severe. At any rate this period saw a rent in the *social* fabric that has never mended—a shocking blow to faith in the power of community or even common humanity. It bears repeating that the Famine was deeply divisive in pitting neighbors against neighbors among the lower classes while hardly affecting the rich at all. In fact, a striving merchant class—referred to derisively as Gombeen men—profited from rising prices and exploitative money-lending during the distress, and in the aftermath medium and large farmers consolidated wealth in form of cheap, newly available land. There is plenty of blame to lay at the feet of a British colonial system that engineered or at least abetted such a vulnerable society, then did next to nothing in effective relief efforts. During this period, the island had in fact been full of every kind of food except the staple diet of the poor, the potato, thus calling into question whether we can even call this period a Famine instead of a class-specific Starvation. But the case for criminal neglect founded on prejudice or, at the very least, self-interest is far easier to make than genocide, which includes murderous intent.

Considering the hungry grass in the context of vernacular discourse about the Famine expands our interpretive possibilities by providing a context for how the phenomenon was interpreted in the post-Famine period. Though debated, one observation commonly made today is that there was widespread official silence about the Famine for decades afterward, and that the folklore record, which should offer the unofficial grassroots perspective, is sparse and terse but not so much quiet as enigmatic, requiring special hermeneutic efforts to “hear.” There are comparatively few songs about the Famine from the period, and the few that came later, such as “Skibbereen” (published 1880), are clearly shaped by a nationalist move to simplify complex causes and assign blame solely to the British and/or Anglo-Irish establishment. In large part, the range of legendary materials representing the Famine are fragmentary, coded, indirect, and often opaque. One could explain this in demographic terms, in that those in the best position to bear witness were either dead or had emigrated. Or the relative lack of narratives or—more accurately perhaps—their unconventional nature could be interpreted as a problem of representation. That is, extraordinarily traumatic experience is not easily represented in conventional narrative, so we may be confronting the poverty of language to convey certain types of experience, an artistic problem we also find in the prospect of representing the Nazi Holocaust.

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Given that context, the belief that the hungry grass was a result of Famine deaths may speak volumes that cannot be expressed fully in a more expository way. Consider that the post-Famine narrators of hungry grass experiences—such as William McLaughlin, quoted earlier—had inherited a decimated world full of largely reticent or at the very least unnerved survivors. Reticent why? If I survived but my neighbors did not, could I have done something more for them? Was it the food that I stole for my family—or that I hid or refused to share—that made the difference between life and death for my neighbor in a world of limited good? Perhaps there is room to see something like a collective survivor’s guilt at work in post-Famine conceptions of the hungry grass. Such guilt would be collective on the part of the survivors themselves and of their descendants, who would have inherited certain beliefs, customs, and ways of talking directly and indirectly about the undead past, inscribed in the landscape that endures.

The experience of the hungry grass and its narration may predate the Famine, but it is notable and telling that the dominant popular etiology in available records connects it to the Famine. It would seem that on some level, for some people, the hungry grass offers itself as a vernacular means to remember and indirectly contemplate the *social* implications of the Famine. Thinking of the somatic experience as a matter of feeling what Famine victims felt—but neither I nor my ancestors, who were spared, did—may render the hungry grass a kind of Famine starvation *couvade*. Here is a phenomenon that may be interpreted as a matter of experiencing vicariously, even empathetically. It is an experience—perhaps like a penance, or at least an acknowledgment—that may help expiate the ambient, if unspoken, sense of guilt among those who survived and their descendants.

This proposal, whatever its merits, brings to mind a moment at University College Cork, nearly a quarter of a century ago, when I was an American undergraduate on a study abroad program taking a class taught by the late Professor Donnchadh Ó Corráin. I remember that during class discussion one of the students made a case for how the Irish were uniquely victimized by the Famine and the lack of an adequate British response. Ó Corráin—perhaps contrarian by nature and certainly not one to be satisfied with a simplistic nationalist spin—pushed back, declaring competitive victimhood exercises unproductive and unenlightening. More pointedly he gravely intoned, “Listen, *survivorship means having blood on your hands*. Everyone in this room—except possibly him [he gestured to me]—is the descendant of Gombeen men or people wealthy enough not to have been touched by the Famine.”

To be clear, my ancestors—Famine-era emigrants to the United States though they were—are no more innocent of blood on their hands than yours. (Our Civil War, Reconstruction, Gilded Age, and each successive age has offered their own hearts of darkness, to be sure.) Back in that moment at UCC, I understood Professor Ó Corráin to be making a rhetorical point not to be taken entirely literally. But his arresting retort was nothing if not a gobsmack to us all. If a morsel of oatbread could have dispelled the gut wrench of it all in the silence that ensued, we would have been glad for the relief. But relief was not on offer, and some things are unforgettable even if—or perhaps because—they are difficult to articulate. With such things in mind, today I have to wonder if the popular interpretation of the hungry grass, as haunting Famine echo, is a vernacular way—for some people, at certain times—of reiterating Professor Ó Corráin’s uncomfortable point.

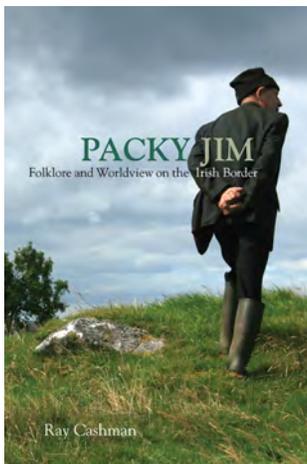
Whether interpreted in light of the Famine or not, the hungry grass collapses past and present to bear witness to dreadful ruptures in our obligations to each other, in this society or between us and those in the parallel society of the Otherworld. In our attempts to understand queer notions and resonant stories that circulate, there may be room to interpret the hungry grass in terms of postmemory, in terms of the return of the repressed, or in terms of any number of contemporary metaphors for grappling with trauma and the undead past. But we are far from the first ones to undertake such grappling. The hungry grass endures, not least because, generation after generation, it offers itself for creative recycling in popular thinking about self and society, right and wrong, the ordinary and the extraordinary, this world and the next—a body of vernacular theory otherwise known as folklore.

- 1 The Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1971), founded and directed by James Delargey (Séamus Ó Duilearga) and modestly funded by the fledgling Irish Free State, employed full- and part-time collectors to gather and preserve the traditional, vernacular expressive and material culture of Ireland (folklore and folklife). Today the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin combines IFC and later materials in one of the world's most extensive traditional culture archives, recognized in 2017 by the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.
- 2 One of the Irish Folklore Commission's successful schemes, the Schools' Collection disseminated surveys to roughly 5,000 primary schools and depended on teachers to organize the materials collected by senior students from their families and neighbors in their home districts. Go to <https://www.duchas.ie/en> to search the Schools' Collection and additional materials from the National Folklore Collection. This digitization initiative, the Dúchas.ie Project, is a collaboration between the NFC, the National Folklore Foundation, and the Digital Library at UCD; Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge, Dublin City University; and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.
- 3 See, for example, *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* (1847, London: Simms and Mintyre) or "Phelim O'Toole's Courtship" in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, volume 2 (1844, Dublin: William Curry Jr. and Co.).
- 4 Canon John O'Hanlon (aka Lageniensis) (1870) *Irish Folk Lore: Traditions and Superstitions of the Country, with Humorous Tales*. Glasgow: Cameron & Ferguson.
- 5 William Wilde (1852) *Irish Popular Superstitions*. Dublin: James McGlashan.
- 6 Donagh McDonagh (1947) *The Hungry Grass*. London: Faber & Faber.
- 7 Richard Power (1969) *The Hungry Grass*. New York: Dial Press.
- 8 I am grateful to Jonny Dillon of the National Folklore Collection for his observations on special sods in Irish folklore. Camden refers to the sites of accidents where an offending sod must be removed and properly dealt with to avoid fairy enchantment and future misfortune at that spot. Other special sods include those where one is destined to die (mentioned in the Ulster Cycle as well as in more contemporary lore) and the stray sod where people lose their bearings, a sod that has been enchanted by the fairies or that actuates, for lack of a better term, at the site of a tragic death or unconsecrated burial.
- 9 Deborah R. Davis (1996) "Famine Ghosts and the Féar Gortach: A Strand of Irish Belief" in *Folklore Forum* 27/2, pp. 39-52.
- 10 Rónán Ó Gealbháin (2004) *An Féar Gortach*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Irish Folklore Department/Roinn Bhéalóideas Éireann, University College Dublin.
- 11 Stith Thompson (1955-1958) *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*, 6 volumes. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 12 Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- 13 Keith Basso (1996) *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- 14 William Carleton (1856) "Fair Gurtha; Or, The Hungry Grass. A Legend of the Dumb Hill" in *Dublin University Magazine* 47, pp. 414-435.
- 15 The phrase "in a world of limited good" invokes George Foster's 1965 observation that in the vernacular social theory of many traditional societies one encounters the shared postulate that there is a finite amount of good in the world so that one person's gain entails another's loss ("Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good" *American Anthropologist* 67/2, pp. 293-315). Such a perspective reinforces a conception of community as a social contract for mutual aid, one that reinforces generalized reciprocity. The prospect of community, then, is threatened by any breach of this social contract, including the efforts of any person to advance his or her own interests too far, which is understood to come inherently at the expense of others.
- 16 Ray Cashman (2006) "Dying the Good Death: Wake and Funeral Customs in County Tyrone" in *New Hibernia Review* 10/2, pp. 9-25.
- 17 Niall Ó Ciosáin (2004) "Approaching a Folklore Archive: The Irish Folklore Commission and the Memory of the Great Famine" in *Folklore* 115/2, pp. 222-232.
- 18 Cormac Ó Gráda (2000) *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 19 Niall Ó Ciosáin (1995) "Was there 'silence' about the Famine" in *Irish Studies Review* 13/4, pp. 7-10.

## Ray Cashman



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Daniel MacDonald  
(1821–1853) "The Discovery of the  
Potato Blight in Ireland," c. 1847,  
oil on canvas.

Image courtesy of the  
National Folklore Collection

# Sacred sites, holy wells and pilgrim paths: revivals in Irish religious tradition?

by Anne O'Connor



Ladywell Shrine, Dundalk, County Louth.  
Photo: Adrienne Leavy

## Introduction

In this paper, I wish to suggest that there are many ways of seeing and understanding the mixed messages that we use, and have used, in examining the 'sacred sites, holy wells and pilgrim paths' of Ireland. For example, there is the mystical approach, the religious view, the sceptical and critical view, the dismissive view, the deconstructed and political approaches, and the romanticised view. Arguably they all have their place in contributing to our complicated worldview, opinions and attitudes. So much depends on how we see. All the various approaches offer us a glimpse of some aspect of a greater cosmos, an inherent complexity and ambiguity, a world of infinite possibility. As a folklorist, I am interested to understand the importance of sites and features of the Irish landscape which are, or have been, considered to be sacred by Irish people at different times over our multi-layered history on this island. There is a very rich and abundant body of folklore, in terms of beliefs, practices and oral literature, concerning sacred places in Ireland. The primary source for this oral traditional material is the National Folklore Collection, housed at University College Dublin (UCD). Secondary literary printed and online sources augment this material.

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Space does not permit me here to present a full description of the various popular beliefs, practices and oral legends associated with sacred sites, holy wells or popular pilgrimages in Ireland; instead I seek to explore the diversity of the material and its representation in various (inter)disciplinary approaches to these subjects.

## I Sacred landscapes and pilgrim paths

The concept of the sacred landscape, and of the 'sacredness' of trees, waters, and stones in particular, is attested in many different cultures and traditions, not least in the North-west Atlantic coastal cultural area. In their book *Sacred Waters, Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland*<sup>1</sup> Janet and Colin Bond, as in many of their other publications, attest the healing powers attributed to sacred springs, rivers and lakes and the pre-Christian evidence for water cults in these islands.

Similarly, Lawrence J. Taylor, in *Occasions of Faith, An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*<sup>2</sup>(1995), speaks of the 'sacred geography' of the holy well in Ireland. Taylor locates this discussion in an ethnographic religious approach, and having studied the material in the folklore archives of the National Folklore Collection at UCD, he shows a deep appreciation of the importance of folklore in the understanding of Irish religious tradition and practice.

In *The Art of Pilgrimage*,<sup>3</sup> Phil Cousineau describes a 'pilgrimage' as a sacred journey, a 'spirit-renewing ritual'. The aspect of the mystical and the sacred is inherent in the concept of a 'sacred landscape' where human beings can travel to an actual place or location that is believed to have an otherworldly or transcendent essence. The act of leaving one's home and travelling to a specific place is the essence of pilgrimage: the seeker thereby enters a liminal, transitional state as they journey towards their destination, whatever that may be. It could be a megalithic monument, a stone circle, an underground tomb, the site of an apparition of the Virgin Mary, or a healing well of spring water.

Peter Harbison (1991) in his *Pilgrimage in Ireland. The Monuments and the People*,<sup>4</sup> examines the concept of pilgrimage and its relevance for Ireland; places of pilgrimage within Ireland; and the 'things' or artefacts that are part of these places of pilgrimage. Similarly, Victor Turner and Edith Turner, in their book *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture, Anthropological Perspectives* (1978) state that:

*At the heart of pilgrimage is the folk, the ordinary people who choose a "materialist" expression of their religion. In other words, pilgrimage as a religious act is a kinetic ritual, replete with actual objects, "sacra", and is often held to have material results, such as healing.*

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Furthermore, they explore 'religion and nationalism in an archaic pilgrimage' in the case of St Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg in County Donegal. They cite Máire MacNeill's *The Festival of Lughnasa*, which the Turners term 'a fascinating study of Irish Christian syncretism' (p. 106). It was in 1962 that Irish folklorist Máire MacNeill published her pioneering study of *The Festival of Lughnasa, A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of the Harvest*,<sup>5</sup> a scholarly work on Irish calendar custom, and more specifically on of the famous 'quarter-days' of Irish tradition (namely, Imbolc, which became St Brigid's Day,<sup>1<sup>st</sup></sup> February; Bealtaine (1st May); Lúnasa (Harvest, beginning of August; and Samhain (1st November)).<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that in examining the Irish folklore evidence concerning Lúnasa, the celebration of the Harvest, that MacNeill was consciously defining this material as 'survivals' of an ancient 'Celtic' festival. Perspectives on such 'survivals,' and indeed on 'Celticism,' have changed in folkloristics since then.

