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THE IRISH FOLKLORE COMMISSION

ACHIEVEMENT AND LEGACY¹

Our society, An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann, The Folklore of Ireland Society, celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this academic year. The way in which societies celebrate such occasions constitutes one of the many unploughed fields in the domain of folklore. Here, however, I will only touch upon one aspect of commemoration festivities—that of their function. What purposes do society commemorations fulfil, and why do we, in particular, indulge in them?

Many answers can be given to these questions. Like any 'savage rite' or communal 'peasant custom' commemorations bring the in-group closer together, thus increasing co-operation and achievement. Commemorations are also spectacular to the out-groups. They give a society additional opportunities to further its ends and to persuade others to join in. And—not least important—anniversaries offer fixed spots, like the coming of the first swallow, or like the end of harvest, like Lá Bealtaine or Lá Samhna. They can serve as peaks from which we command a view of past achievements, the present state of affairs and the future we envisage and desire.

It is with such considerations in mind that the general theme of collecting, exposition and preservation of Irish Folklore has been chosen for the lectures 1976-77.

We will hear in January from our Cathaoirleach how An Cumann was established and what it has achieved over the past fifty years. Different aspects of collecting, indexing, documentation etc. of folklore will be covered by seven distinguished speakers during this academic year. Their names speak for themselves, and I am sure that what they will have to say will be of the greatest interest.

It has fallen to my lot—or should I say as *geasa troma draíochta* upon me?—to try to give a general introduction to this series in dealing with 'The Irish Folklore Commission—Achievement and Legacy'. I say *geasa troma draíochta* because I would gladly have passed over the responsibility of giving this lecture to somebody else—I have as a matter of fact made several unsuccessful

¹ Lecture delivered to An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann, 16th February 1977. The lecture is printed as it was delivered, with the exception of some minor adjustments and the addition of a few footnotes.

attempts to do so! Unlike nearly all the other speakers this year, I was never attached to The Irish Folklore Commission, unlike them I have no 'O' in my name, though I have on a few occasions been flattered to receive letters addressed to B. O'Almqvist. I am painfully aware of all the things I do not know, as far as the Commission and its work goes. Still I think I can truthfully say that in a way I know too much—or at least enough to realize that even dozens of lectures would not suffice to cover even the most essential traits in the achievement and legacy of the Commission. Consequently only a small part of the field can be surveyed, and my perspective is unusual, due to the fact that I was not one of the ploughmen at that time, but rather a foreign bird flying over the field.

I can only hope that a few things, which may not be obvious to those nearer to the earth, may be more clearly visible in that perspective.

The collection and preservation of Irish folklore have a long history. The earliest Irish and Hiberno-Latin records and Middle and Early Modern Irish writings of all sorts and kinds are extremely rich sources for folklore. In the nineteenth century the study of folklore starts to emerge in its own right. In this country—as elsewhere—the inspiration from Germany, especially from the Grimm brothers, is noticeable. Among the pioneers in the field of folklore in Ireland were for instance Thomas Crofton Croker and Patrick Kennedy. What they and others, like the foresighted and gifted American scholar Jeremiah Curtin, meant to Irish folklore forms topics for separate investigations. It goes without saying, too, that Irish folklore is greatly indebted to the Gaelic League, and in particular to Douglas Hyde. In those days, too, the unity of Irish and Scottish-Gaelic traditions was highlighted, and the work of the great Scottish collectors like John Francis Campbell of Islay and Alexander Carmichael were held up as models—a fact that meant a tremendous improvement in the standard of collecting methods.

The work of these and many other pioneers meant that attention was called to the richness of Irish folk tradition. Still the whole enterprise of collecting Irish folklore until well into this century can be compared to haphazard diving—in the process of which some golden coins were found more or less by chance—rather than to anything like a systematic treasure hunt.

The establishment of An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann in 1927 and simultaneously of *Béaloideas*, an Irish journal devoted entirely to folklore, involved a first big step towards a better state of affairs.

The editorial address in Irish and English in the first volume of *Béaloideas* is in its extreme shortness—only four pages—one of the most important documents for the understanding of the turn that Irish folklore collecting took in the following decades and for the success of the enterprise. In the editorial address Séamus Ó Duilearga, a young man who combined glowing enthusiasm with deep knowledge and scholarly training, spoke out bold and clear. The editorial address was an appeal to the people of Ireland and to their pride, as well as a statement of the objectives of the Society:

‘The aim of our Society,’ he wrote, ‘is a humble one—to collect what still remains of the folklore of our country. 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.’²

Séamus Ó Duilearga went on to outline the standards which ought to be the guide-lines for further oral collectors, in six points, stating for instance the importance of giving the reciter’s name and age together with ‘details of the provenance of the reciter’s material’ and the necessity of recording the material ‘verbatim, retaining *all* peculiarities of dialect and making no “corrections”’.³

Furthermore he announced the Society’s policy to ‘endeavour to provide each Gaelic contribution to its Journal with a translation or summary in English, French, or German’.

