

Sketches from the Field:
the Simon Coleman Collection
Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh

A donation from a Donegal patron of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1949 enabled the commission to appoint temporarily two additional part-time staff. The sole condition attached to the donation was that their time be spent recording and cataloguing folklore relating to the province of Ulster. One of the two men appointed was Simon Coleman RHA, an established portrait and landscape painter from Duleek, County Meath. On 3rd December 1949, he left Dublin for Donegal in the company of the experienced collector, Seán Ó hEochaidh, his brief to make drawings and, where possible, paintings of objects of a traditional or historical nature. In his account of the assignment, Coleman noted: 'This was a new departure for me since I had hitherto concerned myself with painting in its more orthodox or "pure" sense. That is painting for sale as such. I was not certain that I could adapt myself to the new role of painter-cum-folklorist, but being at a loose end I thought I might try my hand at it' (NFC 1615: 7). The success of his mission persuaded the Commission to employ his services again, a decade after, when he made two further field trips to Galway and Clare. Coleman's separate accounts of the three trips are bound in two volumes in the National Folklore Collection (NFC 1615: 1–201 and 1674: 276–306).

Simon Coleman RHA (1916–1995) was the son of a postman who was educated in Duleek and at the Christian Brothers' School in Drogheda. With the assistance of a teacher-in-training scholarship he enrolled at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art in 1933, hoping for a career as a fashion artist. There he studied under Maurice MacGonigal and in 1939 was selected by Seán Keating of the National College of Art to assist him, with three other young artists, in painting a mural for the World's Fair in New York. The first of many of his works was exhibited at the Royal Hibernian Academy the



following year. The quality of his portraits especially was recognized early in his career, and in 1940 he was chosen by President Douglas Hyde to paint *The Council of State 1940*, a group portrait which included Éamon de Valera and Seán T. O'Kelly, to mark Hyde's retirement from office.

While working for the Commission Coleman was accompanied at all times by a local collector – Seán Ó hEochaidh in Donegal (December 1949), and in Galway, Ciarán Bairéad (Turloughmore, January–April 1959) and Proinsias de Búrca (Corr na Móna, July–August 1959). The shy Coleman (as he confesses in his diary) was quickly at ease in the company of Ó hEochaidh, although his 'few words of Munster Irish' were insufficient to understand the conversation in Seán's home in Gort an Choirce, where 'all spoke Irish with a freedom which was bewildering to me.'¹ This was also true of neighbouring Míin Lárach where he sketched frequently during his stay. But his incomprehension was even greater in the Blue Stack mountains where the language 'was strange music to my ears, this long drawn-out, slow, rising and

'Ag ithe na preatai' ['eating the potatoes'] Blue Stack mountains, Co. Donegal, 1949



Kelp kiln, Míin Lárach,
Co. Donegal, 1949

falling, rich and deep-throated Irish' (NFC 1615: 24). When Coleman was called on a second time by the Commission, ten years later, to make sketches in the field his Irish had greatly improved. He was able to follow the conversation in Conamara households to which he was brought by the collector Proinsias de Búrca, proudly noting in his diary 'I am by now an insatiable *Gaeilgeoir*'.

Coleman's technique of recording objects and scenes of vernacular interest was refined during his Donegal field trip. He sketched with pencil in the various households he visited with Ó hEochaidh, later drawing the sketches into his sketch pad with pen and ink. His full output is preserved in six 35cm wide by 25cm high sketch pads, of from thirty to fifty sheets each, and six larger, loose sheets. In his first sketch pad, completed in Donegal, Coleman sketched and drew on both sides of the sheets – a clear reflection of the straitened circumstances of the post-war years. In his later 'notebooks' his drawings are almost exclusively done on one side only, with occasional trial sketches in pencil on the reverse sides. The six pads contain a total of one hundred and sixty three sheets of drawings in pen and ink – many of these are multiple sketches of related objects – and nine pencil sketches. He made a total of fourteen water colours and a single oil painting. In several of his drawings he uses a light grey wash to finish the picture.