## II Folklore

Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*<sup>7</sup>, which remains arguably one of the most important manuals for folklore researchers in Ireland, covers fourteen chapters, addressing all aspects of life, living and lore. Folklore, or 'folk tradition', is oral, traditional, anonymous and it varies in transmission: it is dynamic, and changes in its journey from one person, group and generation to another. While folklore is expressed by individuals, it comprises a substantive body of collective and shared belief and custom, as against singular or individual experience on its own, which amounts to an easily recognisable body of popular belief and tradition. In many ways, the Irish word, *béaloideas*, describes this concept beautifully: oral wisdom or knowledge. Ó Súilleabháin's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* is generally acknowledged by Irish folklorists as comprising the extent and depth of the subject.<sup>8</sup> Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, in his article on *béaloideas*,<sup>9</sup> provides a comprehensive history of the word.

As folklorists, we know how 'folklore' can sometimes be misunderstood. Of course, we are all biased in some way or another, and self-reflexivity is now fully acknowledged; indeed, unique personal perspectives used in self-awareness can further deepen the insights gained. So for the purposes of this paper, I intend to eschew the question as to whether or not we can determine that there was, or that there remains, a distinctly 'Celtic' Christianity or even a distinctly 'pre-Christian' religious and spiritual inheritance still traceable in Ireland through the use of folkloric 'survivals'. Because I am more interested to explore the meanings that we are today ascribing to the place of such spirituality in our lives, and to how these meanings and interpretations can inform our construction of our own personal and cultural identity. It is evident that for many people the spiritual connections to place and landscape are fundamentally important: such strong associations have the power to affect us as we journey through life. As I have said elsewhere:

*Irish religious lore and legend, as an integral part of Ireland's cultural heritage, has much to reveal to us about the stories we choose to tell and pass on, as part of our ongoing engagement with who we think we are, our identities, and how we seek to represent ourselves in the world.*<sup>10</sup>

Irish folklorist Dáithí Ó hÓgáin was born and raised with an abiding intuition and understanding of Ireland's complex spiritual inheritance. An inheritance at once pagan, Christian and pre-Christian, Celtic and pre-Celtic: it is truly an interweaving of many strands of spirituality, as Seán Ó Duinn has called it, a place 'where three streams meet' – the megalithic, the Celtic and the Christian.<sup>11</sup> Ó hÓgáin in *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in pre-Christian Ireland*,<sup>12</sup> combines the testimony of modern Irish folklore with the evidence of the land itself. In this way a multi-layered appreciation is garnered which underpins his particular approach to pre-Christian and Christian Ireland.

However, identity, and its formation and germination, is a complex process. Nationalistic nation-building and its consequences, especially in twentieth and twenty-first century human history, testify to the inadequacy of language to encapsulate the dynamics and potential dangers of 'easy' identification with nations, religions, or other 'causes'. Folklore has been proved to be a powerful agent in contributing to mass generalisations and stereotyping of whole swathes of humanity, depending on whether we consider races, genders, religions, nationalities, etc., and this is an ongoing process. Because folklore is a dynamic process, it is not just about 'gathering up the fragments' of the past,<sup>13</sup> though that has been important also; but,

more so, it is about how human beings communicate, remember, celebrate, castigate, and above all, relate, to each other. So folklore can be used for various purposes. In addition, it can be a cyclical process: where ‘traditions’ once held sacrosanct can be discarded or superseded by new ‘traditions’, which themselves will possibly be resurrected or ‘revived’ in time. The social and historical context is central to this process, despite the seeming ‘ahistorical’ nature of folklore.

### III Sacred Waters and Holy Wells

It is generally estimated that there are ‘circa three thousand holy wells’ in Ireland, though this is sometimes contested: we actually cannot be sure how many there were as many are now in ruins in the landscape.<sup>14</sup> Ó Súilleabháin (1942) references ‘holy wells’ thirty-six times in his *Handbook*, and the Irish Folklore Commission (precursor of the National Folklore Collection) issued a Questionnaire in 1934 to folklore correspondents throughout the island of Ireland on the topic of ‘holy wells’<sup>14</sup>

When Diarmuid Ó Giolláin wrote his ‘Revisiting the Holy Well’ article for *Éire/Ireland* in 2005, he noted that ‘six books and a few articles’ had been published in the previous ten years on ‘Irish holy wells or patterns,’ themselves testimony to a growing interest in this area in the new millennium<sup>15</sup>. Ó Giolláin presented a comprehensive review of this literature, and indeed of all significant previous literature on the topic up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is an essential guide to Irish holy wells and associated sites.<sup>16</sup> He further noted that most of these ‘recent’ publications were analytical, reflecting the perspectives of specific disciplinary approaches, saying that ‘the study of the pattern has thus benefited from the application of the methods of anthropology, archaeology, comparative religion, folkloristics, history, and sociology.’<sup>18</sup> Ó Giolláin critiques this literature in some detail, presenting the reader with a plethora of fascinating insights and raising questions about potential influences and developments. Focusing on Carroll (1999), Taylor (1995) and the Brennemans (1995), the author examines in detail the nature of Irish religious tradition, discussing the inheritance of the ‘devotional revolution’ of the nineteenth century and the role of the Roman Catholic clergy in the suppression of violent and ribald behaviour at ‘patterns’.<sup>19</sup> Ó Giolláin concludes this paper in outlining how further research in this area might be advanced: namely, by examining the Patterns and Holy Wells with Irish and international calendar custom; and by examining the associated Saints with the Holy wells and patterns in each locality. The ‘Pattern’ is the name in Ireland given to a ritual performed in honour of a Saint at a sacred site, which often includes a holy well, and possibly also other features, such as a sacred tree or certain stones or symbols.<sup>20</sup>

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In her Introduction to *Fish, Stone, Water: holy wells of Ireland*,<sup>21</sup> Angela Bourke explores the meaning of holy wells and sacred places for Irish people, discussing some of the ‘origin legends’ of these wells and their associations with native Irish saints, predominantly. The characteristics of the well, its water that could not be boiled, the sacred trees whose wood would not burn, or the mystical fish in the well, for instance, are all motifs from folk belief which heighten the mystical associations of the holy well; and its associated stones, trees and other aspects of the ritual topography of the site. Bourke reminds us that both blessings and curses could be said at such places, where rituals, ‘rounds’ (*turas* in Irish) were the norm

in the recent folklore collected in Ireland from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. These ‘rounds’ comprise a procession of people revisiting various parts of the site, and were often made at such sites on the Saint’s feast day, drawing crowds of people to perform certain rituals such as drinking water from the holy well, saying prayers (such as the Rosary) or making offerings and seeking healing or forgiveness. Many such pilgrims left symbols of their illness behind at the sacred tree, such as crutches, bandages, ribbons etc., and the tree was often known as the ‘rag tree’ for that reason.

Bourke concludes that:

*Places of pilgrimage have always been what cultural critics call contested sites – places whose ownership and meaning can shift – for they are at once central and peripheral, often on boundaries and therefore capable of accommodating ambiguity, paradox and change. Holy wells which have apparently been abandoned may be rediscovered when new spiritual needs arise, so some are now centres of devotion for those who find mainstream religious practice corrupt and hope for a return to conservative authority, while others are the focus of New Age practices or celebrations of the Mother Goddess.*

It is important to realise that folklore is not ‘history’. For example, the historian James Rattue, in his Introduction to *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context*,<sup>22</sup> when speaking about the collections of popular customs of the later nineteenth century by ‘folklorists’, states:

*Not only were the folklorists tabulating popular customs and beliefs at a time when those subjects appeared to be of no historical importance. But their whole approach was alienating to the historians. The folklorists tended to universalize their discoveries, regarding the ‘survivals’ of ancient custom as the untainted relics of a pure antiquity, and extending the motifs they found still in existence backwards to a prehistoric past.*

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While there is indeed some truth in the statement that the nineteenth century folklorists were largely influenced by the prevailing romanticism of the period, nevertheless, it is to be argued that theirs was a process of discovery, or re-discovery, and a necessary part of an evolving growth in understanding and appreciation of ‘popular’ belief and custom, including storytelling, music-making and craftsmanship.

In the intervening thirteen years since Ó Giolláin wrote his ‘Revisiting the Holy Well’ article, many other individuals have contributed to the diverse and inter-disciplinary nature of the literature of Irish sacred sites, both from an analytical and a popular perspective. This literature now extends beyond the range of disciplines cited by Ó Giolláin (‘anthropology, archaeology, comparative religion, folkloristics, history, and sociology’<sup>23</sup>) to include ethnology, cultural studies, cultural and human geography, Pagan and New Age writings.

#### IV Irish religious tradition

The phrase which I am using in this essay, ‘Irish religious tradition,’ could also be called ‘Irish spirituality’ or ‘Irish folk religion’, or indeed ‘vernacular religion’. Arguably all such concepts are concerned with the lived religious experience of Irish people in any specific time or place. As I have stated elsewhere, Irish religious tradition is predominantly Roman Catholic in ethos, with a blending and melding of folk belief and official doctrine.<sup>24</sup> Irish religious folklore requires to be situated in its social and historical context, highlighting the special significance of post-Tridentine Counter-Reformation Catholic teachings in Irish folklore.<sup>25</sup>

*‘Folk religion,’ that frequently contested concept, concerning ‘the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion’<sup>26</sup> represents a blending, or sharing of orthodoxy and popular belief and practice. As Diarmuid Ó Giolláin suggested, there is a ‘continuum of the sacred from official religion to folk-religion’ which indicates that the nature of this inter-relationship in the modern state is deserving of special scrutiny.<sup>27</sup> Irish religious lore and legend reveals something of the hidden lives of Irish people in their oral narratives which were so often communicated from one individual, group, and generation to another, primarily in their own homes and communities. Indeed, Irish religious folklore reveals the ‘collective unconscious manifested in narrative’<sup>28</sup> in a particularly vivid way, ‘religious identity, as part of cultural identity, is created through a dynamic process, and popular religious legend contributes to this process.’<sup>29</sup>*

Marion Bowman, in her research in folklore and religious studies uses the term ‘vernacular religion’ as originally coined by Leonard N. Primiano,<sup>30</sup> saying that ‘Primiano emphasises the need to study “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret and practice it” (Primiano 1995, 44).<sup>31</sup> With emphasis on *human expressions of belief*, Bowman addresses one of the central challenges for folklorists in the twenty-first century, saying that ‘folklorists no longer regard their primary work as salvaging survivals or plotting prototypes’.<sup>32</sup> But rather, folklorists must now adopt a more nuanced and creative approach, observing ‘whatever constitutes reality for a particular group or person...[to engage in] studies that allow us to see how theory is put into practice, how beliefs impact on different aspects of life, the ways in which worldview must affect, and be expressed in, everyday life.’<sup>33</sup> Referencing the renowned Finnish folklorist, Lauri Honko, and his work, Bowman refers to the ‘multiple lives’ of folklore,<sup>34</sup> demonstrating how the process of folklore is often cyclical.

In examining sacred spaces, springs and pilgrim paths in Irish religious tradition, it must be remembered that folklore or oral transmission is not a linear process, but rather requires a realisation that cycles may repeat, themes, motifs and stories may overlap; and they may repeat or adapt to new circumstances; and that this process is always dynamic and constantly changing. This cyclical process is also evident in popular beliefs and practices, such as those we have been discussing, and therefore throughout the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first century we can see ‘revivals’ of ‘tradition’ as a current and contemporary phenomenon. For example, Irish ‘pilgrim paths’ are now to the forefront of cultural tourism,<sup>35</sup> and Darach MacDonald, in his *Tóchar, Walking Ireland’s ancient pilgrim paths*, (2013),<sup>36</sup> presents a travelogue for present-day pilgrims.

## V Conclusion - Sacred Landscapes, Devotional Landscapes, Therapeutic Landscapes

The interaction of human beings with their places of habitation, their landscapes, and the symbiotic relationship that exists between human beings and their landscapes, has been widely examined through various lens throughout history and throughout academic discourse. The importance of landscapes, whether seen as 'sacred', 'devotional' or otherwise, for individuals and groups of people, cannot be over-emphasised. Thinking in this area is also evolving and changing. Many new publications testify to the enduring power of the concept of the 'holy well' and its healing waters.<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, I wish to refer to some exciting developments in this regard. Since the early 1990s Cultural and Human Geographers have been investigating the concept and reality of 'therapeutic landscapes'<sup>38</sup> and Ronan Foley (2010 and 2011) examines the holy well as a 'therapeutic assemblage'.<sup>39</sup>

Drawing on many of the sources mentioned already, Foley revisits Irish holy wells from this perspective, saying:

*Lest it be thought that the holy well is a relict of the past, it has a contemporary relevance and performance as well. In looking at the resilience of the well through the lens of a therapeutic assemblage, mobilities of meaning and re-tellings of place-health identities all play a role. The mobility of the cure is tied to the waters of the place, both portable and potable, which can be consumed in situ, or equally importantly taken away as a general prophylactic in the everyday home of those too ill to come. Older performances of health have been augmented by new meanings, still with affective health values, as places of memorial, gratitude and supplication. More recently patterns have been revived at Tully and Faughert and are often celebrated by catholic and neo-pagan groups...In a new-age vision of spirituality, a concern with nature and new understandings of the sacred, often expressed in body-landscape-energy terms, find natural expression within holy well sites.<sup>40</sup>*

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It is apparent, therefore, that many holy well 'patterns' are experiencing a revival of interest and publicity today. This underlines the cyclical nature of folklore and the folk tradition as constantly changing and evolving process of communication and performance.<sup>41</sup>

- 1 Janet and Colin Bond, Sacred Waters, Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland, (London: Granada, 1985).
- 2 Lawrence J. Taylor, Occasions of Faith, An Anthropology of Irish Catholics, (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1995).
- 3 Phil Cousineau, The Art of Pilgrimage, (San Francisco: Conari Press, 1998, 2012).
- 4 Peter Harbison, Pilgrimage in Ireland. The Monuments and the People, (Syracuse and London: Syracuse University Press, 1991).
- 5 Máire MacNeill, The Festival of Lughnasa. A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of the Harvest, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, reprinted 1982 by Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann).
- 6 See Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 'The Quarter Days in Irish Tradition', Arv 1959, 47-55.
- 7 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, The Handbook of Irish Folklore, (Dublin: The Folklore of Ireland Society 1942).
- 8 Seán Ó Súilleabháin's A Handbook of Irish Folklore (1942) is accepted as the definition of folklore in Ireland, and it forms the basis for the indexing system of the National Folklore Collection now housed at University College Dublin (UCD).
- 9 Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, 'Notes on the History of a Word', Béaloideas 70, 2002, 83-98.