Obviously Séamus Ó Duilearga’s views on all these matters developed and matured in many ways during the following decades but the goal and the main means and methods were clear from the very outset: the folklore of Ireland must be saved in its true and unadulterated form through engaging the assistance of the people of Ireland, for the people of Ireland and for the world.

And many Irishmen listened to the appeal and understood what was involved. A great number of manuscripts from different parts of Ireland were given to the society, and part of this material was published in early issues of *Béaloideas*. Some of the outlines of the folklore of Ireland began to appear, and with that came a clearer

² *Béal.* 1 (1928), 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 5 f.

insight into what was missing in the picture. Part of the necessary foundation for future work and planning was laid.

It became more and more obvious that the task could and should not be directed and organized by a voluntary body. The establishment of an organization devoted solely to the task was necessary. This was also realized by the Government and in 1930 *Institiúid Bhéaloideas Éireann*, The Irish Folklore Institute, was established. The members on the board of that institute were—as was proper and natural—to a great extent recruited from the board of *An Cumann*, and it was again Séamus Ó Duilearga who led and organized the activities. Further experience was gained as more material was collected and published. The need for a bigger and better equipped organization was felt and in 1935 the Irish Government established *Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann*, the Irish Folklore Commission. That body was responsible for the collection, preservation, classification, study and exposition of all aspects of Irish folk traditions until 1971, when it was replaced by the Department of Irish Folklore and incorporated into University College Dublin. Séamus Ó Duilearga led the activities of the Commission in his capacity as honorary director. A tie with University College was also formed at an early stage, since Séamus Ó Duilearga also held a chair of Irish Folklore in that College.

Collection, classification, exposition and study of folklore are, of course, inter-related in many and intricate ways. They all depend to some extent upon each other, and one cannot be totally successful in any of these things if some of them are neglected.

But the manpower and the resources of the Commission were not such that it would have been humanly possible to pay equal attention to these fields. It must be made absolutely clear that those in the Commission—as well as we in the Department—were and are up against an impossible task. A famous Danish folklorist once said that all folklorists are mad—and unfortunately I think that he is right. We are in a way to be compared to a dozen farmers trying to cultivate the whole of a country. But if we are madmen, at least we are devoted madmen, trying to make the best of an impossible situation. And that involves, among other things, the fact that one will constantly have to assess and re-assess how much of the limited time it is most profitable to devote to each of the activities I have just mentioned.

It was the opinion of Séamus Ó Duilearga—and surely his opinion was sound and correct—that collecting was a task of primary importance and that as much attention as possible should be given to that activity. Many traditions were and are rapidly dying. Unless they are collected and preserved they cannot be used and studied in the future.

When surveying the achievement of the Commission, it may therefore be proper to begin with the collecting activities. Among the many factors involved in this complex are: what material and how much was collected, how was it done and what is the quality and the national and scholarly importance of these collections?

It is not too difficult to give some idea of the sheer bulk of material assembled during the time of the Irish Folklore Commission. Somebody who was not too sympathetic to the work described the collections, rather flippantly, as 'twenty-two tons of folklore'—and he may not have been far off the mark. The core of the material—what we call the Main Manuscripts—amounted to 1,735 thick volumes when the Commission was wound up, the so-called Schools' Manuscripts comprise some 1,100 volumes. Other material acquired by the Commission—which we are still in the process of sorting out—must be added to this. The figure two million manuscript pages has sometimes been mentioned as a total figure—one which is, I am sure, far too low. Then there are all the sound-recordings on Ediphone cylinders, on gramophone discs and on tape, some 25,000 photographs, plans, sketches and other pictorial representations of the visible aspects of tradition, and so on. Though perhaps not relevant in this particular context, it also ought to be mentioned that a specialist library, comprising some 20,000 printed books, of tremendous value for the study of Irish folklore and related fields, was brought together during the time of the Commission. I do not hesitate to say that this total achievement is something of a miracle, considering how few the workers were, and how ridiculously small the budget was.