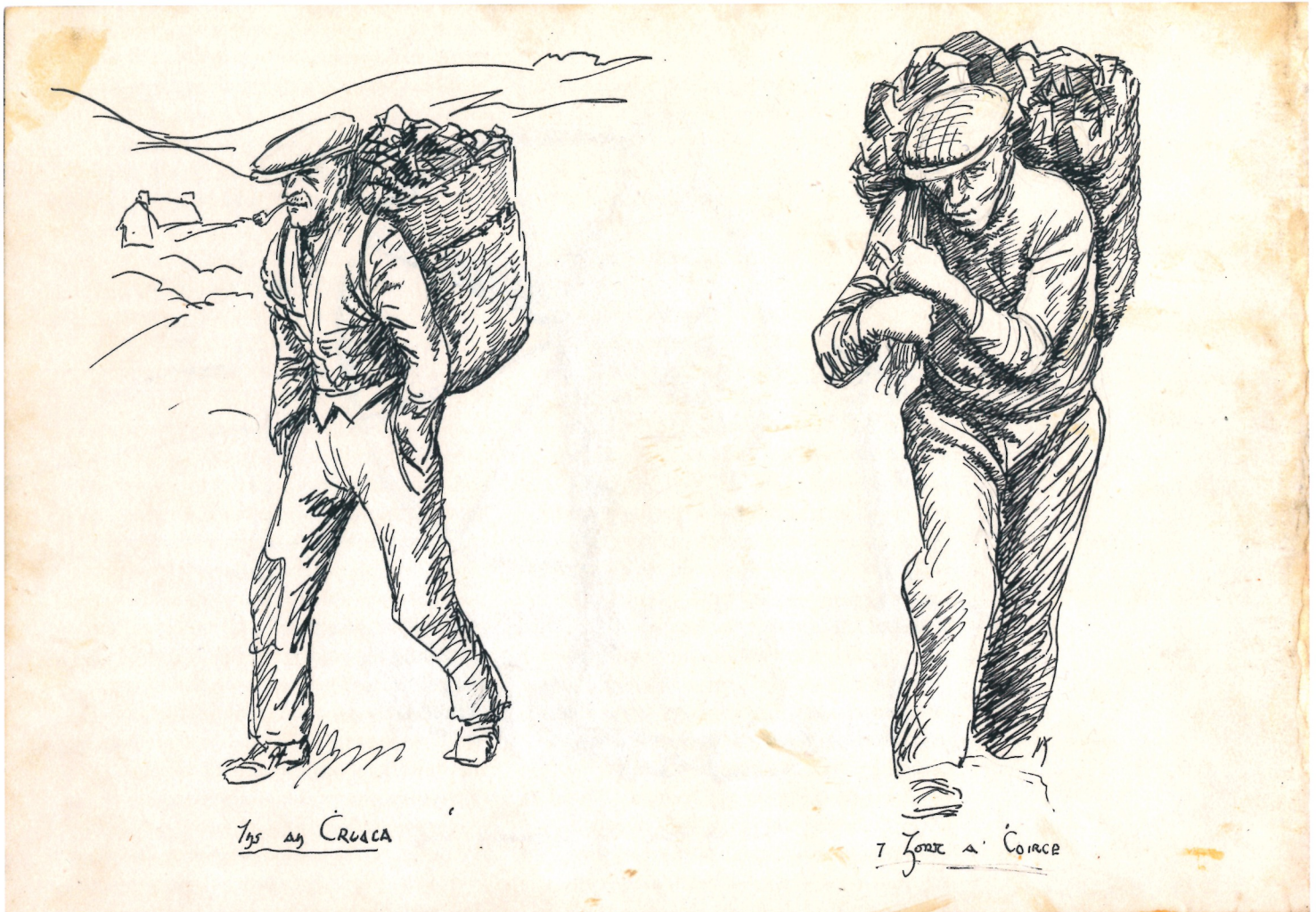
His compositions illustrate a significant number of vernacular processes, such as roof construction and thatching in east Galway and tilling with the spade in the Aran Islands. It was also his intention if possible to portray 'a few of the old people who "had still" retained old songs or stories of the people' (NFC 1615: 1).

