The Irish Folklore Commission was established in 1935 to collect the oral tradition of Ireland. It aimed to establish an archive of this material, properly catalogued and available to researchers, and to form a library of reference works on world folklore, with particular reference to the Celtic countries. It was continuing the work done by earlier groups, but on a much larger scale. In 1971, it became the Department of Irish Folklore (Roinn Béaloideas Éireann), University College Dublin.

Building up the collection

The holdings of the Department of Irish Folklore consist primarily of two manuscript series: the Main Manuscripts, containing 2311 bound volumes of collected folklore, and the Schools’ Collection, containing 1128 bound volumes and 1124 boxes of unbound material. There is a large collection of sound recordings (both gramophone records and audio tapes), with thousands of hours of oral folklore and folk songs. There are about 100,000 photographs of folk material, and of the singers and storytellers interviewed over the years. There are films and video tapes, as well as plans, sketches and diagrams – pictorial representations of the visible aspects of tradition. Finally, the Department also houses a specialist library of about 38,000 printed books, pamphlets and periodicals covering the entire field of Irish and comparative folklore. This library is organized not by the Dewey system, but according to the Ó Súilleabháin subject headings discussed below.

Folklore was given a very wide definition, and the material includes all aspects of folk narrative tradition, folk customs and beliefs, folk music, song and dance. There is material on place names, and lists of words and specific terms in both Irish and English, with explanations of words and phrases, all relevant to students of linguistics and onomastics. About three-quarters of the manuscript and sound holdings are in the Irish language, and the collections also contain material in other Celtic languages, such as Manx. In fact, to access the collections fully, a sound knowledge of Irish is essential, as almost all the earlier material was collected through Irish, and their categorization is also mainly in Irish.

The Commission employed full-time collectors all over the country. They had to be familiar with local dialects, as much of the material consists of verbatim transcripts of field recordings (originally on Ediphone machines, later with modern tape-recorders). Special collectors for folk song and music were employed. Collections have also been donated by private individuals, and this still occurs from time to time.

In 1937–8, The Schools’ Scheme invited primary schools all over the country to send in children’s accounts of folklore in their local areas, and this resulted in huge amounts of material from the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. The children, aged between 11 and 14, followed special guidelines, and the best essays were transcribed into copybooks. These copybooks, as well as the original essays by the children, are still preserved in the Department (see Fig. 1). The Department continues some collecting activities. For example, in 1980–1, the Urban Folklore Project explored a previously neglected area, folklore in Dublin city and its environs. Questionnaires on specific topics are sent annually to a core group of correspondents, such as retired teachers, but those interested in folklore are a diminishing group.

The small staff (Professor, two associate professors, one lecturer, two collectors/archivists, a sound technician and two secretaries) work both in Irish and English. They spend much of their time answering queries from all over the world, and sourcing material for researchers. The collection is only open to the public during afternoon hours, and arrangements have to be made in advance to access the sound and pictorial collections. The Department provides university courses in Irish and Comparative Folklore, as well as smaller specialized courses. It publishes books and pamphlets under the aegis of the Folklore of Ireland Council (Comhainle Béaloideas Éireann), and staff members assist with the journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society – An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann. The main manuscript collection is available on microfilm in Irish university libraries and the schools’ collection is also on microfilm in each relevant county library.

Cataloguing and indexing: the work to be done

With all this activity, and starved of resources, the Department cannot prioritize the indexing and cataloguing functions that are necessary to make sense of such a huge and diverse collection. The manuscript catalogue has not been properly updated for ten years; new acquisitions are given a rough general classification, these days directly onto
computer. Some interim indexes outline the contents of individual manuscript volumes, and a computerized index of photographic slides and sound recordings (indexed by keyword) is on-going. Specific indexes are being prepared for genres such as folk songs, and the Fenian Cycle of mythological tales. Each archivist is trying to computerize the indexing for his or her own specialism, but of course the process is both exhaustive and exhausting. For example, a statement such as ‘In Inchiquin townland, a red ribbon is tied on a cow’s horn to protect against disease’ has to be listed under Popular Belief and Practice, then indexed under the place, the type of ribbon, the colour of the ribbon (and possibly of the cow), and the particular disease, not to mention the names of the collector and the informant.

One large collection of volumes contains the personal diaries of each collector in the field, mostly written in Irish, but none of them has been indexed in detail. Shelves at the back of the stacks contain large folders of newspaper cuttings on relevant material, only roughly, if at all, categorized (one folder is labelled ‘Assorted Articles from Various Dates’!).