This material—the famous two million pages and the rest—then, is Irish folklore. But that is a dangerous thing to say, because it raises the frightening question: What is folklore and what is Irish folklore? It is to the greatest credit of Séamus Ó Duilearga and his staff that they had a wide and practical approach to these problems, that they made a quick and intelligent decision and

started working from that, rather than getting bogged down in futile quarrels over definitions. They were not unguided, of course; they looked outside Ireland for the best available models. These models were Scandinavian, more particularly Swedish. These models guided the work of the Commission from its very beginning and they were laid down in writing, first in Irish in Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *Láimhleabhar Béaloideas* (1937), and then, in fuller form, in the same author's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1940). Thanks to this book we are in the position to say, whenever we are asked: 'What do you mean by Irish folklore?' that our definition is: 'All such things as are mentioned and enquired about in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*.' And the section headings in that book, from Settlement and Dwelling, to Livelihood and Household Support, Communications and Trade, The Community, Human Life, Nature, Folk Medicine, Time, Principles and Rules of Popular Belief and Practice, Mythological Tradition, Historical Tradition, Religious Tradition, Popular Oral Literature and Sports and Pastimes, will make you understand that what is covered is the totality of folk culture, spiritual and material, including everything human and everything supernatural. This, ladies and gentlemen, is not something one can snigger at with sly references to fairies, leprechauns and shillelaghs—it is material of the greatest importance, if we want to know and understand ourselves; it is of vital concern not only to folklorists but to students of practically every aspect of national and international culture, be it Irish, English, History, Social Sciences, History of Religion, Medicine, Law and almost everything else one might think of. The *Handbook* was—you will allow me, as a Swede, to say this—partly dedicated 'To the Swedish people whose scholars evolved the scheme for folklore classification outlined in these pages. . .' It is one of the finest gifts that the Swedish people ever received from Ireland, because the system has never been laid down in print in Sweden, and it was through the *Handbook*, more than through anything else that it came to be known and imitated internationally. And Swedish folklore scholars are proud, too, to be associated with the second part of the dedication: '. . . and to the generations of Irish people both living and dead who preserved on their lips for us our rich treasure of traditional lore.' Though the main principles in the *Handbook* are Swedish, the detailed execution is adopted to suit Irish traditions. The book builds up

into the fullest outline of everything pertaining to folklore that one ought to enquire about, available in any country.

So this gives you some idea of the bulk and general types of material collected under the auspices of the Commission. The *Handbook* became the guide line for what to collect.

The collecting of the material was done in many ways, and I can here only touch on some of them. Some material was, as I mentioned before, given to the Society and to the Folklore Institute by dedicated private collectors. Some was collected during field trips by members of the indoor staff of the Commission. Most, and much of the most valuable material, however, was brought together by specially employed full-time and part-time collectors who were stationed in different parts of Ireland and who mostly performed their work in the vicinity of their homes. It was one of the strokes of genius of Séamus Ó Duilearga to realize that this method of collection would be the most successful. And he showed his genius too, in picking the right men. These collectors knew their respective areas and the people intimately, and, what was of equal importance, they were known to the people of the areas in which they worked. They would not be mistaken for tax collectors, gunmen on the run, or whatever else a stranger in an area can be mistaken for. People had confidence in them and willingly shared what they knew with them. Some of these full-time collectors have told me that they have never been turned away from any of the thousands and thousands of doors that they have knocked on, and that, I think, says more for the collectors and the good-will with which they were received than anything else. If I were a poet, I would write out the names of these collectors in verse. Thanks to them everything changed, changed utterly, but the beauty that was born through their collections was not terrible, but radiant, gentle and everlasting.

Another way through which the people of Ireland were directly involved in the collecting activities was through the questionnaire system. During the time of the Commission over a hundred questionnaires on the most varied topics, from Furniture, Milk and Transport to Holy Wells, The Danes in Ireland and Dance Music, were sent out and answered in many cases by several hundred correspondents who not only contributed their own knowledge without receiving any payment whatsoever, but also often made extensive enquiries locally,

so that the number of individuals from which information was received would perhaps be several thousands.

A third grandiose collecting scheme which was carried out in 1937-38 was the Schools' Collection, which included practically all the national schools in the twenty-six counties. For this a special booklet was prepared in Irish and English as a guide for the collecting activities of the children and the teachers. The Schools' Collection is of great importance in that it covers many areas where little or no collecting had been done previously. It also did much in creating an understanding among the participants of their national heritage and general good will for the cause. Up to this very day we have a stream of visitors who come to the Department to re-acquaint themselves with tales, songs and other traditions which they themselves, or their fathers and mothers, collected, perhaps from their fathers and mothers or grandfathers and grandmothers.

An evaluation of the quality of all this material, brought together through different methods and in different circumstances, is a difficult task indeed, since so many factors are involved. All archives have their skeletons in the cupboard. There are cases where collectors have tried, through ignorance or for even darker reasons, to pass off verbatim copies of printed sources as genuine folklore. But they are—I think I can say from my own experience of the material—very few, and such few criminals as there were have mostly been caught out and stopped at an early stage. The full-time and part-time collectors were of course not all equally good. Each of them also had their specific qualities and preferences, some were better at collecting some types of material, others were better at other types. It would indeed be a task of primary importance for the scholarly use of the collections to have a report prepared on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual collectors. In spite of the policy of the Commission to cover every area and type of tradition, this was for many reasons—too complex to go into here—not possible in reality. Most of the material comes from areas where the traditions were richest—the Gaeltacht areas in particular. This material is of course also as a rule the best from a purely aesthetic point of view—in the excellence of the performance of storytellers and singers for example. We can be eternally thankful that that is so, but on the other hand we must take into account the fact that artistic excellence and scholarly importance may sometimes be two different things.