- 10 Anne O'Connor, *The Blessed and the Damned: Sinful Women and Unbaptised Children in Irish Folklore*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 210; see also, Anne O'Connor, *Child Murderess and Dead-Child Traditions, A Comparative Study*, *Folklore Fellows Communications* 249, (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1991).
- 11 Seán Ó Duinn, *Where Three Streams Meet*, (Dublin, 2000); see also Michael Maher, (ed) *Irish Spirituality* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1981).
- 12 Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in pre-Christian Ireland*, (Cork: The Collins Press, 1999).
- 13 This is the motto of An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann, see <https://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/ga/ancumann/>
- 14 Ríonach uí Ógáin, in a lecture on 23 September 2017 entitled 'Leigheas na Muintire sa Deasgháth agus sa Phaidir: Toibreacha Beannaithe i gCorca Dhuibhne' as part of the Céiliúradh an Bhlascaod celebration presented some hitherto unpublished folklore material from the 1934 Questionnaire in the NFC as well as photographs and literary references.  
Please refer to [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie) for images of circa three hundred holy wells from the NFC.
- 15 See NFC Manuscript 468; See also Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, 'In Correspondence with Tradition: The Role of the Postal Questionnaire in the Collection of Irish Folklore,' in *Northern Lights, Following Folklore in North-Western Europe, Essays in honour of Bo Almqvist*, Séamas Ó Catháin (ed) (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001), 215–228.
- 16 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'Revisiting the Holy Well', *Éire/Ireland Volume 40:1&2, Earrach/Samhradh/ Spring / Summer 2005*, pp.11–41: see references contained therein as follows : Walter L. Brenneman Jr., and Mary G. Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle at Holy Wells of Ireland* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Susan Connolly and Anne-Marie Moroney, *Stone and Tree Sheltering Water: An Exploration of Sacred and Secular Wells in County Louth* (Drogheda: Flax Mill, 1998; Michael P. Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion*, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Healy, *In Search of Ireland's Holy Wells* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001); Anne Rackard and Liam O'Callaghan, *Fish, Stone, Water: holy wells of Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press); Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *The Holy Well Tradition: The Pattern of St Declan, Ardmore, County Waterford, 1800-2000*, *Maynooth Studies in Local History* 45, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002).
- 17 See also Patrick Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980) which provides a compendium of material about holy wells and their associated pilgrim rituals with many descriptions of stories, beliefs and practices associated with the wells throughout the country.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.5.
- 19 Ó Giolláin, *op. cit.*, 2005, 29.
- 20 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'The Pattern,' in *Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850*, J.S. Donnelly and Kerby A. Miller (eds) (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 201–222.
- 21 Angela Bourke, 'Introduction' to *Fish, Stone, Water: holy wells of Ireland*, by Anna Rackard and Liam O'Callaghan, (Cork: Atrium, 2001), 11.
- 22 James Rattue, *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press: 1995), 2-3.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.5.
- 24 Cf. Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, *Léachtaí Cholm Cille VIII; Ár nDúchas Creidimh*, Má Nuad, 1977; cf. Taylor, L.J., *Occasions of Faith, An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*, Dublin, 1995.
- 25 Anne O'Connor, 'To Hell or to Purgatory? Irish Folk Religion and Post-Tridentine Counter-Reformation Catholic Teachings', *Béaloideas* 2012, 115-141.
- 26 Don Yoder, 'Toward a definition of folk religion', in *Western Folklore*, vol. 33:1, (Jan. 1, 1974, 2-15), 14.
- 27 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'Perspectives in the Study of Folk-Religion', in *Ulster Folklife* 36, 1 (1990 66–73) 67; 'The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland', in Narváez, P. (ed.) *The Good People*, Kentucky, 1991, 199–214.
- 28 Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, 'The Word, the Lore and the Spirit: Folk Religion and the Supernatural in Modern Irish Literature', in R. Welch, (ed.) *Irish Writers and Religion*, Dublin 1992 43-61, (59).
- 29 See O'Connor, *op.cit.*, 2005, 63ff.
- 30 Leonard N. Primiano, 'Vernacular religion and the search for method in religious folklife', *Western Folklore* (1995), 54 (1), 37-56.
- 31 Marion Bowman, 'Vernacular Religion, Contemporary Spirituality and Emergent Identities, Lessons from Lauri Honko', *Approaching Religion*, Vol. 4., No. 1, May 2014, 101-113; see also, Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk, (ed.s), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, (Sheffield and Bristol: CT, Equinox), 2012.
- 32 Bowman, *op. cit.*, 2014, 111.
- 33 Bowman and Valk, *op. cit.*, 2012, 2.
- 34 See for example, Lauri Honko, 'The Folklore Process,' originally published in 1991 and re-published in 2013 in *Theoretical Milestones: Selected Writings of Lauri Honko*, in Pekka Hakamies and Anneli Honko (ed.s),

- Folklore Fellows Communications, 304, (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica), 29-54.
- 35 The Sunday Times 18 February 2018.
- 36 Darach MacDonald, *Tóchar*, Walking Ireland's ancient pilgrim paths, (Dublin: New Island, 2013).
- 37 See for example, Gary R. Varner, *Sacred Wells, A Study in the History, Meaning, and Mythology of Holy Wells & Waters*, (Baltimore, USA: Algora Publishing, 2002 and 2009); Celeste Ray, 'The sacred and the body politic at Ireland's holt wells', *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 62, Issue 205-206, September - December 2011, 271-285, and 'Paying the Rounds at Ireland's Holy Wells', *Anthropos* 2015, 415-432; Walter L Brenneman, 'The Circle and the Cross: Reflections on the Holy Wells of Ireland', *Natural Resources Journal*, 45, (Fall 2005), 789-805; E. Moore Quinn, "'All the Themes of Hagiography": An Turas Cholm Cille Revisited', *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Geimhreadh / Winter, 2010, 9-26.
- 38 First coined by William Gesler in the early 1990s, see for example, 'Therapeutic landscapes, medical issues in the light of the new cultural geography', *Social Sciences and Medicine* 34 (7), 1992, 735-746, cited by Ronan Foley.
- 39 Ronan Foley, 'Performing health in place: The holy well as a therapeutic assemblage', *Health & Place*, Volume 2, Issue 17, 2011, 470-479. Accessed: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1353829210001759> note that Foley includes an ordnance survey map of holy wells in Ireland on page 472; see also, Ronan Foley, *Healing Waters, Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland*, (Geographies of Health Series), (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2010); Ronan Foley, 'Small health pilgrimages: Place and practice at the holy well', *Culture and Religion*, 2013, Vol. 14, No. 1, 44-62,
- 40 Foley, op. cit., 2011, 477.
- 41 See Anne O'Connor, review of *Blood Rite: The Feast of St Martin in Ireland*, by Billy Mag Fhloinn. (Folklore Fellows Communications 310, (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2016), in *Béaloidéas* 85 (2017), 312-318.

## Anne O'Connor



Anne O'Connor holds a Ph.D. in Irish and international folklore, as well as BA, MA, MBA degrees and an MSc in Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Anne's primary research areas focus on women's folklore, Irish religious belief and narrative, spirituality and perceptions of the Otherworld and the supernatural, as well as storytelling, memory, and identity.

Her pioneering work in collecting traditions of childbirth in Ireland and in focussing on the representations of women in Irish and international folklore began in the late 1970s and is still ongoing. In addition to many scholarly journal articles, reviews, book chapters etc., her published work includes two monographs: *Child Murderess and Dead-Child Traditions, A Comparative Study*, Folklore Fellows Communications Series 249, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 1991 (her doctoral thesis); and *The Blessed and the Damned: Sinful Women and Unbaptised Children in Irish Folklore*, Peter Lang AG, Bern 2005; as well as a co-edited collection with Anne Markey, *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin 2014. Anne is a member of the editorial board of *Béaloidéas*, the journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society. She is also a board member of Fondúireacht Bhéaloidéas Éireann (The National Folklore Foundation).



St. Brigid's Well, Clondalkin, Dublin, c.1960, photographed by Caoihín Ó Danachair.

The well has been long associated with the cures for eye ailments. Recent field work records that the well is still frequented.

Images courtesy of the National Folklore Collection

A photograph showing four individuals in traditional mummer costumes standing in a misty, wooded area. The costumes are made of straw or hay, with some featuring animal heads and green cloaks. The background is a dense forest of bare trees under an overcast sky.

## Spotlight on The Armagh Rhymers: Dara Vallely in conversation with Adrienne Leavy

Photo Oisín O' Brien

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### Introduction

Dara Vallely is a renowned artist and musician who along with Peter J. Shortall and Brendan Bailey (**both now deceased**), founded the Armagh Rhymers in the late 1970s. One of Ireland's most celebrated traditional music and theatre ensembles, their mission is to continue the long tradition of folk drama or "mummers plays" that for centuries has been a vital part of Irish community life. In addition to performing at festivals in Ireland, the Armagh Rhymers have for many years engaged in cultural and educational work in Catholic and Protestant schools in the North. At the onset, working in a cross-community setting was highly sensitive if not indeed risky. The Armagh Rhymers were one of the first groups to work in this area in association with some courageous civil servants in the Department of Education. During this period many schools became involved in the Cross-Community Contact Program, a scheme by which Protestant and Catholic children were brought together in an agreed venue. The Armagh Rhymers often provided the common cultural experience for these children to come together to play, act, sing and dance. The group have performed at various international folk festivals throughout the world including China, Germany, Scotland and the United States. They have also received a UNESCO award for their work with the Armagh Observatory in a project that brings science and the arts together to promote peaceful relations. Vallely has served as the Artistic Director of the Armagh Rhymers since 1978.

- Q.** The masked tradition of rhyming with its unique blend of music, drama, song and dance dates back over 2,500 years. Could you speak to the importance of the mask to the performances of the Armagh Rhymers and to the Irish mumming tradition in general?
- A.** Masks are universal and timeless. For a young audience we introduce the mask gradually in our performances after we have set them at ease. When we tour other countries, we find evidence of the mask tradition, so the use of the mask can be a way to connect with a non-English or Irish speaking audience. We feel very much at home in the Dario Fo tradition of art and performance.<sup>1</sup>



Photo Oisín O' Brien

- Q.** You play several instruments including the Uilleann pipes, bodhran, tin whistle and flute. What other instruments does the group use in their performances?
- A.** We also incorporate fiddles and accordions into our performances. Poetry recital forms an important part of many of our performances, particularly the Ulster poets, Heaney, Montague, Hewitt and Longley. We work with excellent musicians and dancers.
- Q.** Obviously, custom, ritual and local practices are incorporated into mumming performances. When you go into schools, is it difficult to connect with contemporary students who perhaps have no background of knowledge of these traditions?
- A.** No, we have never found this to be the case. Really, our work in the schools is about cultural enrichment. We often find that when we perform in these venues or in hospitals and special needs schools, we may be performing in front of an audience who have not had much exposure to the arts. We try to interpret the tradition to make it enjoyable and accessible to everyone. All children, whatever age, enjoy and respond to fun and participation.

- Q.** Do the Armagh Rhymers continue the mumming tradition of visiting houses to perform during the Christmas season? If so, could you describe these performances?
- A.** Yes. In addition to performing at the graves of old rhymers in North Armagh, every St. Stephen's Day we visit the first Gaeltacht houses on the Shaw's Road in Armagh and we also perform at The Grange, which is just outside Armagh.
- Q.** Do the Armagh Rhymers host special performances to mark the four main traditional festivals: *Samhain* (Halloween); *Imbolg St. Brigid* (February 1); *Bealtaine* (May 1); and *Lúnasa* (August 1)?
- A.** For the past few years we have played at the biggest Halloween festival in the world which takes place in Derry. We perform at the Franciscan Priory in Armagh on St. Brigid's Day and sometimes at St. Bridget's Well in Faughart in County Louth. For these performances we wear masks with crosses on them to symbolize St. Brigid's cross. On *Bealtaine* we participate in fire jumping rituals at Knockmany Hill and Tullyhogue Fort. On *Lúnasa* we perform at Carrickatuke, which is a sacred site and believed to be the mystical home of King Lir. We have been influenced regarding celebrating these festivals by the great Tomás Mac Anna and Michael J. Murphy who together watched us in Dromintee primary school many years ago and gave us great advice.

Photo Oisín O' Brien



- Q.** The characters in mumming plays and stories include strawboys, wrenboys, biddymen, Halloween pranksters and Mayboys among others. Do you have a favorite character you like to play?
- A.** Many of our characters are like the mythological minotaur; half animal half human. I usually play the white or the brown bull from the *Táin*. My mask is the mask of a bull so in one sense I also represent the minotaur who had the head of a bull and the body of a man. My wife Anne Hart plays the horse goddess, so her mask is that of a horse. Armagh or Ard Mhacha is named after the horse goddess Macha.

- Q.** The masks worn by the Armagh Rhymers, which are made of flax, willow and straw, and both beautiful and quite intricate. Who makes the masks, and how long does it take to create them?
- A.** Our mask makers are Paul Carville from Derrymacash, Alison Fitzgerald from Ballyhegan, Bob Johnston from the Ulster Folk Museum, along with James Mulholland, from Aghagallon in North Armagh, who passed away two years ago- 14th December 2016. These artists are so well practiced in the art of mask-making that it takes them only a couple of days to create a mask. We supply folk and national museums around the world with our masks.



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Photos Oisín O'Brien



**Q.** In addition to acting out old stories and legends I understand that the group incorporates poetry into some performances, with reading of the work of poets such as Seamus Heaney, Brendan Kennelly, John Montague, John Hewitt and Michael Longley. Can you speak about the importance of poetry recitations to your work?