The catalogue and indexes

The contents of the manuscript series are referenced in four card indexes, indicating the volumes and pages where subjects can be found. The index of Collectors covers up to 2000 individual collectors, by name; Informants lists up to 40,000 individuals; Provenance contains about 10,000 entries, with reference to province, county, barony and parish (or district); and Subject Matter is the largest index, with about 300,000 cards arranged according to the main headings of the catalogue, as described below. There is also a subject catalogue, the Aarne–Thompson index, covering most of the collection. This is based on an internationally recognized folktale classification.

The first three card indexes are more or less complete, but the Subject Matter index is not, as mentioned above. No work has been done on updating it for ten years.

Seán Ó Súilleabháin’s system

The first archivist of the Irish Folklore Commission was Seán Ó Súilleabháin, an Irish-speaking native of County Kerry. It was he who was largely responsible for designing and instituting the cataloguing and indexing system of this extraordinary collection, publishing it in A Handbook of Irish Folklore in 1942. He used 14 main topic headings, as follows:

- Settlement and Dwelling
- Livelihood and Household Support
- Communications and Trade
- The Community
- Human Life

Figure 1. Part of a child’s copybook from 1937–8

who insisted on going for water on that night and when she came home the water was turned into blood.

6. You should never open an umbrella inside a house because it is a sign of bad luck.

7. When a rook crows during the day it is a sign that there is someone going to die.

8. When there is blue light in the fire it is a sign of bad weather.

9. If the cat is facing the fire it is a sign of bad weather.

10. If you go out early in the morning and meet a grey woman you will have bad luck for the day.

11. If you see seagulls perched on the land it is a sign of stormy weather.

12. If a person is to be buried on Monday someone should go and dig a sod out of the grave on Sunday.

Litton: The Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin
Ó Súilleabháin based his system of classification on a Swedish system that had been worked out in 1934. He made some changes; for example, he did not give a separate category to Individual Biographies, Personal Experiences, and Reminiscences, as the Swedes had done, and he created a heading for Religious Traditions, more apparent in Ireland than in Sweden.

In his ‘Instructions to Collectors’ at the start of his Handbook, Séan Ó Súilleabháin points out that where once ‘folklore’ was seen to consist merely of fairy tales and superstitions, modern developments in Scandinavian and Baltic countries had widened the definition to include the lore of mankind, and all its various activities.

Accounts of the houses people lived in, the dress they wore, the food they ate, their social dealings with one another, their education and religious life, their festivals and amusements, births, marriages and deaths, together with beliefs about the afterworld, as well as innumerable other facets of human life, have been brought within the sphere of Folklore.

(Ó Súilleabháin, 1942: xi)

**Asking the right questions**

A quick glance through the Handbook reveals many fascinating categories of subject matter, leading through one realm after another. It is essentially a guide to collectors of folklore, so the categories consist of lists of questions to be asked. No detail was insignificant. Indeed, some of the questions seem rather leading:

**HUMAN LIFE** [Category no. 5]

**Marriage**

*Luck in Marriage.* Make a list of all the divinatory practices or omens connected with marriage luck. Lucky times and places for marriage; ones to be avoided. Omens of good or ill-luck in marriage (unlucky if day rains, ring drops, glass or a cup broken on the wedding-day, dog licks or kisses either party, somebody kisses the bride before the husband does so, wedding meets funeral or breaks down on the way; lucky if the sun shines or if a male calf is born or a cud-chewing animal dies soon after the marriage). Were certain practices carried out after marriage for the purpose of ensuring good luck (e.g. throwing something after them on their way; a man to welcome the bride to her new home; burying the first calf born after the marriage; tying a hen about to lay an egg to the bedpost on the marriage-night; and such customs)? Are stories told of ill-luck in marriage following certain men, or members of particular families, or people who marry in certain houses? Unhappy marriages; separations.

**POPULAR BELIEF AND PRACTICE** [Category no. 9]

**Talismans**

*Human Skull.* Are stories told locally of human skulls which spoke, sang, laughed, or acted in some similar manner after death? Were skulls kept in graveyards (e.g. in hollows in the walls or on the window ledges of church ruins) for any special purpose? Did fetching these skulls at night form any part of penance enjoined for sin in olden times? Accounts of this. Were skulls used in the detection of guilty persons? How? Were skulls sworn upon on certain occasions? Give details. Was there believed to be a cure in water in which a skull was boiled? Was a skull used in any such rites as the following (causing a person’s death by mentioning his name while scraping a skull over boiling holy water)? Were special powers attributed to the skulls of certain persons? Were skulls sworn on (by)? Give details.