It is obvious, too, that certain genres—for instance folk narratives, and especially the longer and most spectacular hero tales and *Märchen*—have been more extensively collected than less conspicuous, but no less important, genres and items.

But granting this, and taking into account other considerations of this kind, I, for one, am prepared to stake any hope of eternal salvation on the truthfulness of the statement that the Collections brought together under the auspices of the Commission are, on the whole, outstanding, and deserve to be regarded as one of the best folklore collections in the world, not only in quantity but also in quality. And I know that many hundreds of foreign folklore scholars, from everywhere in Europe, America and further afield, who have visited the Commission over the years, will be willing to join me in taking that oath. Still it must be understood that these scholars with three or four exceptions were not able to read Irish, and consequently base their opinion only on a small part—and not the best part—of the material. If the full richness of the collections were known and all the material available to international scholarship, that would mean nothing less than the beginning of an entirely new era for folklore studies. I think that, as a Swede, I am entitled to tell the Irish people that they ought to know and appreciate that.

If I am to say anything about other aspects of the work of the Commission I will now have to turn away from the collecting activities—though I do so with a heavy heart since so much more could, and ought to be, said about them.

Collecting is, as I said before, of course not an end in itself. The twenty-two tons of folklore might, in the worst eventuality, be twenty-two tons of dead weight, that might lie unused and eventually rot away, become scattered, lost or even burnt. The work of the Commission was carried out not least in order to provide Irish people in the present and in future generations with an understanding of themselves and their past. The perspective in work of this kind must be long, and it would be wrong to give in to the hysterical shouts of 'Now! Now!' when something much more than the present is at stake. Still it cannot be expected that the meaningfulness of the work should be understood to the general public unless there are visible results in the present. So there was another dilemma that faced the Commission—and that the Department has inherited: How much now and how much in the future?

The first task was to preserve the material in a way that it would not be scattered or lost and so that deterioration would be as minimal as possible. Just to get a proper roof over the collections proved a difficult problem.

The story of the move from small quarters in Earlsfort Terrace into 82 St. Stephen's Green and of all the carefully thought out and executed plans of keeping the material out of danger in the country during the war years, is a long one and cannot be told here. Let it only be said that everything was tried and that every move was a step in the right direction. That the housing was always sadly inadequate and that the safety and security that national treasures ought to be given were never given to the Collections is a fact for which the Commission carries no blame.

The material was bound in handsome strong leather volumes, clearly marked on the spine. They are thus easily kept in order and easy to handle. Efforts were made to use good paper and ink, though this was for many reasons not always possible.

The state of preservation was not as good on the sound record side. The Ediphone cylinders were costly, and money was very scarce. The cylinders had to be re-used over and over, after having been transcribed. Consequently sound recordings of tremendous value not only to the study of Irish folklore but also to the study of Irish and Anglo-Irish dialects constantly had to be sacrificed. As soon as the tape-recorder came, however, all tapes sent in by the full-time collectors were preserved. The conditions under which they were preserved, however, were, in spite of valiant efforts, unsatisfactory, to say the least, and the technical assistance—though those to whom it was entrusted did their very best—was, again, due to the financial situation, sadly inadequate.

Indexing is a *sine qua non* for any sensible use of folklore collections, especially when they are of such a bulk as those brought together under the auspices of the Commission. If not even the staff knows what is in a particular volume, that material—obviously enough—might just as well not be there as far as the *present* goes. I do not need to say much about the achievement of the Commission in the field of indexing, since that will be dealt with in the next lecture by a man who, sometimes single-handed, sometimes with a few devoted helpers, did practically all the important work that was achieved in this field, namely, the archivist of the Commission,

Seán Ó Súilleabháin. It is on the indexes of informants, collectors, districts where collecting has taken place, and subject matter that most of the scholarly work on the collected material is based. It is worth noticing, too, that the general policy of the Commission that 'it is people that matter' is reflected in the indexes as well, since so much care has been taken to make sure that informants and collectors are kept track of. And these indexes, including some 40,000 cards, were all the time kept up to date. The subject-matter index, comprising some 180,000 cards at the time when the Commission came to an end, is based on the *Handbook*, which means that the system is clear and logical and—which is a tremendous advantage—known to most folklore scholars in Ireland and abroad. In spite of what I do not hesitate to call the heroic work of the Archivist and his helpers, only a small portion of the subject matter index was completed during the time of the Commission. The necessity and importance of the continuation and completion of this work cannot be overstressed. It is a work that will take several decades for at least half a dozen skilled and fully employed cataloguers.