As it transpired, Coleman completed just one full colour portrait during his stay in Donegal, that of Anna Nic an Luain, in the Blue Stacks. The difficulty of drawing portraits in the mostly ill-lit homes he visited, in midwinter, was soon apparent to him. As he sketched Anna, Coleman had to contend with water dripping on his drawing block while her husband made constant 'jocose remarks' about the procedure. In contrast, a decade later, the artist was able to sketch the Galway storyteller Mike Silke in relative comfort, perfecting his portrait in the course of several visits. There were occasions too, in both Donegal and Galway, when his hands were simply too cold to sketch, or the conditions otherwise unfavourable. A 'Stygian gloom', for example, made it extremely difficult for Coleman to discern the outlines of a bed-outshot or *cailleach* in an abandoned, overgrown house at Ballynonagh, near Corr na Móna which he visited with Proinsias de Búrca.

A diverse range of farming, fishing and domestic objects and buildings was placed at Coleman's disposal by the three collectors with whom he worked. All three men were experienced collectors, having an intimate knowledge of their respective districts. This ensured a positive reception in the homes that Coleman visited. Every day spent with the three men in these unfamiliar landscapes resulted in fresh insights for the artist. Coleman clearly enjoyed their company: in the final page of his Turloughmore diary, for instance, he fondly recalls 'Flying along through the roadways of the west listening to Ciarán's irrepressible and illuminating patter'.

The cooperation Coleman received in the many households he visited was considerable, indeed at times overwhelming. In one particular home in the Blue Stacks the owners 'went to great lengths to find things that would interest me, to such lengths did they go in fact that I found myself drawing one or two objects which I could have seen in some shop in Dublin' (NFC 1615: 31). Everywhere the artist ventured he was ushered into intimate domestic settings and scenes that few other contemporary artists might have enjoyed. His drawing 'Ag ithe na preataí', showing a family in the Blue Stacks seated around a large circular, shallow basket eating their dinner, is a unique visual record of this ancient practice.

Methods of carrying back baskets,
Co. Donegal, 1949



His interaction with several people in the course of his work was particularly constructive. Mike Silke, from whom Ciarán Bairéad had already recorded a large repertoire of tales, historical tradition and ethnological material, was an important source of technical information for Coleman, who made repeated visits to the storyteller during his time at Turloughmore. Significantly, more than twenty of the men and women identified in his diary in Donegal and Galway were Commission informants whose interviews are preserved in the National Folklore Collection.

Immediately on his return from Donegal, on the 19th of December, Coleman wrote a detailed account of his work and submitted it to the Commission. His narrative outlines the day-to-day itinerary of his stay but also makes a number of general observations on life in rural Donegal. He notes that there were, at most, a dozen children in Gort an Choirce – ‘a lonely outpost of Gaelic culture and tradition’ – the younger men and women having ‘flown away to England or America never to return’ (NFC 1615: 35). In his Galway-Clare expeditions, a decade later, Coleman was required by the Commission to keep a daily written account of his activities. These latter diaries are markedly visual and sensuous in their language, with greater contextual detail about the people

Wooden chimney in the home of William Kelly, Caherlea, Co. Galway, 1959



and places he encountered, and about individual drawings. The three months he spent at Turloughmore in early 1959 ranging through south Galway, north Clare and the Aran Islands, as well as Galway city, enabled him to form clear impressions of the west and how it contrasted so markedly with his native Meath. He observed that a greater percentage of people in Galway owned land 'of one kind or another', unlike Meath where there was two extremes – large cattle holdings and a landless labouring class. 'Because of this kind of social structure you have in Galway greater freedom of intercourse between people, without the crippling embarrassments of class distinction: fifteen acres is deemed equal to fifty or as near as makes no matter' (NFC 1615: 81).