**GAMES AND PASTIMES** [Category no. 14]

**Card-playing**

*Luck at Cards.* Record sayings, beliefs, customs or stories you can find locally regarding good luck or ill-luck at cards. Were there persons who ‘always won’ or who ‘always lost’ no matter what happened? Accounts about this. What means were adopted by card-players to secure good luck when playing cards? Were any of the following devices or similar ones resorted to by local card-players: swallowing some card (e.g. the ace of hearts); performing certain acts at Mass; carrying amulets or talismans on one’s person (a comb, foot of goat or rabbit, a fern-seed, eyeless needle); going under a double-rooted brier, or performing certain acts in the name of the devil...
story ‘about the priest throwing a bottle over the house’ but who, disappointingly, ‘refuses to tell it on tape’. Flicking through the volumes throws up fascinating material, such as the account of how to cure the gums of a horse which were ‘higher than its teeth’, so that it could not eat: ‘The blacksmith heated a hot iron and rubbed it across the gums, then got a horse nail and gave two prods up in the gums to bring the blood down. That horse healed up alright.’

This is a very sketchy account of what is a huge and original collection. Such a unique resource ought to be valued more highly, and given what it needs to make it more accessible to the large numbers of students and academics, from all over the world, who are interested in Irish folklore.

Indexing my life

Tom Norton

For the past ten years I have been honorary indexer for the County Roscommon Historical and Archaeological Society Journal, which has been published every two years since 1986. While indexing the latest volume, and adding it to the cumulated index (1986–2000), several of the entries jumped off the page and triggered off personal memories, in a sort of ‘story of my early life’ chronicle.

Claw Inch Island, memoir 7.79–80
Norton, Tom, ‘Claw Inch Island: A Memoir’ 7.79–80

I lived on Claw Inch island in Lough Ree for five years from 1944 to 1949, in a single-story three-roomed house. Lough Ree, an inland sea in the River Shannon in the centre of Ireland, is about 15 miles long and 7 miles wide, at most. When I came to write this memoir, I began to wonder what exactly I remembered of that time and how accurate it was. I was reminded of the danger of false and incomplete memories when I read Dermot Healy’s memoir of his Westmeath childhood, The Bend for Home, in which he explores the obduracy of memory and the vagaries of recollection: ‘memory is always incomplete, like a map with places missing’. At the centre of the book is a diary the author kept as a boy and that his mother retained, returning it only in her last years. When he checked his memory against this diary, he found that his memory had betrayed him in many significant details. I had no such written record, and everyone who could have corroborated my recollections was dead. I could have emulated Proust, locking myself away in a cork-lined room to shut out distractions and assist recall, but life is too short for such indulgence. I found that Timothy O’Neill’s book on Life and tradition in rural Ireland was a better memory jogger.

We were the last family to live on Claw Inch and it has been sold on several times since. When I last visited it in 1995, the middle room of the house was a graveyard for a dead goat. However, someone evidently thinks it is desirable as, according to the Longford Leader (2000), the island was recently put on sale for £325,000, with a ‘derelict residence with development potential’. Such is the fate of the ancestral home, but stop me before I start reciting ‘Kilcash’ with the poignant lines: ‘Kilcash and the house of its glory/And the bell of the house are gone’.

Quaker Island (Inis Clothran)
Bell Tower and Church (1885), photo 1.21
ground slab, drawing 4. front cover
group photograph, 1909 (possibly Conradh na Gaeilge) 8.61

Next door to Claw Inch is the much larger Quaker Island (so called because a Quaker by the name of Fairbrother lived there for a time), which I remember seeing every day of my time on Claw Inch, though I never visited it until 1995. The oldest name for the island is ‘Inis Clothran’, Clothra being the name of the semi-legendary Queen Maeve’s sister. It is said that Queen Maeve was killed on the island by a stone thrown from Cu Culainn’s sling from the Longford shore three miles away, and the said stone can still be seen on the south-east tip of the island.

The island’s Christian associations are embodied in yet another name, ‘Seven Church Island’, and there is evidence of active religious life on the island from the 6th to the 15th century. All of the churches are now ruined. One of them was founded by St Diarmuid, who built a monastery on the island in about AD540, and another, at six feet by six feet, was one of the smallest ever built. The Bell Tower and Church referred to in the index entry were built in the 12th century, and such a combination is a rarity in Ireland. Maeve’s sun bower and grave are represented by ruins, though it must be said that other places lay claim to Maeve’s grave, including Knocknarea in County Sligo. As Yeats (1994) put it:

The wind has bundled up the clouds high over Knocknarea and thrown the thunder on the stones for all that Maeve can say.

The grave slab referred to in the index, and others, were stolen from the island in 1991 and offered for sale in America for $1 million. But following an FBI ‘sting’ opera-

References

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