Unfortunately a card-index cannot be physically moved from the institution where it is located. It ought to be complemented by printed indexes that are available to workers in libraries and institutions everywhere in the country and abroad. For one important category of folk traditions, namely the folktales, there is such a printed index: Seán Ó Súilleabháin's and Reidar Th. Christiansen's *The Types of the Irish Folktale* (1967). It bears witness again to the wide international contacts of the Commission that this important scholarly tool is the product of co-operation between a Norwegian—a scholar who has done much important work in the field of Irish folklore—and an Irishman. And you can easily see what this work has meant to international folktale scholarship if you compare monographs on individual tales appearing before and after *The Types of the Irish Folktale*—in the former, Ireland is as a rule represented by a few atypical printed versions, in the latter the full scale of hundreds of manuscript versions from Cork and Kerry to Donegal are taken into account, and are often of vital importance to the conclusions reached.

It must have been a source of joy and inspiration for the Honorary Director of the Commission and his staff that the amassed material gradually became more available and that its importance

was gradually better understood at home and abroad. But this also meant more work, and much more work, as the years went along, work that the staff had to do, partly to the detriment of their own promotion and scholarly output.

Visitors of all sorts and kinds from storytellers, *seanchaís* and schoolchildren who had contributed the material and wanted to see it, to scholars and others, famous and infamous, who wanted to use it in one way or another, kept coming in droves to visit the Irish Folklore Commission. Some of them stayed for weeks and months. I know, because I was one of them in 1952, when I was twenty-one years old, and in 1957 and in 1966-70. And then there were all those who wrote in with requests and inquiries about everything between heaven and earth: the American businessman who had a boat and who wanted a good Irish name for it, those who wanted the Commission to testify that the peculiar striped cloth that they produced were genuine Irish tartan patterns, those who wanted to know whether a doll's rubber shoe that they had found in Mayo could possibly be a leprechaun's shoe, those who not only wanted material for their essays and theses but also wanted the Commission's staff to write them for them, and the whole motley crew of more or less serious scholars working on everything from poteenmaking, house-types, customs and beliefs to folktales, legends—and what have you? Though some of the answers would of necessity have to take the form of short but polite refusals, others would engage staff members for days and weeks. The material had to be found, translated or summarized, long reports had to be written; often special inquiries or whole questionnaires were sent out to help individual scholars and advice and active help was given in introducing them to the right people in the field and in accommodating them in the areas they ought to visit. And once there, these scholars were frequently helped and guided by the full-time collectors.

Knowledge of Irish folklore was also spread abroad by extensive lecturing by the Honorary Director and his staff. As a result of such lectures, collecting activities were taken up in many countries; and institutes of a similar kind to the Commission have even been established. The Irish achievement was of importance for, not least of all, The School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. The importance of the work of the Commission abroad is, I have often

noticed, practically unknown to most people in Ireland, and because of that I am especially glad to have the opportunity to stress it. I can myself testify that the Irish Folklore Commission and the names of some members of its staff were household words in Uppsala, when I first came there in 1950. It is no coincidence that the first Irishman that I and hundreds of students who entered the university at that time saw and heard was Caoimhín Ó Danachair who for a year lectured in Irish and Irish folklore. I can even say that apart from Jonathan Swift, de Valera, Yeats, Synge and one or two more, I and my fellow students of those years knew of no other Irishmen than Séamus Ó Duilearga, Seán Ó Súilleabháin and Caoimhín Ó Danachair. This of course—they will themselves be the first to admit—is unimportant in comparison to the fact that we also knew what they stood for and what they worked for. And the situation was certainly similar in other countries. There are all over Europe thousands and thousands of people who know more about the Blasket Islands than about Tralee or Galway and more about Tory Island than about Letterkenny. True, there are many and varied reasons for this, but you will be surprised if you ask these foreigners how often the Irish Folklore Commission or people who have been associated with the Commission have spread this knowledge.

One of my staff members recently told me a joke about Lisdoonvarna, but since such jokes are by their very nature migratory, I am sure it has been told about hundreds of other places. Anyhow, some kind of fair or celebration, or perhaps it was a political meeting, was being held there, and all kinds of banderolls and banners were on display. And this is what was written on one of them: 'Stand up Lisdoonvarna and take your place among the nations of the earth!'

Now, we should not deny ourselves the pleasure of laughing at this, because one of the functions of such folklore is to amuse and make life brighter for us. But, like many such jokes, this one has a deeper dimension. It is a marvellous and admirable sentiment that this slogan expresses. I think it is true to say that one of the achievements of the Irish Folklore Commission is that it has helped in giving many a tradition-bearer and many a place in Ireland their self-esteem, the most necessary quality for a full human life. It is indeed, in a sense, no joke that the Blasket Islands and hundreds and thousands of other seemingly equally obscure localities have stood up and taken their place among the nations of the earth!