**A.** Mostly we recite poetry about the ancient tradition of rhyming. Montague, Heaney, Kavanagh, Hewitt and Longley have all written poems involving mumming and Irish folk traditions. For example, in his poem “The Last Mummer” Seamus Heaney describes the mummer as one who “Carries a stone in his pocket, / an ash-plant under his arm.” Montague references the Halloween rituals in “The Mummer Speaks”: “God save our shadowed land, / Stalked by this night beast of the dead / Turnip-roundness of the skull, / Sockets smouldering in the head...” John Hewitt has a poem about the Christmas Rhymers, called “The Christmas Rhymers, Ballyncure 1941: an old woman remembers”:

The Christmas Rhymers came again last year,  
wee boys with blackened faces at the door,  
not like those strapping lads that would appear,  
dressed for the mummers’ parts in times before,  
to act the old play on the kitchen floor...

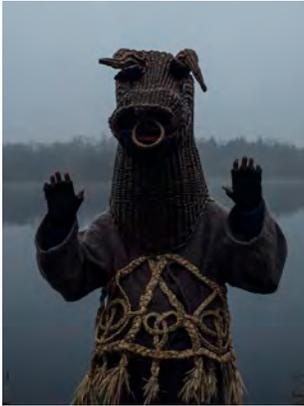


Photo Oisín O’ Brien

We also frequently include Brendan Kennelly’s poem, “The Wren Boy,” and Gabriel Fitzmaurice’s poem “Hunting the Wren.” More recently, we have become a subject in a poem about rhyming! Michael Longley’s poem “Room to Rhyme” which was written in memory of Seamus, refers to a performance we gave for Seamus shortly before he died:

I blew a kiss across the stage to you  
When we read our poems in Lisdoonvarna  
Two weeks before you died. Arrayed in straw  
The Armagh rhymers turned up at the end.

**Q.** The Armagh Rhymers describe themselves as “mummers, ballad singers, actors, musicians, dancers, storytellers and clowns.” How many performers does the troupe have?

**A.** There are a core group of four of us who perform on a continuous basis. Myself and Anne, who along with being an actor is also a director of the company and the office administrator. We are joined by Adam Costa, a classically trained violinist from New Zealand who is also a traditional fiddle player and actor, and Cormac O’ Briain, an uilleann piper and actor who for many years was a manager in a variety of Irish language organizations. For larger performances we draw on many other talented actors and musicians including Gerry Jones, a retired school principal, Ciara Cullen, a traditional Irish and Scottish step dancer who has performed with Riverdance, and Dr. Conor Cauldwell, a fiddler and the leading expert on Donegal fiddler, Johnny Doherty. Other past member of the group are Seamus Tansey, a flute player from Sligo, Margaret Berry a legendary folk singer, Eoin Kelly, Annie Callaghan and Sean Maguire. Our board of directors include: John McAllister author of the Barlow Books and our administration is handled by mother and daughter Liz and Karen Wasson



Photo Oisín O’ Brien



Photo Oisín O' Brien

- Q.** You recently collaborated with writer Réamonn Ó Ciaráin on *Laoch na Laochra! Cúchulainn: Ulster's Greatest Hero*, a retelling of the life story of *Cúchulainn*. Ó Ciaráin translated stories from the Ulster Cycle, including both *réamhscéalta*, the scenesetting stories, and sections from the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, into modern Ulster Irish language and you provided the paintings which illustrate the book.<sup>2</sup> To what extent if any is there an overlap of your work with the Armagh Rhymers and your collaboration with Ó Ciaráin on *Cúchulainn*?
- A.** The Armagh Rhymers have performed at different venues where the book was launched, incorporating the animals of the *Táin*, such as the bull, horse, water dog, horned cerannos, lugh and hound into the ritual through our masks. The art exhibition of my painting hangs usually for a month and is accompanied by an installation of masks with a DVD of our performance in the background. This exhibition has travelled from the Ulster Museum to Art Galleries in Strabane and Cookstown, as well as The Tain Arts Center in Dundalk and the Linenhall Library in Belfast. Future exhibitions will be in Edinburgh, London and Collins Barracks in Dublin and we will take the exhibition and the performance to the US in 2019 and launch the book there.
- Q.** Are there other rhymers in Ireland and if so, are their mumming practices different from those of the Armagh Rhymers? If so, could you describe some of these differences?
- A.** There is a strong tradition of mumming throughout Ireland which persists to the present day and each community has their own individual practices. For example, the Wexford mummers focus on historical performances. James Parle is involved with this group. In Sligo, Joe McGovern, author of a splendid book on the subject is also active. Fergus O' Flathery and Aóife Granville maintain a strong Wren Boy tradition in Dingle with the "Green and Gold," County Kerry. Paddy Murphy and Jim Ledwithe in Fermanagh run the Aughkillynamaud Mummies.



From left to right,  
Cormac O' Briain, Dara Vallely  
and Adam Costa.

Photo Oisín O' Brien

*Thank you, Dara.*

For more information visit <http://www.armaghrhymers.com>

E-mail: [info@armaghrhymers.com](mailto:info@armaghrhymers.com)

For information about Dara Vallely, the Armagh Rhymers and the history of mumming go to <http://www.daravallely.com/mumming.htm>

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- 1 Dario Fo was an Italian actor, playwright, comedian, singer, theatre director, stage designer and painter. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1997.
- 2 An English translation of *Laoch na Laochra* has subsequently been published: *Cúchulainn: Ulster's Greatest Hero*. Dublin: Gael Linn: 2017. A selection of Vallely's artwork from the book was published in the spring 2017 issue of *Reading Ireland*. A review of *Cúchulainn: Ulster's Greatest Hero* by writer Byddi Lee will be published in the fall/winter 2018 issue of *Reading Ireland*.

# Essay: Old Stories in New Forms: Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's Folklore Poems

by Adrienne Leavy

## Introduction

Born in Lancashire, England, to Irish-speaking parents, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (b.1952), is widely acclaimed as one of the foremost Irish-language poets of her generation and a major voice in Irish poetry. Raised in the west Kerry Gaeltacht, where she was sent to live with her aunt at the age of five, Ní Dhomhnaill subsequently spent several years living in Turkey with her husband, geologist Dogan Leflef, before they returned to Ireland with their four children. Ní Dhomhnaill's work displays tremendous lyrical range and a colloquial vigor that has its foundation in the original Irish in which she writes. Fluent in Irish, English and Turkish, Ní Dhomhnaill decided early in her career to write exclusively in Irish, and it is evident from her poetry that the Irish language is an enabling creative and psychic force for her work. Throughout her career, she has attracted the attention of major Irish poets who have striven to remain faithful to her poetry's energy and exuberance, where comedy and tragedy, past and present, often co-exist within the same poem. Michael Harnett, Ciaran Carson, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, John Montague, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin are just some of the poets who have translated her poetry into English in several dual language collections.<sup>3</sup>

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In "Ceist na Teangan"/ "The Language Issue," from *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990), Ní Dhomhnaill recognizes the potential pitfalls of her decision to write exclusively in Irish, comparing her poems to a fragile reed boat such as the one that carried Moses to the Pharaoh's daughter. As translated by Muldoon, she writes: "I place my hope on the water / in this little boat / of the language." Her poems may reach a larger English-speaking audience through translation, but the poet is uncertain, as the translated poem in the language boat is "borne hither and thither / not knowing where it may end up." Clearly the experience of reading Ní Dhomhnaill in Irish will differ in countless subtle ways from reading her in translation, no matter how faithful to the text or how skilled her translators are.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the present author is not fluent in Irish so the discussion that follows is based on a close reading of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems in their English translations and on the English language scholarship that her work has attracted.

Historically, Irish language writers have had a close connection to the folklore traditions of Ireland and Ní Dhomhnaill is no exception. A frequent visitor to the Department of Folklore at University College Dublin, Ní Dhomhnaill is well-versed in the traditions and oral folklore of the Irish-speaking communities in Ireland. Many of her poems draw upon this material in the process, telling "a story about how it happened / as long as your arm." When reading Ní Dhomhnaill one encounters banshees and mermaids, mythological warrior queens and goddesses, along with the poor old woman of Ireland – the Shan Van Vocht, and a host of other fairy folk. Notwithstanding that these personae challenge the rational, empirical world of English language poetry, the poet's aesthetic representations of the otherworldly

inhabitants of folklore are no Disneyesque fantasies. To the contrary, the dark undercurrents of Irish fairy lore are frequently used by Ní Dhomhnaill as a metaphor for personal trauma and the suffering endemic in modern society.

### **Social issues**

In Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry one finds traditional motifs and imagery co-existing easily with a contemporary, international sensibility. Her more overtly political poems share an affinity with Paul Durcan's caustic poetry about the shortcomings of modern Ireland. Her imaginative immersion in the world of Irish folklore does not prevent her casting her poetic eye further afield in poems such as "Black," a short poem which mourns the fall of the town of Srebrenica to Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995 that resulted in large scale ethnic cleansing. Neither are the darker aspects of Ireland's past whitewashed. In "Plútóiniam," translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as "Plutonium," the poet writes about "Seo radachur núicléach na Staire / ní foláir," the "radioactive rain / Of History" which brings to mind the oppressive activities of The Irish Missionary Society in the workhouses during the Famine.

Her creative use of folklore to address social issues is evidenced in her employment of the myth of the *changeling*, one of the most persistent folk beliefs in Ireland. A changeling child was believed to be a fairy child who had been left in place of a human child. The myth of the stolen child was often used to explain away childhood disabilities, diseases or unexplained disorders. Ní Dhomhnaill's poem, "An Bhatráil," translated by Muldoon as "The Battering," distills this belief and the rituals and cures used to reclaim the child. The poem opens with the speaker announcing that "thugas mo longhand liom aréir ón lios / ar éigean," she "only just made it home last night with my child / from the fairy fort." Rescuing her child, the speaker describes how "thairrigíos trí huairé é tré urla an tsnáith ghlais / a bhí i mo phóca agam," three times she "drew him through the lank of undyed wool / I'd been carrying in my pocket," whereupon she confronted a dark stranger at the entrance to the fairy fort and cut through a briar. Once the child is safely back in the home, the speaker "Tá fíor na croise bainte agam / as tlú na tine / is é buailte trasna an chliabháin agam," "made the sign of the cross / with the tongs / and laid them on the cradle." Part of the lore suggests that fairies were afraid of iron, so items such as tongs or scissors would frequently be laid at the foot of the cradle to protect a sleeping child. Thus far, the poem reads like a contemporary response to W.B. Yeats's poem "The Stolen Child." In Yeats's version, the child is lured away by the fairies with the promise of a better existence than the one he has on earth:

*Come away, O human child!  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than you can  
Understand.*

W. B. Yeats *Collected Poems*.

Ní Dhomhnaill's version, however, takes a more sinister turn, alluding to domestic violence and child abuse, as the speaker vows to defeat the fairies and the changeling:

Is má chuireann siad aon rud eile nach liom  
isteach ann  
an diabhal ná gurb é an chaor dhearg  
a gheobhaidh sé!  
Chaithfinn é a chur i ngort ansan.  
Níl aon seans riamh go bhféadfainn dul in aon ghaobhar  
d'aon ospidéal leis.  
Mar atá  
beidh mo leordhóthain dalladh agam  
ag iarraidh a chur in iúl dóib  
nach mise a thug an Bhatráil dheireanach seo dó.

If they try to sneak anything past  
that's not my own, if they try to pull another fast  
one on me, it won't stand a snowball's  
chance in hell:  
I'd have to bury it out the field.  
There's no way I could take it anywhere next  
or near the hospital.  
As things stand,  
I'll have more than enough trouble  
trying to convince them that it wasn't me  
who gave my little laddie this last battering.<sup>5</sup>

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### Representations of Women

Ní Dhomhnaill's poems routinely challenge the social, cultural and sexual boundaries that have historically been placed on women, and she is renowned for her use of folklore and mythology to redefine the representations of women and their experiences within the Irish poetic canon. As Clair Wills points out, within the Irish poetic tradition, "the woman writer must inevitably come to terms with the Catholic representation of the female as virgin handmaiden or equally desexualized mother, and with the nationalist trope of Ireland as the motherland."<sup>6</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill disrupts these tropes by celebrating female manifestations of love, whether they be erotic, unrequited, or maternal. Throughout her corpus there are poems where the desiring female praises her lover's body. Ní Dhomhnaill reverses the male gaze in poems such as "Oileán," translated by Montague as "Island," where the female speaker acknowledges her lover thus: "Oileán is ea do chorp / i lár na mara móire. / Tá do ghéaga spréite ar bhraillín / gléigeal os farraige faoileán" – "Your nude body is an island / asprawl on the ocean bed. How/ beautiful your limbs, spread-/ eagled under seagulls' wings!" In "Gan do Chuid Éadaigh," translated by Muldoon as "Nude," the female speaker does not shy away from her desire: "Is fearr liom tú / gan do chuid éadaigh ort –" which translates, "The long and short / of it is I'd rather see you nude –." In another reversal, "Fear," translated by Ní

Chuilleanáin as “Looking at a Man,” pictures a beautiful male figure as the female artist’s model and muse.

Critics such as Patricia Boyle Haberstroh have noted that “for Ní Dhomhnaill’s personae, sex involves choice, not obligation, as they actively pursue their roles as daughters of Earth.”<sup>7</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill’s unapologetic celebration of female sensuality in “An Bhean Mhídhílis,” translated by Muldoon as “The Unfaithful Wife,” calls to mind the celebration of female sexuality and agency found in Brian Merriman’s eighteenth-century masterpiece *Cúirt An Mhéan Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*). Merriman’s highly innovative, colloquial long poem revolves around a debate on the question of marriage which is by turn a bawdy, comedic satire and an astute social and psychological analysis of relationships between the sexes. In “The Unfaithful Wife,” the speaker describes how by chance she met a man in a pub who started flirting with her. After a few drinks, he offered to leave her home, and along the way they pulled into a lay-by and had sex. At the poem’s conclusion, this wife is not suffering the pangs of guilt:

Do bhuaileas suas an casán  
lem scol amhráin is lem phort feadaíle  
is níor ligeas orm le héinne  
an eachtra a bhí laistiar díom.

As I marched up my own garden-path  
I kicked up a little dust.  
I burst into song and whistled a tune  
and vowed not to breathe a word  
to a soul about what I’d done.