The Irish Folklore Commission showed considerable foresight and imagination in appointing an artist of Simon Coleman's ability, however brief the periods of time spent by him in the field, or however limited the geographical scope of his work. His finely executed drawings document a broad range of vernacular scenes, artefacts and construction techniques. There is a very conscious effort throughout his work to situate objects in the context of domestic space and to illustrate their various functions. Coleman went about his apprenticeship as a 'folklorist' in a systematic way, always questioning his collector-mentors and the many people he encountered about the nature of the objects and scenes he was recording.

Coleman's skilled depictions of rural life in the mid-twentieth century are an authentic and informed visual record of that period shortly before electrification and mass-manufactured goods and appliances entered most country households. For Coleman, his role as artist-collector with the Irish Folklore Commission undoubtedly informs his later work. When his three-month stay in Turloughmore was at an end he joyously recorded: 'I feel I've been immersed in a great wave that has impregnated my whole mind and being' (NFC 1615: 201). His immersion in the material culture of the western counties, and the new social insights he gained, principally through

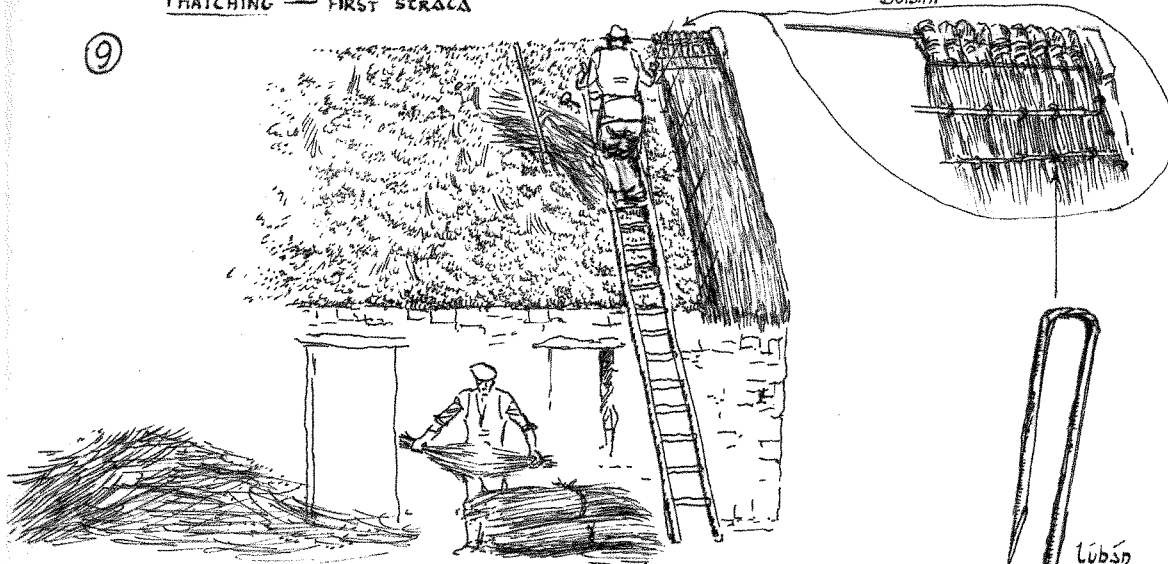


the medium of Irish, impacted on his subsequent work. That this is so is evident from the fact that all of the works exhibited by him at the Royal Hibernian Academy in the two years after his second and final spells in the field are conspicuous for their cultural themes and exclusively Irish titles.

Portrait of Mike Silke, Carrmore, Co. Galway, 1959

THATCHING — FIRST SCRÁGA

9



SECOND SCRÁGA

10



Roof construction, Carnmore district, Co. Galway, 1959

Further reading

Amharc Oidhreacht Éireann, An Exhibition of Paintings from the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, 1993.

Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts, Vol. I, A–G, Index of Exhibitors and their Works 1826–1979, compiled by Ann M. Stewart with a summary history of the R.H.A. by C. de Courcy, Dublin, 1985.

Snoddy, T., *Dictionary of Irish Artists, 20th Century*, Dublin, 2002.

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