In an assessment of the achievement of the Commission one must, of course, also take into account all the published works, scholarly and popular, of its members. But I have already used up most of my time, and I must be very brief.

During its short existence the Irish Folklore Institute published some important collections of tales and legends: An Seabhadh, *An Seanchaidhe Muimhneach* (1932); Éamonn Ó Tuathail, *Sgéalta Mhuintir Luinigh* (1933), and Dubhglas de h-Íde, *An Sgéuluidhe Gaedhealach* (1933).

It must be taken into account that this was during the years when its other activities were still on a comparatively moderate scale.

All the new duties, and the accumulation of work which they entailed, made it increasingly difficult to set much time aside for publications. Nevertheless two important publications: Reidar Th. Christiansen's *Studies in Irish and Scandinavian Folktales* (1959) and Máire MacNeill's *The Festival of Lughnasa* (1962) appeared under the auspices of The Irish Folklore Commission. They are scholarly works, neither intended or likely to attract much attention among a wider public. But in both of them the full and genuine material in the Commission was used, and international attention was drawn to its enormous potentialities. In his book Professor Christiansen opened up a new field in folktale scholarship. Studies of tale traditions in two related regions were taken up by later scholars and the methods Christiansen had developed in this connection were widely imitated. And Máire MacNeill's work is recognized as one of the most competent and carefully executed studies of a seasonal festival ever undertaken in any country.

Though the name of the Commission appeared on these two books only, the publications of the staff-members were many and covered a wide field of topics.

People have often asked, often do ask, and often will ask: 'Why is not more folklore published?' It is a good thing that this question should be asked, because it shows the need and demand for such publications. But unfortunately many of those who ask are sadly unaware of what is already available and of the extent of the involvement of the Folklore Commission and its staff in these publications.

One cannot, for instance, in this respect detach the activities of the Commission from those of An Cumann. The two bodies have

always worked hand in hand, as it were, and this close co-operation has been of much benefit to both bodies. As we know, the Folklore Institute and the Folklore Commission grew out of An Cumann. An Cumann's journal *Béaloidéas* was, during the whole existence of the Commission—and indeed for some time after the Commission had ceased—edited by Séamus Ó Duilearga, the honorary director of the Commission. And the bulk of the folklore material published in *Béaloidéas* up to 1969—close to 11,000 pages—is drawn from the collections acquired through the Commission, and staff-members of the Commission have contributed a great percentage of the articles in the journal.

This has, of course, been recognized and appreciated by An Cumann, just as the help of An Cumann has been acknowledged and appreciated by the Commission. But there is, unfortunately, a certain confusion in the mind of the general public as to what each body has done, a confusion that may have detracted from due recognition to both bodies. I have no solution to this problem—which still exists, though in a different form—but I think that attention should be given to it.

It was under the auspices of An Cumann, too, that Séamus Ó Duilearga's *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill* was first brought out in 1948.

This book has served and will serve, as a model for editions of the repertoires of individual story-tellers. I can—if you will allow me to slip into memories from my early youth again—clearly remember how I marvelled at this book when I first saw it in 1950, though, at the time, I was only able to read the English summary.

And here, again, it is fair to say that the importance of the work is much better understood abroad than in Ireland. *Leabhar Sheáin Í Chonaill* and Séamus Ó Duilearga's methods and principles in its presentation have been discussed fully in books and articles in German and Swedish—not by me—while there is still no competent appreciation in Ireland, either in Irish or English.

It would be impossible to go into Séamus Ó Duilearga's other writings on this occasion. A bibliography of his printed works is, as many of you know, to be found in *Hereditas*, the Festschrift that An Cumann brought out in his honour in 1975. Still less does time allow me to go into the many hundred scholarly and popular books and articles written by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, Caoimhín

Ó Danachair and other members of the Commission's staff. But they are all there, and when the Folklore Bibliography that Dr. Ó Danachair has prepared will be brought out—and that will be soon⁴—it will be easy for all and sundry to survey this whole spectrum of good scholarship and sound popularization.

Looking back at this incomplete outline of the Commission and its achievement—in the fields of collecting, preservation, indexing and exposition of Irish folklore—what are we to say in conclusion?

It is hard to find words, not least in our days when superlatives are so carelessly scattered around, when everything from washing-powder to Cidona is 'wonderful' and 'super'. Perhaps the best summing up is a simple understatement: Those who were engaged in The Irish Folklore Commission were not idle. Let nobody doubt that they worked!