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Her poetry further challenges patriarchal culture from the standpoint of the double outsider as she is a female poet who also writes in a minority language which is not the language of power. Typically, Ní Dhomhnaill’s strong female speakers refuse to have a male discourse superimposed upon them. Angela Burke points out that “in Ní Dhomhnaill’s work, women speak for themselves.” Bourke continues, “most of her poems have a first-person narrator who by the act of taking voice and claiming traditional language as her own offers a radical re-reading of oral tradition about women.”<sup>8</sup> A representative example is “*Féar Suaithinseach*,” translated by Heaney in *Pharaoh’s Daughter* as “Miraculous Grass.” The poem is based on several well-known folk stories about a young girl who falls deadly ill during her first Holy Communion. Upon seeing the girl, the priest drops the sacred communion wafer, and the church where this incident occurred subsequently falls into ruin. The poem is deliberately ambiguous as to whether the gaze of the priest was sexual or not; however, both his gaze and the act of dropping the communion host have traumatic effects on the girl, who falls ill and remains confined to bed, refusing to speak. The first three stanzas describe the incident and the shame that lurked in her heart “like a thorn under mud.” In the final stanzas the girl, who is now a young woman, recovers her voice and directs the men to search for the the lost communion host within the church ruins: “Is ins an ionad inar thit / an chomaoine naofa féach go mbeidh / i lár an bhiorlamais istigh / toirtín d’fhéar suaithinseach.” “And there where the sacred wafer fell / you will discover / in the middle of the shooting weeds /

a clump of miraculous grass.” The girl further directs that the priest who dropped the host must now come and give it to her. In the traditional versions of this story, the priest gives the girl Holy Communion and she makes a complete recovery, but as Bourke reminds us, “she never speaks.”<sup>9</sup> In Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem, the young woman takes control of her own recovery and rescue from starvation by directing the men in her community where to find the lost host and by commanding the priest to finally confer the sacrament of communion upon her.

Ní Dhomhnaill also draws on powerful women from Irish mythology and legend, including warrior goddesses and queens. Boyle Haberstroh writes that “images of the Great Queen, Mór, and Badb appear in many of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems, showing up in both their life-giving and their death-giving forms, when Ní Dhomhnaill restores the goddesses to the independent and active roles they once had.”<sup>10</sup> Through these persona Ní Dhomhnaill explores gender and political oppression in both pre-Christian and contemporary Ireland, and in the process, positions the female in traditional male territory. In “Labhrann Medb” / “Medb Speaks,” Ní Dhomhnaill recasts the quest of the mythic Irish queen Maeve from the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, when she declares war on the men of Ireland, who are dismissed as “na leaids ag na cúinni sráide / is iad ina luí i lúib i gceas naíon,” - “corner boys / lying curled in children’s cradles.” Medb seeks respect, “ach éiric atá míle uair / níos luachmhaire, mo dhínit;” which she recognizes is “an honour-price / a thousand times more precious” than the brown bull of Cooley.

Not all female speakers in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry are heroic or strong. She also writes sympathetically about the struggles of ordinary middle-aged women, such as the woman in “Éirigh, A Éinín,” translated by Hartnett as “Celebration.” In this poem, a woman is pictured pushing a pram containing her handicapped child along the sand dunes, “a stocáí laisteacha ag cur uirthi ag an dteas / cé gur mheasa go mór ná san, dar léi, an tinneas / óna féitheoga *varicose* dá mbainfeadh sí iad anuas,” “her elastic stockings killing in the heat, / but even worse, she’d know greater pain / without them from her varicose veins.” The proud, contentious, lonely figure of her aunt Elly Ní Dhomhnaill is the subject of “In Memoriam Elly Ní Dhomhnaill (1884-1963).” Despite her many flaws, which are enumerated in this poem, the poet admires her aunt’s courage in standing up to the dominant Catholic hierarchy in mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Refusing to be shamed for not contributing to the church’s upkeep, her aunt is described as defiantly attending weekly mass, “fad a nglaoití amach ón altóir / ‘Elly Ní Dhomhnaill – dada.” – “awaiting the call from the altar, / ‘Elly Ní Dhomhnaill – nothing.” In “Fionnuala,” one of the three cursed Children of Lir describes life after her transformation into a swan. It is a life “a d’fhág lasmuigh den dtairseach teolaí sinn, / ag caoi ar locháin reoite; / a chuir lasmuigh de pharaiméadair na daonnachta sinn,” – “That left us outside that warm threshold / Wailing on frozen lakes, / That put us beyond the bounds of humankind.”

### Animal Transformation

Another common folk belief involves animals who have the ability to take on human shape. The long poem, “An tEach Uisce,” translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as “The Water Horse,” concerns the legend of a horse that lives in water who can take the male form when he emerges on land to associate with humans. Cary Shay explains the story thus:

In these legends adult humans often attempt to tame the water horse in order to get them to perform work. Water horses also try to lure children to mount and once they are on the horse, they find that they cannot free themselves. Eventually the horse will drag the child into the water to be drowned.<sup>11</sup>

When appearing as a human the water horse usually retains vestiges of his original form, most commonly his horse ears.

In Ní Dhomhnaill’s version, repressed sexuality and a desire to escape from the confines of family are important themes. The poem begins with a young girl fantasizing about the mythical stranger: “Ar dtúis ba cuid taibhrí amháin / a thagadh sé chun luí léi.” – “At first it was only in her dreams / That he came and lay with her.” Soon after, when she was out in the fields charged with minding the cows, the water horse appears to her, and although he reminds her of a creature from a B movie or *King Kong*, she welcomes his attentions. With repeated visits their intimacy grows, and he asks her to comb his hair. Upon doing so the girl discovers seaweed and other underwater items growing in his hair, and realizes the danger she is in: “Thuig sí láithreach cad a bhí suas / is nár mhaith an earra é.” – “She guessed at once what was going on / And that it was bad news.” Frightened, she escapes and attempts to tell her family about her experience. The poem then shifts from the pastoral scenes between the girl and the water horse to a darker scene, reminiscent of the village mob scene in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, where fear of the other, and the dangerous force of tribal instincts, dictate the community response. Although no harm had come to the girl, the family react with violence, “is ritheadar amach ina mbuíon armtha / ar tí a mharaithe.” – “And out they went as an armed patrol / To find and kill him.” The poem ends with the girl alone, dreaming once more about the stranger, her desires for sexuality and selfhood unresolved:

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Thar aon ní do chuimhnigh sí ar mhatáin  
Iallaithe a choirp a bhí chomh haiclí  
Is chomh teann le bogha i bhfearas.

More than all else she remembered the muscular  
Weave of his body that was tense  
And light as a tightened bow.

As Shay notes, “it turns out to be a mistake for the girl to appeal to the authority of her family in the midst of her fears: because their impressions overwhelm hers, she is left deprived of her desire, and retains only memories which mesmerize her.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Lost Island**

Another departure from her female-centered poetry, *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992), translated by Muldoon, contains a series of fourteen poems entitled *Immram / The Voyage*, that tell the story of a magical island, *Oileán Draíochta/ the Isle of Enchantment*, that appears and disappears off the west coast of Ireland. As Eric Falci tells us, “the existence of otherworldly, blessed islands off the western coast – usually referred to as ‘An Bhreasail’ or ‘Hy-Breasil’ – has long been part of Gaelic Folklore, and they were represented on many maps up until the modern period.”<sup>13</sup> Irish legend describes this phantom island in the Atlantic as being cloaked in mist, except for one day every seven years when it becomes visible. The island represents mystery and wonder, and there are many stories about attempts to reach the island by mortals. The sailors in “Beirt Fhear” / “Two Men,” argue about whether to throw coal or sod on the island as they make their approach; however, as they discover, it may appear tantalizingly close, but the island is forever out of reach to those who try to sail there. In “An Tonn” / “The Wave,” a woman attempts to ride a horse onto the island in the seventh year, when she thinks it will be almost completely clear of sorcery, with disastrous consequence for herself (mental illness), and the horse (who was severed in two by a wave). “Teist Mhuintir Dhún Chaoin ar an Oileán” / “The Testimony of the People of Dunquin,” takes as its inspiration oral narratives on Hy-Breasil collected by the National Folklore Commission.

Many critics have commented on the synergy between the poetic voices of Ní Dhomhnaill and Muldoon in this volume, characterizing the collection as more akin to collaboration than strict translation. The linguistic dexterity, wit, sensuality and sheer irreverence that characterizes much of Ní Dhomhnaill’s work is also present in Muldoon, and this aesthetic mirroring can be seen clearly in two poems, “An tOileán” / “The Island,” and “Poiblíocht” / “Publicity,” where Ní Dhomhnaill wryly comments on the modern society’s commercialization of sacred sites. In “The Island” a crowd gathers on the coast to view the island and the Guards are called to maintain order. She writes: “Dúnadh an bóthar sa tranglam / ach roimhe sin / dhein lucht díolta uachtar reoite is sceallóg / a mbuilín orthu” – “In the midst of all this confusion the road was closed / though not before / the ice-cream and fish-and-chip vendors / had made a killing.” Similarly in “Publicity,” where the Taoiseach opens a new Heritage Center, “Díolann tú dhá phunt (leathphraghas : pinsinéirí is leanaí) / chun taispeántas a fheiscint / ar oileán nach bhfuil ann,” – “you pay two pounds (half-price for kids and OAP’s) / to see an exhibition / about a non-existent island.”

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### **Mermaids**

There are numerous legends in Irish folk tradition about mermaids, and one of the most popular concerns the mermaid who was brought to live on land by a human male who later married her. Bo Almqvist recounts the following short version collected in English from Glenbeigh, County Kerry, which was written down in 1937 and is archived in the Schools Collection in the Irish folklore Collection:

As a man was walking along the strand of Glenbeigh, he saw a mermaid sitting on a rock combing her hair. He stole over to where she was and seeing a little cap near her he took it, and the mermaid, looking around for her cap could not find it. By losing this cap she had also lost her power to return to sea.

The man then brought her home and married her. They lived happily together with their children for a long time until one day the man was cleaning the loft in which he kept his fishing tackle, he threw down the mermaid's cap. The minute she saw it she grabbed it and off with her back to the sea.

Her husband and her children were all very lonely after her.<sup>14</sup>

Ní Dhomhnaill used this folk legend of mermaid marriage as the basis for the poem, “An Mhaighdean Mhara”/ “The Mermaid,” which appeared in her first collection, *An Dealg Droighin* (1981). As she was to do later in “Féar Suaithinseach / Miraculous Grass” (discussed above), Ní Dhomhnaill changes the speaker of the tale from the third person to the first and lets the mermaid tell her own story:

Má tá eirebeall éisc féin orm  
nílim gan dathúlacht éigin.  
Tá mo ghruaig fada is buí  
is tá loinnir óm' ghainní  
ná chíféa riamh ag mná mhíntíre.

Though I've got a fish's tail  
I'm not unbeautiful;  
my hair is long and yellow  
and there's a shine from my scales  
you won't see on landlocked women.

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Other versions of mermaid legends inspire *The Fifty-Minute Mermaid* (2007), a series of poems about a population of merfolk who have morphed into human beings and now live on land. Collectively, these poems, which are translated by Muldoon, exemplify Máirín Nic Eoin's point that “Ní Dhomhnaill typically personalizes and psychologises the objective third-person accounts of the oral tradition.”<sup>15</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill uses the persona of an mhurúch (the mermaid), to explore issues of trauma, abuse and a loss of autonomy. A representative example is “An Mhurúch agus an Sagart Paróiste”/ “Mermaid with Parish Priest,” where in a scenario that could have been lifted from contemporary newspaper headlines in Ireland the merchild is sexually molested by the parish priest. Ní Dhomhnaill makes clear that in such cases the victim's trauma is often life-long: “B'in deireadh leis an Aifreann di. / Aon uair a théadh sí ina ghaobhar / do thiteadh sí síos fuar marbh le lagachar is fanntaisí.” “That was the end of Mass for her. / Any time she went next nor near the church / she would fall down in a fainting fit.”

In several of these poems Ní Dhomhnaill addresses the cultural trauma that occurs when a native language is lost. The merfolk struggle with assimilation as they try to adapt to a new environment. In their transition to dry land, the merfolk have forsaken music and literature,

which results in a collective, cultural amnesia and an inability to fully express themselves. “An Mhurúch agus Focail Áirthe”/ “The Mermaid and Certain Words,” becomes an allegory for the marginalization of the Irish language and Gaelic culture as the mermaid rejects the old traditions and superstitions of her race, favoring instead, the logic and rationality of her adopted home: “Aer, eolas, solas gléineach na heolaíochta / is ea a shantaíos-sa” – “Fresh air, knowledge, the shining brightness of science / are all I ever hankered for.”

The mermaids also function as metaphors for Ní Dhomhnaill’s family. In poems such as “An Mhurúch is a hIníon”/ “The Mermaid and Her Daughter” and “Fáidhiúlacht na Murúiche”/ “The Mermaid’s Gift of Prophecy” Ní Dhomhnaill confronts her mother’s decline and their painful shared history. In a later poem in the collection, “Filleadh na Murúiche ar an dTír-fó-Thoinn”/ “The Mermaid Returns to Land-Under-Wave,” her mother is the mermaid in the hospital, wasting away with dementia. The poet describes her mother’s condition thus:

Cé go raibh sí fós inár bhfianaise go corpartha  
bhí sé mar a bheadh seithe róin  
fillet go cúramach aici uimpi  
is í ag snámh amach in aigéan éigin fo-ininneach  
nárbh fhéidir le héinne againn í a leanúint ann.

Even though she was still physically in our presence  
it was as though she had wrapped a layer of sealskin  
carefully around herself  
and was swimming off in some deep subconscious ocean  
where none of us could follow her.

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At a later point in the poem the old mermaid wakes up and tells her daughter “your hair’s nowhere as red as it used to be,” before shutting down again. The poet describes the emotional struggle that is familiar to any family who have experienced the angry side of Alzheimer’s:

Táim fós ag iarraidh a dhéanamh amach  
ab ann ab amhlaidh gur aithin sí an lá ar fad m--  
is ná labhródh liom le teann pusa is mioscaise  
nó arbh é a bhí san abairt obann aonair úd amháin  
ná mar a bheadh bréitseáil míl mhóir os cionn an uisce.