'The Irish Folklore Commission—Achievement and Legacy'; that is what I have committed myself to talk about. I have spoken about the achievement. What can I say in a few minutes about the legacy?

Fortunately some of the main things are implied in what I have already touched upon.

The move of the Commission from 82 St. Stephen's Green to Belfield and the change of name into The Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, has not radically changed the character of the work we are engaged in nor the way in which it is done. Past experience is our main guide-line and we are mainly coping with the same problems that the Commission was up against.

In some respects we have perhaps walked a bit further on the road of improvement; in other respects, however, problems and difficulties have been aggravated.

I can only very briefly mention a few of these things.

Thanks to the move to a university, Irish folklore has, I think, been better integrated into the totality of Irish culture. We are closer to people who work in related fields. Scholars engaged in Irish and Anglo-Irish studies, geography, history, archaeology, social sciences and so on, have easier access to the material and make more use of it. We have tried through service-lectures and in other ways

⁴ This work has now appeared: Caoimhín Ó Danachair, *A Bibliography of Irish Ethnology and Folk Tradition* (Dublin 1978).

to convey an idea to our colleagues of what folklore has to contribute to their respective fields. And, of course, we in turn learn from them.

Folklore has also been established as an academic subject in its own right—both on the undergraduate and graduate level. This is one of the most important new developments. So far (autumn 1976) twelve students have taken their B.A. and one his doctorate. There are now more people than before who have the basic skills to do work on Irish folklore and who are enthusiastic about doing so. They ought not to be prevented from doing this work through lack of employment opportunities.

Collecting continues through full-time collectors, fieldwork by members of the indoor staff, questionnaires and through other means. Our latest questionnaire—on the banshee⁵—has yielded a particularly rich harvest. We have tried again to activate schoolchildren, an effort that has been sponsored by the Irish Life Assurance Company. I am no friend of commercial advertisement—though I have my own life insurance with Irish Life—nevertheless, I think it is proper to say that Irish Life has set an example in sponsoring a worthy cause, an example that ought to be followed by others. On the other hand the retirement of Proinsias de Búrca and the death of Ciarán Bairéad—two of our ablest field collectors—has meant a great loss. We are also constantly plagued with nightmares in broad daylight whenever we think of all the disappearing traditions and all the wide areas, including Dublin City, where virtually no collecting has been done. Collecting must be intensified: we want to do it and we know how to do it, but it cannot be done without additional resources and manpower. I have often said it, but it cannot be said too often: Future generations will not—and ought not to—forgive us for what we neglect to do in this salvage work of national importance.

As to the preservation of the collections, I think it is fair to say that they are in certain respects safer and better guarded against fire, theft and other means of destruction after the move to Belfield than before. Microfilming of the manuscripts—which started during the time of the Commission—has been continued and intensified. All the Main Manuscripts and the greater part of the Schools' Manuscripts have now been microfilmed and the films are kept outside

⁵ See *Béal*. 42-4 (1974-6), 88-119.

the Department, so that even if the originals were to be destroyed through fire or any other catastrophe all will not be lost. The collections belonging to the Musical Division are, however, still kept in Earlsfort Terrace under conditions no better—or let me say just as bad—as those in 82 St. Stephen's Green. Urgent preservation work on the tapes, indexes and photographs has been postponed due to lack of staff and funds. An additional worry is that the increased use of the material—no matter how legitimate—will of necessity speed up deterioration. Neither the manuscript nor the tape archive are up to the standards one ought to have the right to expect for the safe-keeping of collections of this kind.

Indexing is progressing according to the system laid down by Seán Ó Súilleabháin. Furthermore, a half dozen students have been engaged in indexing three days a week—thanks to a special grant, administered through Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, The Folklore of Ireland Council. Work done by graduate and undergraduate students in folklore as part of essays and theses has also helped the indexing. One undergraduate student, for instance, has indexed thousands of proverbs, from the Schools' Collections, another has done similar work on folk medicine. The work towards a doctoral thesis will, I hope, also provide the basis for an index of *exempla* in Irish folk-tradition, comparable to Seán Ó Súilleabháin's folktale index. Valuable regional indexes of folk-songs have been prepared as M.A. theses in the Irish Department. And further work of a comparable kind is in progress. Special mention should be made of the indexes that one of our staff members, Bríd Mahon, is preparing in connection with her investigations of two important aspects of material folk-culture: dress and food. The dress index, which is not far from its completion, comprises some 20,000 cards.

In spite of all this it is obvious that progress is far too slow. In fact, since we have acquired much new material, we are percentage wise no better off than when the Commission ended its days in 1971. There is still no detailed subject matter index for the major part of the collections.

Séamas Ó Catháin, the present archivist, is in no way to blame for this sad state of affairs. The amount of visitors and the amount of scholarly inquiries has steadily increased and the main burden in connection with that has rested on his shoulders. And he has done Herculean work.