I’m still trying to figure out  
if she knew all along who I was  
but wouldn’t speak to me out of sheer malice  
or if that single, sudden sentence  
was like a whale leaping and  
launching itself out  
over the ocean.

## Conclusion

Critics have long recognized the creative debt that Ní Dhomhnaill owes to Irish folklore; however, the debt goes both ways. Through her poetry, contemporary audiences can enter a world of oral Gaelic culture that has survived for centuries in communities and parishes throughout Ireland. This essay has only touched upon the myriad ways in which Ní Dhomhnaill conscripts the rich treasure trove of Irish folklore in the service of her poetic vision. It is clear however, that by retelling stories and myths in the context of confronting female stereotypes, social oppression, and the decline of the Irish language, her body of work demonstrates the continuing relevance of the rich vernacular traditions of Ireland.

- 1 The dual language collections are: *Selected Poems/ Rogha Dánta*, translated by Michael Hartnett and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1988; *Pharaoh's Daughter*, translated by thirteen Irish poets. Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 1990; *The Astrakhan Cloak*, translated by Paul Muldoon. Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 1992; *The Water Horse*, translated by Medbh McGuckian & Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Winston-Salem, NC.: Wake Forest University Press, 2000 and *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, translated by Paul Muldoon. Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 2007. Her poetry has also been translated into other languages including Turkish, which is a rarity for Irish language poets.
- 2 For a discussion on how English translations of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems not only amplify the original text but also at times disrupt the original meaning, see Eric Falci, "Ní Dhomhnaill along the spine" in *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010*. Falci argues that in the bi-lingual editions, "both sides of the text haunt each other," 156.
- 3 An Bhatráil/ "The Battering" by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, translated by Paul Muldoon from *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992). Reproduced by kind permission of the authors and The Gallery Press.
- 4 For a discussion on how English translations of Ní Dhomhnaill's poems not only amplify the original text but also at times disrupt the original meaning, see Eric Falci, "Ní Dhomhnaill along the spine" in *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010*. Falci argues that in the bi-lingual editions, "both sides of the text haunt each other," 156.
- 5 Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "The Battering" from *The Astrakhan Cloak*, translated by Paul Muldoon. Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 1992. *Reading Ireland would like to thank Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill for permission to reprint a substantial part of "The Battering" in Irish and The Gallery Press for permission to reprint the English language translation of these lines.*
- 6 Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 52.
- 7 Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 176.
- 8 Angela Bourke, "Fairies and Anorexia: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Amazing Grass'" in *Proceeding of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium, Vol. 13* (1993), Harvard, MA.: Department of Celtic Languages & Literature, Harvard University, 27
- 9 Bourke, 27.
- 10 Boyle Haberstroh, 166.
- 11 Cary Shay, *Of Mermaids and Others: An Introduction to the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill* (Dublin: Peter Lang, 2013), 206.
- 12 Shay, 216.
- 13 Falci, 175.
- 14 Bo Almqvist, "Of Mermaids and Marriages. Seamus Heaney's 'Maighdean Mara' and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'an Mhaighdean Mhara' in the Light of Folk tradition in *Béaloideas*, 58 (1990), 4.
- 15 Máirín Nic Eoin, "1998 *Cead aighnis: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill*" in *Modern Ireland in 100 artworks. Fintan O'Toole* (Ed.) (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 2016), 249.

### Further Reading:

Bo Almqvist, "Of Mermaids and Marriages. Seamus Heaney's 'Maighdean Mara' and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'an Mhaighdean Mhara' in the light of Folk tradition" in *Béaloides vol 58 (1990)*, 1-74.

Angela Bourke, "Fairies and Anorexia" Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Amazing Grass' in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium, Vol. 13 (1993)*, 25-38. Published by the Department of Celtic Languages & Literatures, Harvard University.

Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996)*.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays Oona Frawley (Ed.)*, (Dublin: New Island, 2005).

John Dillon, "Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill," in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets Gerald Dawe (Ed.)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

----"Writing by Night: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Dream Notebooks," in *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Eds.)*, (Winston Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2017).

Eric Falci, *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry: 1966-2010 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)*.

Linda, Revie, "Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Parthenogenesis': A Bisexual Exchange" in *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature Michael Kenneally (Ed.)*, (Dublin: Colin Smythe, 1995).

Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)*.

Cary A. Shay, *Of Mermaids and Others: An Introduction to the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (Dublin: Peter Lang 2013)*.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry collections can be ordered through The Gallery Press: <https://www.gallerypress.com> To purchase *The Water Horse* contact Wake Forest University Press at <https://wfupress.wfu.edu>



"St. John's Fireplace,"  
St. John's Eve. Athea, Co.  
Limerick, 23rd June 1960.

Image courtesy of the  
National Folklore Collection

## Spotlight on The Williamite Coat in the Louth County Museum

by Adrienne Leavy



Among the many interesting items on display in the County Museum in Dundalk, County Louth, is a leather jacket (or jerkin) worn by King William of Orange on the eve of the Battle of the Boyne on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1690. The history of the jacket is thought to be as follows: On the night before the battle, shots were exchanged between the warring sides with a shot catching King William in the shoulder. The story goes that a Colonel Wetherall rushed to the injured King to tend to his injuries. As a mark of gratitude for his prompt response, William gave Weatherall the jacket. The jacket was subsequently passed on from generation to generation of the Wetherall family, who happened to live in Ravensdale, County Louth.

The coat displays a great deal of wear and tear but not for obvious reasons. The first report of damage to the coat dates from the time of the Irish Rebellion of 1803 when a Baron McClelland came across two boys playing ball. He approached them, looked at the ball admiringly, and asked who had made it. He then asked from where they had obtained the leather. From the old leather coat in the garret came the reply. When it was confirmed that it was the thick leather coat McClelland expressed his hope that it was not King William's coat. This incident is further verified by the account of one of the boys, the young John O'Neill, who subsequently became a famous Irish engineer. As he recounts, O' Neill was

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“playing ball at the end of the old lapping room, which, had one window towards the road, and a much larger one toward the yard. It was the custom of the lappers when they went to breakfast at 9 in the morning to close the shutter of the window near the road so as to enable the men & the boys to play ball at the end. This I was doing one fine morning with a boy called Edward Duff, when we saw Baron McClelland walking down from the turn. When he came to us he looked at the ball & asked who had made it, it was so well done. I said Duff. He asked where we had got the leather & I told him that I had cut it off the sleeve of an old leather coat that was in the garret. He asked me if the coat was of thick leather. I said it was, then said I hope it is not King William's coat, but I could not tell whose it was.”

An early description of the jacket is contained in a report from the Newry Magazine of 1815 wherein Dr. John Spenser describes the jacket as follows:

A coat of buffalo-skin, worn by king (sic) William the 111, at the Battle of the Boyne, is now in possession of Robert Thomson, Ravensdale, Esq. It is perforated at the spot opposite the shoulder, in which the king had received a wound from a musket-ball. It was the property of the late Mrs. Mills (grand –aunt to Mr. Thomson) who died a few years ago, in extreme old age, at Ravensdale. This lady's husband had received it from colonel Wetherall, aid-de-camp to William, whose near relative he was. The colonel had aided it taking it off the king, with whose consent he had retained it, in memory of the transaction with his sovereign.

More recently, a folklore survey taken by the Folklore Commission at Dulargy National School in Ravensdale discovered that an employee of the family was dispensing cuttings from the jacket as one might distribute holy relics or talismans: The survey noted that “this relic was also known to a steward on the farm who was friendly with a great many people who were also interested in King William. He wished to give each one of them a memento.”

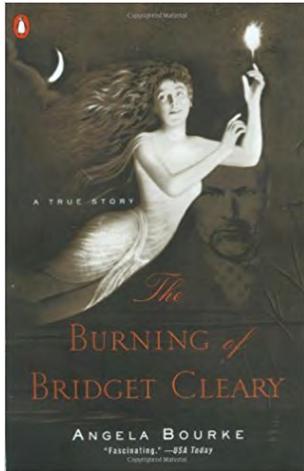
In July 2000 Mr. Robin Clutterbuck approached the County Museum and informed them that he had in his possession the leather coat which was reputed to have been worn by King William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne. According to Mr. Clutterbuck, the jacket had come into his family’s possession via his great grandfather, Julian Jocelyn of Tullymore, County Down. In 1926 Julian had inherited it on the death of Mr. Thomas Thompson, Ravensdale, whose family had been in possession of the coat for approximately 150 years.

The Williamite Coat is now on permanent display on the first floor of the County Museum in Dundalk, County Louth.

For more information about the museum and its collection visit [www.dundalkmuseum.ie](http://www.dundalkmuseum.ie) or call (011-353) (0)42 93 92 999

## Review: *Astride a White Horse*

by Declan Kiberd



*The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* by Angela Bourke.

London: Pimlico, 1999.  
ISBN 0-7126-6590-0

In the spring of 1998 a Dutch TV crew arrived in the parish of Moyvane, Co. Kerry. They were making a documentary about poetry and landscape, and interviewed a farmer about a fairy-mound in one of his fields near the village. He explained that for many local people it was a forbidden place, and that he had never dared to plough it over because of the distress it would cause. As he was saying this, his mobile phone rang. The TV crew carried on filming as he transacted his business. ‘Tell us, sir,’ the interviewer said when he’d finished, ‘a modern man like you surely does not believe in the little people.’ ‘Of course I don’t,’ he chortled. ‘But I’m very frightened of’ em.’

Angela Bourke, who was a colleague of mine when I was at University College Dublin, is one of the foremost commentators on Irish folk traditions. Her early work appeared mostly in Irish, but in recent years she has published a number of English-language papers on the “virtual world” of fairy legend. These legends are, for her, both striking narratives and a way for vulnerable people to negotiate a difficult environment. A sinister hand that emerges from the sea near a certain rock and drags fishermen from their boats is, for example, a persuasive way of representing the dangers of a treacherous stretch of water.

The interpretative tradition in which Bourke works is at least two centuries old. In Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) the narrator Thady Quirk advises his master Sir Condy against digging up a fairy-mound. The warning is rejected and the master “had no luck afterwards.” Like many country people, Thady sees no contradiction between the claims of rational analysis and those of folk belief, while Edgeworth enacts the contradiction in the formal division between her text and the scholarly notes she attaches to it. They order and survey, and what they survey is the speaker of the main text. But they also suggest that Tandy’s may be the better method – the fairy lore, it turns out, has a shrewdly pragmatic set of functions hidden within its rituals. Edgeworth remarks in one note that fairy-mounds often had riches of one kind or another concealed in them and the stories forbidding farmers to destroy them meant that they were more secure than banks. In a similar fashion, the waking of the dead could be seen both as a way of offering company to the recently deceased and as an unofficial coroner’s inquest. The Act of Union, passed in the year *Castle Rackrent* was published, implied that the voice of scientific realism should override the voice of magic – but it didn’t happen.

Even after the establishment of an independent Irish republic, many Irish people continued to subscribe, however skeptically, to fairy belief. When electrification reached the remoter parts of Co. Kerry in the late Forties, the old, familiar problem presented itself. Local workers were reluctant to lay poles across a mound and an enraged engineer refused to reposition his cables by going around it. Eventually, a gang of Protestant workers was bused in from co. Wexford and paid time-and-a-half – otherwise known as danger money – to complete the job. On the way home their bus crashed into a tree. Nobody was badly hurt but the striking Kerry workers had been vindicated.

These kinds of belief weren't confined to rural communities. The first major manufacturer of potato crisps was a firm called Tayto. It opened in Coolock, a suburb on the north side of Dublin, not far from Roddy Doyle's stomping ground, in the decade after World War Two. The factory is set back from the highway which runs past it and a grassy knoll – rather pretty, functions as a buffer between the industrial plant and the outside world. The knoll is a fairy-mound and the Murphy family who owned Tayto sensibly left it intact (land on the outskirts of Dublin was anyway dirt cheap). They soon became millionaires and their business went international.

The ease with which people have integrated fairy lore into more conventional systems of belief is striking. When J.M. Synge first visited the Aran Islands in 1898, he was astonished to learn that the islanders had a story that allowed them to assimilate the fairy faith to their Roman Catholicism: the vain Lucifer, seeing himself in a mirror, declared war on God and was thrown out of heaven, along with the bad angels. As they fell toward Earth, an archangel interceded, asking mercy for some, “and those that were falling are in the air still, and have power to wreck ships, and to work evil magic in the world.” The islanders made no distinction between the scientific and the magical: anything they could not understand was held to be the work of spirits or fairies. When Synge quickened a fire by holding a newspaper against the mouth of the chimney, a young woman called him a sorcerer: “It's to hell you'll be going by and by.” When the *De Profundis* was recommended to Synge to ward off evil spirits it was clear to him that the traffic also flowed in the opposite direction. Or in every direction: the spirit of Dracula, too, was also present on the Aran Islands, to the extent that a child taken by fairies was replaced by one with “a wound on its neck.” The islanders were well aware that their lore seemed ridiculous to outsiders. Protestants gave no credence to such things, they informed Synge, “and do be making fun of us.” But they insisted that the child had been taken away, body and soul, and that a replacement, which died some days later, had been left in its bed.

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The case of Bridget Cleary was far more shocking. In March 1895, three years before Synge went to Aran, she vanished from the house where she lived with her husband in County Tipperary. She was 26, good-looking, a fashionably dressed and forceful young woman who might have been taken for an early suffragist. She knew how to earn good money as a dress-maker and hen-keeper. Her husband Michael Cleary was an educated and literate cooper, whose services were much in demand by local businesses. He had served his apprenticeship in the progressive town of Clonmel and had good prospects. As a couple, they seemed the very image of a modernizing Ireland and were singled out by the authorities as suitable occupants of a new slate-roofed cottage in the area. On the other hand, unlike many other local people, they weren't afraid to live in a dwelling that was rumored to have been built on a fairy-mound. Undaunted, they moved in, along with Bridget's father, Patrick Boland, a landless laborer who must have taken pride in the improvement to his family's fortunes. All that was lacking was a child to bless the happy union.

The weather in March was bitter and Bridget fell ill. She had been on a visit to her father's cousin, Jack Dunne, when the fever struck. Dunne was a product of the older, oral culture, a gifted storyteller (*seanchai*) and an interpreter of charms, spells and incantations. The spread of literacy and the campaigns of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to root out “superstitious” beliefs among their flock had reduced the power that Jack Dunne and others had once wielded, but there was life in the fairy lore yet. Even as the priests sought to extirpate it, exponents

of the Irish Literary Revival, led by Yeats, were using the new powers of print to recirculate old legends and tales among a public that was having all the usual trouble adjusting to an increasingly urban way of life. Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* had appeared in 1888; his *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* in 1894.

Jack Dunne came to visit the sick woman and said quite simply: "This is not Bridgie Boland." The being before him in the bed was a changeling: the real Bridgie was away with the fairies. Michael Cleary insisted that his wife see a doctor. The nearest available was in Fethard, eight miles away, and often roaring drunk. Five days went by before he came to see the patient. He told the subsequent inquest that he had found her suffering from nervous excitement and bronchitis.

The cause of her nervous excitement can only be guessed at. Some local people claimed that she had been unfaithful to Cleary, who was often away at Clonmel. One possible lover was William Simpson, a man hated by many locals because he worked as a "heavy" for the landlord. Bridget, always a defiant individualist, did his shopping when local grocers refused to serve him. (This may have helped the couple secure the house from the authorities.) Another candidate was an egg-man with whom she dealt.

Whether these suggestions were true or not hardly matters. Cleary, increasingly exhausted, soon became susceptible to the idea that the sick woman was not his wife, though it may be that he found the very possibility of Bridget's infidelity so unbearable that he had forced himself some while back to believe that the perpetrator of such outrages could not be his wife. "He's making a fairy of me now," Bridget complained to her father's older sister: "He thought to burn me about three months ago." In folk belief, fairies were notoriously fearful of fire – and of priests.

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Before setting out for Fethard to get the doctor, Cleary had sent for Father Ryan. The priest stayed for less than half an hour, but was sufficiently worried to give the last rites to the patient. Cleary brought some orthodox medicines back with him from Fethard, but also some healing herbs (still widely used in Ireland). On seeing them, Dunne enthusiastically directed the exhausted husband to a local herbalist, Denis Ganey.

By now, Cleary was despairing of orthodox methods. He had fallen out with the doctor over his diagnosis and the priest was keeping his distance, refusing a further visit. In the midst of all this, his father died, and Cleary was unable to attend the wake, a painful dereliction of familial duty.

The herbs prescribed by Ganey were boiled *nús*, new milk from a cow that had just calved and rich in nutrients and antibodies. Three doses were force-fed to Bridget, who had to be held down by four men, including her father. Each time, Cleary asked the suffering woman whether she was his wife, Bridget Cleary. She screamed; he threw urine onto her; the men shook her and shouted: "Come home, Bridget Boland, in the name of God."

She was burned on the forehead with a hot poker. Next, she was held over the fire and asked: "Are you the daughter of Patrick Boland, wife of Michael Cleary?" "I am, Dada," she said to her father. The men brought her back to bed, where she lay in anguish, her clothes streaked with urine and soot. The men believed they had brought back the true Bridget.

The following evening the couple began to argue and the husband accused his wife of using spells. She said that Cleary's own mother had gone with the fairies and that this was the real trauma behind his allegations. Cleary, Bourke suggests, was deeply hurt by what she said, which not only reflected badly on his family but was also a comment on his fertility (another likely point of dispute between the two). He returned at once to his obsessive behavior, asking Bridget on three separate occasions to eat pieces of bread and jam and to confirm that she was his wife. Twice she complied: but the third time she refused. He knocked her down and threatened her with a burning stick. Her head struck against the floor and, seconds later, her chemise caught fire. Cleary threw paraffin oil over her and she burned to death. "You are a dirty set," Cleary said to her relatives in the room, claiming that they were happier to have her at the local fairy-mound than with him in the modern house.

He buried her in a shallow grave. Local people said she would reappear at the fairy-mound, astride a white horse. Cleary urged her relations to go with him to the mound the following Sunday, armed with knives to cut the straps binding his wife to the horse and rescue her from the fairies. By then, however, the police had found the body. Unionist newspapers found in it clear evidence that the rural Irish were still unfit for the responsibilities of self-government, a possibility then still under active consideration.

Bridget Cleary's husband, her father, aunt and four cousins were all charged in connection with her death. Cleary pleaded guilty to manslaughter and received a 20-year sentence; the various members of her family got off a bit more lightly. Father Ryan seemed to speak for the whole community when he asked how three or four of the dead woman's own relations could "go out of their minds simultaneously."

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What makes the case special is that it is the only documented account of the burning of an adult in 19th-century Ireland – there are numerous accounts of child burnings. Bourke writes with sympathy for everyone caught up in the affair. She is quite certain that Michael Cleary didn't think it was his wife that he was killing, taking a strong position against those who saw him as a murderer who cynically invoked the older codes in an attempt to white-wash his case.

In her version, Cleary is a harried man, isolated and relatively powerless among his wife's people; and despite his modern training, conscripted by an older ideology of stigma and control. His wife emerges as a classic strong woman of the 1890s, uppity and defiant perhaps, and shrewd enough to employ the residue of folk tradition for her own purposes. If Bridget Cleary did threaten to ride the white horse out of the fairy-mound, such a resort to the old lore would have offered this feisty but constrained woman a sense of real social power and an image to leave her husband and his male accomplices gaping in astonishment.

For Bourke, power is what this story is about and the many different ways in which it can be wielded. The authority of *seanchaí* like Jack Dunne was declining as the power of strong women like Bridget Cleary was on the rise; and the hysteria which grips so many of the males in the story (it immobilized the priest and the doctor, as well as others who might have intervened more forcibly) must have had some connection to a fear of the New Woman.

Yeats was very shocked by newspaper reports of the tragedy. He spoke in some worry to old tale-tellers, who assured him that the Tipperary people were quite wrong to attack and kill the “changeling.” In their view such behavior was a breach, rather than a true application of fairy lore. Yeats continued, therefore, to argue for a kinder, gentler, interpretation of such traditions; and undoubtedly a great deal of evidence could be adduced in defense of that view.

To say someone was “away with the fairies” was often a way of accepting and indulging patterns of eccentric or aberrant behavior in the lives of individuals who might otherwise be subjected to the harsher sanctions of clinic or prison. Stories about the replacement of children or young women by withered changelings can, similarly, be thought of as a means by which a people who worshipped youth taught themselves to cope with the harshly ageing effects of a subsistence rural economy or even, perhaps, with the crises of middle age.

Bourke sees fairy stories as negotiating the difficult, often dark, relations between everyday reality and some other, “hidden” world. Unlike the newspaper reporters of 1895, she prefers to speak of “fairies” rather than “witches,” precisely because in Ireland “fairy” is a convenient name for all those forces which cannot otherwise be explained. Another word would be “superstition.” It, too, has its dangers. “Used among equals,” Bourke writes, “the word expresses tolerance for illogical foibles; given a racist or sectarian edge, it can mark an unwillingness to consider those to whom it is applied as fully human.” She has little time for this and tries instead to see the protagonists as they saw themselves. In one sense, her method is similar to that of Sir. William Wilde who, in studying wasting illnesses in Irish children, placed the scientific and vernacular taxonomies side by side in his reports.

Sir William is famous in Ireland not just for being Oscar Wilde’s father but also for his suggestion that the best way to combat and discredit superstitions was to write them down and publish them. Bourke, on the other hand, hints at a preference for tradition. By comparison with the complexity of the folk interpretation of the Cleary outrage, the facts which were brought to light in court seem a wan and paltry accounting. And in portraying an Ireland in transition, Bourke can’t resist comparing the fairies with the increasingly powerful police constabularies: “Like the fairies, the police in late 19th-century Ireland were everywhere: they communicated secretly from stronghold to stronghold; moved unpredictably about the countryside; observed all that went on in the community; and intervened arbitrarily in its life.” Those who submitted to police training procedures returned as utterly “transformed” as those who had been away with the little people.

*The Burning of Bridget Cleary* is not history or folklore or cultural study, but a combination of all these things. It draws, as all such accounts must, on the documentary sources left by the winners of history, yet it submits each of these to the stiff interrogation of oral tradition. That tradition has its moments of barbarism, of which the killing of the Tipperary woman was one. It was also, at its best, a system of compassionate and intelligent restraints and regulations.

A tension still exists in Irish spirituality between the claims of Christian doctrine and the instinctual imperatives of popular belief. Even devout Catholics will submit some of the mystery of their religion to the mockery with which the Kerry farmer spoke of the fairies to the

Dutch television crew. All beliefs in spiritual matters are held with some mental reservation – which may be itself a form of sophistication. After all, Scott Fitzgerald defined a first-rate intelligence as the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the head without losing the capacity to function. Perhaps it was because the onset of modernity came at such catastrophic speed to Tipperary that people like Michael Cleary and his in-laws lost that skill.

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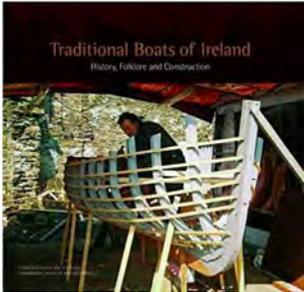
## Declan Kiberd



Declan Kiberd is Keough Professor of Irish Studies at Notre Dame University. His most recent book is *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present* (Harvard University Press 2018). He was for many years Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature at University College Dublin. Among his books are *Synge and the Irish Language* (1979); *Inventing Ireland* (1995); *Irish Classics* (2000); and *Ulysses and Us* (2009).

# Adrienne Leavy book review: *Traditional Boats of Ireland: History, Folklore and Construction* ed.

by Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh



ISBN: 9781905172399

In a comprehensive study aimed at both a specialist and a general audience, *Traditional Boats of Ireland* examines Ireland's legacy of traditional boats from the nineteenth century to the present day. A fundamental premise of the book is that Ireland's history and culture have been greatly influenced by the fact that it is an island nation situated in the north Atlantic. Vast areas of the country have historically relied on fishing to provide a livelihood, and on the sea as a means of transportation and communication. Drawing substantially on local knowledge and oral history, as well as archival and contemporary material, this meticulously researched study captures the rich and varied maritime traditions of countless generations of Irish people through direct engagement with the communities involved. As Mac Cárthaigh acknowledges at the onset, "recording the oral testimony of boat builders, boatmen, fishermen and others whose lives are entwined with the sea, was critical to the success of the project."

Organized geographically with extensive appendices, the volume contains fifty-one essays from thirty-six individual authors. A general overview of Irish fisheries and folklore traditions associated with boats and boatmen in the opening chapters provides a good introduction to the subject, before moving on to specifically focus on the following geographic areas: the North Coast Region; the West Coast Region; the South Coast Region; the East Coast Region; and the Inland Waterways.

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In his introduction, Michael McCaughan draws attention to the fact that vernacular or traditional boats are not standardized, industrially built, highly technological vessels. Instead, their designs typically evolve within communities and are almost unconsciously reproduced by boat builders. Bairbre Ní Fhloinn echoes this observation, noting like other vernacular artefacts, "such boats are not isolated creations, free-standing from the people and places that gave rise to them." Instead, she argues, "they are communal products, shaped by the livelihoods and interests, the values and beliefs, the customs and practices of the community." The emotional impact and aesthetic appeal of traditional boats is clearly illustrated, according to Ní Fhloinn, "by the many songs about boats which have been collected from oral tradition in Ireland," and by numerous stories and anecdotes, beliefs and practices, involving boats and fishermen. Many traditional prayers and blessings are also associated with the sea, including the following which Ní Fhloinn quotes:

Ag gabháil anon in áit go domhain  
A Rí na Foighne, glac iad ar láimh.  
Ar eagla buille na toinne tréan,  
A Mhuire, féach is ná fág.  
Going over the deep,  
O King of Patience, take them in your hand.

For fear of the blow of the terrible wave  
O Mary, look after them and don't desert them.  
(Traditional prayer, Corca Dhuibhne, County Kerry)

Geographically, the book surveys the whole island of Ireland, with case studies addressing a whole range of boats such as the Donegal Punt, the Achill Island, West Cork and Arklow Yawls, the Galway Hooker, the Lobster Boats of Heir Island and the Turf Boats of the inland waters. The historical background provided on boatbuilding in various counties underscores the point that the construction of boats was shaped by diverse factors particular to each community which evolved with time.

One of the boat types now unique to Ireland is the canvas-covered curach or "skin boat" found on the Atlantic seaboard. A section of the book describes how the curach has evolved over the past two hundred years in the different parts of Ireland, with individual chapters devoted to the curachs of Kerry, Clare, Connaught, Donegal and the Boyne River. As Mac Cárthaigh points out, "for many coastal and island dwellers of the west, it was the only boat they could afford or that they could make themselves."

A major strength of this book is its visual material. Sketches and notes by folklore and material cultural collectors of the 1930s and 1940s are expertly reproduced. Numerous photographs of fishermen, boatbuilders and individual boats, dating back as far as 1900 are prominent throughout the text, providing an extraordinary visual history of the fishing communities in Ireland from 1900 up to the present day. A series of appendices detail the construction plans of individual boats, meticulously recorded and drawn by Michael Tyrrell, along with a glossary of standard nautical terms and a glossary of vernacular nautical terms in Irish and Hiberno-English.

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This collection of essays provides the reader with a range of scholarship on Irish boats and boatbuilding within the broader historical context of the social, economic and cultural history of Ireland over the past century. Artfully arranged to showcase Ireland's diverse marine environment and its rich heritage of vernacular boat times, *Traditional Boats of Ireland* is essential reading for anyone interested in this topic.

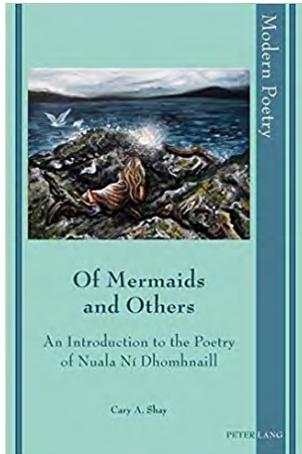


Landing the catch at Dunseverick,  
County Antrim, 1956.