The increased use of the archive and the library in conjunction with the growth of the collections and other activities has also created a situation where we feel as though we were walking in shoes that are half the size of our feet, and that makes our work very difficult.

We are also trying to continue the work of propagating folklore through lectures to societies everywhere in Ireland and abroad, as well as on radio and TV. And after all—what am I trying to do this very minute ?

In 1972 the Government granted a sum of money for indexing and publication of folklore. A special body, Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, under the chairmanship of Dr. Kenneth Whitaker, was set up to administer these funds. Four members of this body were nominated by the Minister for Education, the rest by the President of U.C.D. The head of the Department of Irish Folklore has been the editor of these publications. Two major publications: *The Living Landscape* (1975)—study in placenames and placename lore of Killgalligan, Co. Mayo, by Séamas Ó Catháin and Patrick O'Flanagan and *All In! All In!* (1975)—a book on traditional street games among children in Dublin by Eilís Brady, and two smaller pamphlets,⁶ have appeared so far. Two more books will soon appear,⁷ and others are in progress.

The grant, which was small considering what printing costs are like these days, has been given twice, but the fact that it has not been given on a regular annual basis has made sensible planning very difficult.

It is of the very greatest importance, however, that the Government has recognized through this grant that folklore is the concern of the whole country, not only of University College Dublin. Unfortunately there are indications that the Government will not continue to give financial aid to An Chomhairle. This, in my opinion, is a very serious state of affairs and a cause of great worry to all concerned.

⁶ Bo Almqvist, *The Uglie Foot (AT 1559B*)*, *An anecdote in Old Icelandic literature and its counterpart in Irish folk tradition* (Dublin 1975) and Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Díoltas i nDroch-bhírt, Finnscéalta ar phianóis* (Baile Átha Cliath 1975).

⁷ These books have now been published: Séamus Ó Duilearga, *Leabhar Sheáin í Chonail* (3ú eagr., Baile Átha Cliath 1977), Seán Ó hEochaidh, Máire Ní Néill, Séamas Ó Catháin, *Síscéalta ó Thír Chonail* | *Fairy Legends from Donegal* (Baile Átha Cliath 1977).

That, then, is where we stand at the moment. What can we do in the future, and what should the future be like ?

We ought, of course, to continue and expand our work in all the fields I have mentioned. And that is our burning desire.

But unless there is a radical change that is not possible.

To describe what has happened in the simplest possible terms: New duties have been entrusted to us, but we have not been given the additional staff and the proper funds to carry out these duties as they should be carried out.

This is leading more and more to a situation where all members of the Department are doing too many things and too much of everything, and a situation where nobody is left to do uninterrupted work in the field where his or her main inclination and abilities lie. I know that my staff shares my view that we are working for a noble cause, and that they are willing to sacrifice much for that cause. But this very devotion of my staff is an additional reason—apart from the ordinary human considerations—why I cannot complacently sit around and allow the situation to develop into chaos. No efforts must be spared to improve the situation.

So unless more staff and more funds are given to us, some of our activities will have to suffer. I would hate more than anything else to have to take the decision as to which one or which ones of these—as it seems to me equally important tasks—we should offer up for sacrifice, and I hope that I will not be forced into such a situation.

What then would we need ? If I limit myself to what I see as most immediate and urgent, my preferences would be :

- more field workers ;
- a trained folklore scholar whose main duties would be to answer scholarly enquiries and guide visiting scholars and other users of the archive ;
- a trained technician who could take the full responsibility for the preservation work and other duties in the sound archive ;
- a number of trained cataloguers employed on a full-time basis ;
- a publications officer to assist the head of the Department in work in connection with the publications of *An Chomhairle* ;

more space to house the collections properly, to permit their growth and to accommodate users of the archive and library;

more secretarial staff.

Did I hear somebody whisper 'empire building'? I am not asking this for my own sake, not even for the sake of my staff. I am asking it for the sake of Ireland.

I know that those present here are in sympathy with me. I have no doubt that others may consider me a mad outlandish folklorist. However that may be, I can do nothing except to express my opinions, beliefs and feelings with all the honesty I am capable of mustering; and that I have done.

Íf I were to direct myself to the people of Ireland and its Government and not to this Society, and if I were to plead our case without inhibitions or sly diplomacy, this is more or less what I would feel like saying:

A mhuintir na hÉireann!

Do not neglect one of the greatest treasures you possess! I beseech you for your own sake, for the sake of your men and women, for the sake of past generations—all the humble but truly great men and women who cherished their national heritage and passed it on in trust to us—for the sake of understanding, identity and unity in this country in these troubled times, for the sake of joy and beauty in generations to come, for the sake of truth and love of learning, for the sake of everything you hold dear, noble and holy—do not let us down in our work!

BO ALMQVIST

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