Image courtesy of the  
National Folklore Collection

## Adrienne Leavy book review: Of Mermaids and Others: An Introduction to the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

by Cary A. Shay



ISBN: 9783035399592

This critical introduction to the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill is the first scholarly book length study by a single author to consider Ní Dhomhnaill's body of work in translation. As Cary Shay notes in her introduction, "Ní Dhomhnaill's transgressive voice is dynamic and far-reaching, both in Irish and through her engagement with translation" (p.15). The book opens with an overview of Ní Dhomhnaill's life and career, including her move from Lancashire, England, to the West Kerry Gaeltacht area at age five, her difficult relationship with her parents early in her life, her studies at University College Cork, where she studied under John Montague and Seán Ó Tuama, and her involvement at UCC with the *Innti* poets, Michael Davitt, Gabriel Rosenstock, Louis de Paor and Liam Ó Muirthile.

The book is divided into four substantial chapters which critically assess and contextualize her work in the following areas: the fraught issues of translating and contextualizing Ní Dhomhnaill's oeuvre; her use and revisions of Irish myth, folklore and political and religious ideology; her re-imagining of the mother figure in cultural and religious ideology; and the devices of death, silence and psychoanalytic discourse in her mermaid cycle and other poems.

Chapter one addresses some of the questions raised by the act of translating a marginalized language into a dominant one. The translation of Irish language poetry into English was a rarity before Thomas Kinsella and Seán Ó Tuama's groundbreaking volume, *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*. Published in 1981 by the Dolmen Press, the anthology consisted of a selection of translations of Irish poetry from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spanning the collapse of the old Gaelic order to the emergence of English as the dominant vernacular. Noting that Ní Dhomhnaill welcomes translations of her poetry and in fact allows the translating poets considerable leeway in how they approach the material, Shay acknowledges that for Ní Dhomhnaill, "translation is a necessary part of her primary aim of protecting Irish from total obliteration" (p.27). She also points out that while Ní Dhomhnaill's audience in English far exceeds that of her audience in Irish, the paradoxical effect is that access to the material in translation gives greater visibility to the plight of the Irish language.

This chapter also discusses some of the effects of the historical contingencies of cultural nationalism on the poet and her writing, in particular the feminized trope of Mother Ireland. Feminist thought and psychoanalytical theory, particularly the work of the French psychoanalysts and literary theorists Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are also employed as a means to understand how issues of gender, marginalization on the basis of her chosen language, and her decision to write in Irish, affect Ní Dhomhnaill's aesthetic.

Chapter two looks at the theme of motherhood in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. Shay argues that "Ní Dhomhnaill is a central figure in terms of interrogating and revising the figuration of the position of women in culture and the literary canon" (xix). In this chapter she discusses how the poet examines motherhood from several different perspectives, as she "symbolizes the mother-daughter relationship as both potentially positive and destructive and as a highly complex connection" (p.72). Ní Dhomhnaill's interrogation of the Catholic images of Eve and the Virgin Mary is analyzed in several poems, and notwithstanding the poet's challenge to the historical equation of the feminine with the maternal, Shay concludes that Ní Dhomhnaill's mother poems ultimately "give new life to the maternal" (p.116). The role of Jungian psychoanalysis in her work is also addressed, particularly with regard to the Jungian archetype of the Great Mother and his concept of individuation. Arguably, given his male-centered perspective, Jung's theories do not sit as easily within Ní Dhomhnaill's work as they do within the poetic canon of Kinsella, another Irish poet who has drawn extensively on Jung in his exploration of the psyche and the collective unconscious of the Irish race.

Chapter three pays detailed attention to the manner in which Ní Dhomhnaill draws on powerful women from Irish mythology and legend, exploring their sexual desires and restoring them to the independent and active roles they once had. In her prose as well as her poetry Ní Dhomhnaill has been a fierce critic of Irish cultural nationalism and the hyper-masculinity that often accompanies it, and the poems discussed in this chapter debunk this tradition as they demonstrate "discrepancies in the way mythological material has been understood and employed" (129). In several poems, the mythic figures of Medb, the Morrigan, and Mór Mumhan are imagined as being in the present. Shay considers how Ní Dhomhnaill aesthetic reimagining of these figures provide a structure for interrogating contemporary gender relations. In several of these poems, Ní Dhomhnaill provides a direct challenge to what Shay characterizes as the "misogynist use of myth, the exclusion of women from the canon, and the anti-feminine basis of patriarchal power in Ireland" (p. 130). In poems about Medb, the female protagonist in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, feminine anger at being marginalized is directed at the figure of Cú Chulainn. Another group of poems discussed in this chapter relate to Mór Mumhan, the tutelary goddess of Munster. Shay reads these poems as representing the fragmented nature of the female subject. She also discusses the manner in which Cathleen ní Houlihan, the symbol of Mother Ireland immortalized by W.B. Yeats in his play of the same name, is subject to Ní Dhomhnaill's clear-sighted gaze.

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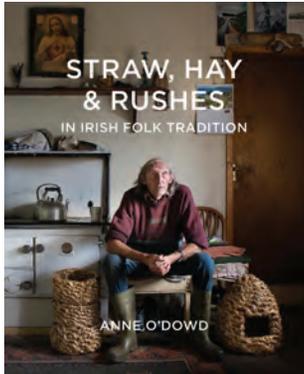
Expanding the focus from issues of translation and Irish language politics, chapter four is an analysis of the ways in which folklore motifs and stories facilitates Ní Dhomhnaill's exploration of the psychological difficulties of the individual subject. Shay argues that in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, such trauma can result in disassociation, paralysis and muteness. There are detailed readings of important poems such as "Féar Suaithinseach," translated by Heaney as "Miraculous Grass," and "An tEach Uisce," translated by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as "The Water Horse." Her thesis in this chapter applies particularly to Muldoon's translations of the poems in *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. Most of the poems in this collection deal directly with the folklore theme of the mermaid and Shay argues that "several of these are a metaphorical examination of what Ní Dhomhnaill sees as modern life in Ireland being lived in denial of the Irish language and the world she believes it encompasses" (p.226).

Throughout the book, Shay's close reading of Ní Dhomhnaill's work is both clear and insightful. Her careful research provides a deeper understanding and appreciation of the rich world of Ní Dhomhnaill's aesthetic vision. Ní Dhomhnaill's unique development of the tradition of Irish language poetry and her creative assimilation of Irish oral culture have made her a major figure in contemporary poetry, and the first Irish language poet to gain an international following. Her work deserves more scholarly attention, and *Of Mermaids and Others* is a laudable first step in that direction.

Recent folklore publications from Irish Academic Press

## Straw, Hay & Rushes in Irish Folk Tradition Anne O'Dowd

by Anne O'Dowd



It is sometimes easy to overlook the most common of objects and the careful craft that went into making them, such as a St Brigid's Cross hanging above a door, the wicker basket topped with turf at the hearth, or the quiet elegance of a thatched roof. Straw, hay and rushes were utilised throughout the centuries in Ireland for a myriad of such practical uses and rituals, developing an unprecedented store of domestic and agricultural objects abundant in function, folklore and beauty. Anne O'Dowd's exquisitely designed new book *Straw, Hay and Rushes in Irish Folk Tradition* celebrates and explores the rich history and tradition of this native craft, featuring almost 400 rare and unpublished images. This ornate, coffee-table book will be of interest to anyone with an interest in Irish arts, folklore, history and traditional crafts, and will be an essential and richly rewarding read. (Available from bookshops and [www.iap.ie](http://www.iap.ie), at €45)

About the book: From thatched roofs and domestic tools, Straw Boys, Wren Boys and Mummers, to the time-honoured rituals of harvest knots and sheafs, the practical and diverse adaptability of straw, hay and rushes is both fascinating and extensive. The people who produced and utilised these objects were both ingenious and economical, making use of readily available materials that were free and plentiful, and ultimately amenable to dexterous hands in making objects of purpose and incomparable beauty.

Anne O'Dowd's *Straw, Hay and Rushes in Irish Folk Tradition* details the historical context for the production of a broad range of practical and ceremonial objects, and the folklore of belief and custom associated with them. The thousand or so objects made from straw, hay and rushes held in the National Museum of Ireland's Irish Folklife Collection in Castlebar, Co. Mayo forms the basis for this beautiful book and its richly informative content. Adorned with hundreds of colour images and drawings, it presents a fascinating insight into Irish crafts and rituals and their ancient origins.

## Anne O'Dowd

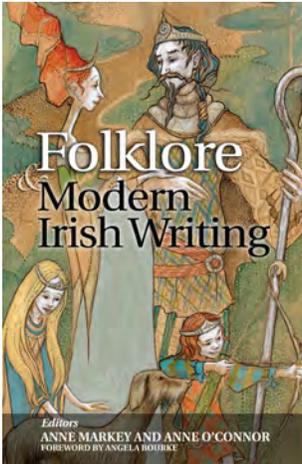


Born in Dublin, Anne O'Dowd's curiosity about rural Ireland was aroused after spending three weeks in the Gaeltacht on a Gael Linn scholarship, a curiosity that has still not been quenched even after extensive study, including a masters and PhD, the latter of which; *Spalpeens and Tattie Hokers - History and Folklore of the Irish Migratory Worker in Ireland and Britain* was published by Irish Academic Press in 1991. She recently retired from the National Museum of Ireland, where she was a Curator for more than thirty years. She continues to write on Irish folk life and also works on landscape design projects

Recent folklore publications from Irish Academic Press

## **Folklore and Modern Irish Writing**

Edited By Anne Markey and Anne O' Connor



Folklore and storytelling have had a huge impact on the development of Irish written culture, both of which contribute hugely to our national identity and are a key aspect of our international appeal. From Yeats to Heaney, J M Synge to Marina Carr, our writers have drawn from its well in terms of stories and themes, which have been given a new reading and interpretation. However, like our national identity itself, our national folklore collection and its scholarship are continuously evolving. Its relevance is constantly being reevaluated and reshaped as new generations of Irish writers draw from traditional narratives, beliefs and practices to create their own. This collection is a timely treasury for those interested in Irish writing, identity, life and ideas.

*Folklore and Modern Irish Writing* explores the fascination of Irish folklore and storytelling from the mid-19th century to the present day, which has captivated readers, writers, and scholars alike. *Folklore and Modern Irish Writing* provides us with an intriguing study of the complex relationship between oral traditions and the written word in Ireland. With contributions from leading Irish literary academics, the book develops existing studies and furthers our understanding of the nature and importance of Irish folklore, emphasising the inherent connection between oral narrative storytellers and literary storytellers.

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## **Anne Markey and Anne O'Connor**

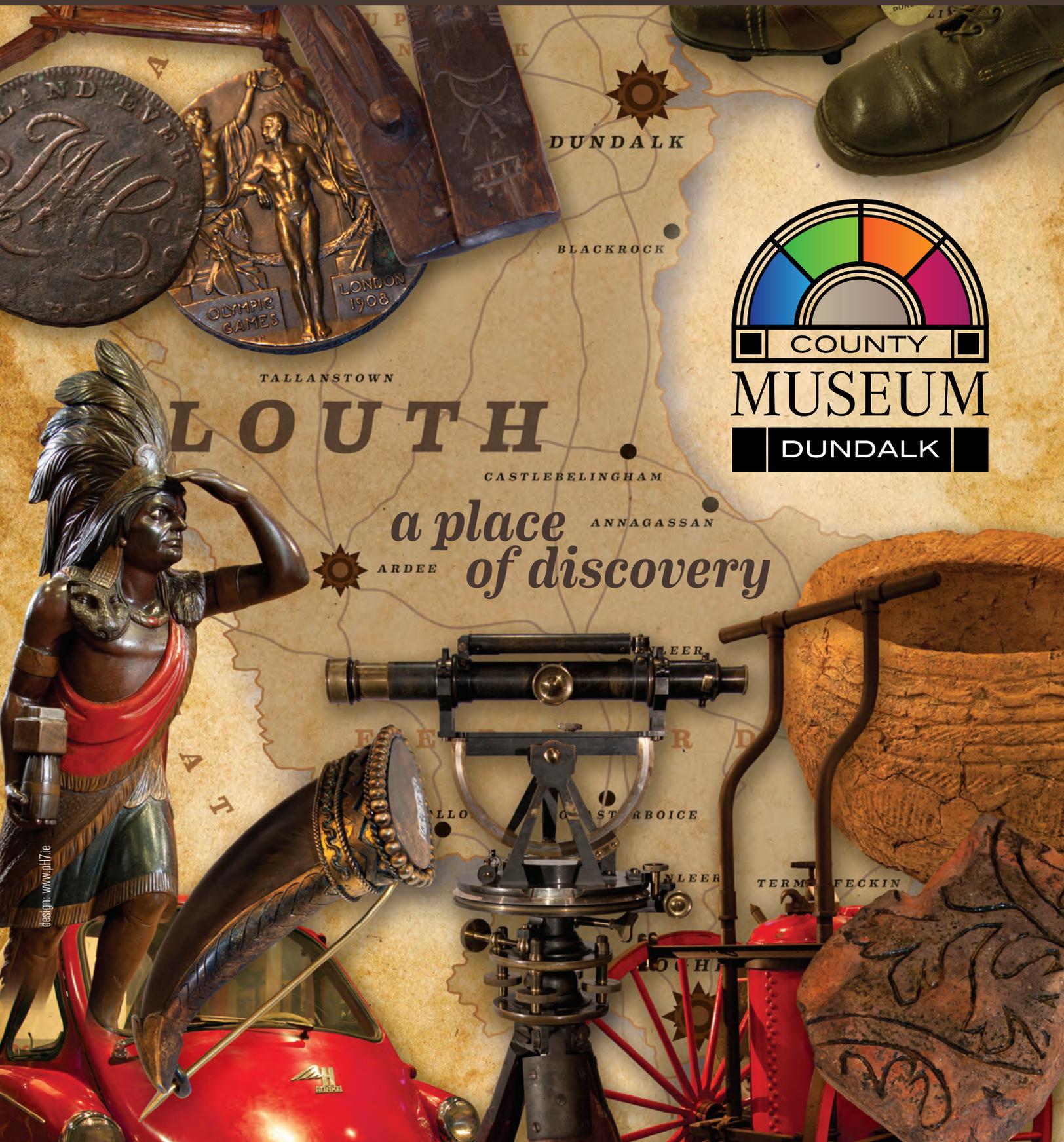


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Anne O'Connor is a folklorist who is especially interested in Irish religious folklore and spirituality. In addition, Anne was a pioneer in focussing on representations of women in Irish folklore.



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