‘Dublin made me and no little town’: the Urban Folklore Project 1979–80

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That the collection of folklore in Ireland has concentrated on rural Ireland, and in particular the western, Gaeltacht regions of the country, for the best of reasons, is undoubtedly true. It is a mistake, however, to assume that no collecting in the cities has occurred. From 1979–80 an ambitious and inspired project, the Urban Folklore Project, was instigated by Professor Séamas Ó Catháin, then Archivist of the Department of Irish Folklore. The Project was funded by FÁS as an employment scheme for university graduates, for whom job opportunities were severely limited at that time.

Fifteen young people worked on the project, five of them graduates of the Department of Irish Folklore in University College Dublin, who had a good training in field work, and the remainder from various other academic backgrounds, including archaeology, Irish, English and history. The former were employed as supervisors, and they trained the latter. Using the indispensable *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* as its guide, but modifying it to suit the environment in which they were working, the enthusiastic team collected a huge variety of oral tradition in many parts of Dublin and the greater Dublin region – although the 'city' was not as extensive as it now is, it had already begun to sprawl into Wicklow, Kildare and Meath.

Boys rowing in Ringsend Regatta. Photo: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, 1980

The Urban Folklore Project was a sophisticated exercise in recording the unofficial history of Dublin. Obviously Dublin was a large city in 1979 and no folklore project could pretend to be at all exhaustive in the geographical circumstances. Nevertheless the Urban Folklore Project spread its net wide and deep. It was a folkloristic *Blitzkrieg*, a systematic and intensive trawl of the oral culture of one place. Within a limited period the collectors, working in small teams, combed the city and surroundings, and recorded its lore and memories and ways of life, using a variety of techniques: tape recording the voice, photographing, taking notes, using questionnaires, and video taping. In addition, every collector kept a diary, recording the circumstances in which the collecting took place, including impressions and information on informants and so on. The result is a corpus of material which provides a mirror of Dublin during one year, a

Filming in a school playground, Ringsend.
Photo: George McClafferty, 1979

mirror of a culture which was nebulous, floating, and 'unofficial': the memories and stories of people who did not write books or newspaper articles, the rhymes and games and stories, the secret lore of children, the rumours and legends which circulated in canteens, tea rooms, pubs. The faces of people who would not have been photographed by any journalist and above all their accents, their dialects, their voices which are as unique as their faces, were recorded. What we have as a result is a vast multi-faceted, indeed multi-media, image of a city as it was at one point in time, unlike any other image of Dublin in existence.

The Urban Folklore Project came about as a direct result of the economic depression of the late 1970s, and is an outstanding example of how such an apparent setback can, with imagination, be used to enrich the cultural life of a country. In the late seventies and eighties, Ireland suffered from a shortage of money, but it had cultural capital. Luckily this was recognized by those that had the power to invest whatever meagre funds were available into an original enterprise. As well as creating a valuable product, i.e., the Urban Folklore Collection, the young people who worked on the Urban Folklore Project, while they did not earn much money, had an experience that was intellectually enriching, edifying, and enormously enjoyable. Such experiences are more precious than pensions.

The Urban Folklore Collection is a scholarly resource but it is also in its multi-layered impressionistic style a piece of art, not amenable to any precise definition, but certainly qualifying as one of the great treasures of the National Folklore Collection.

Playing 'Chariot', St Peter's National School. Bray.
Photo: George McClafferty, 1979

Initially the approach of the collectors was geographical. Particular areas – parishes, streets, regions – in the city were selected, and the focus was on oral lore, mainly taking the form of memoir. For instance, the first weeks of the Project, October and November 1979, were spent in the parish of Ringsend, which was recommended by Séamas Ó Catháin because it was known to have a particularly distinctive and traditional community. The approach of the collectors was straightforward and traditional in itself: they asked the parish priest for advice. In other areas, they applied to schoolteachers. As confidence grew, sometimes they simply went to a street and knocked on doors, usually getting a welcome and helpful reception. Armed with names and addresses, the collectors then visited the homes of those who had been recommended – e.g. in Ringsend, Mags Doyle. Mags was an elderly and very colourful woman who had been a midwife in Ringsend. Bróna Nic Amhlaoibh collected invaluable material from her, relating to childbirth, childcare, laying out of the dead, and women's work. In Ringsend the community soon became aware that the Urban Folklore people were in the neighbourhood and it was easy to find willing narrators. For example, I met one of my best informants, 'Lyrics' Murphy by accident one lunchtime in a pub on Thorncastle Street. 'Lyrics' had already taken a deep interest in the lore of Ringsend and had placed a list of local nicknames on the wall of the pub. He was a mine of information about the past, customs and practices, and was also a good storyteller: his favourite story was 'The Ghost of the Irish Glass Bottle Company'.

Playing 'Farmer wants a wife', St Patrick's National School, Bray. Photo: George McClafferty, 1979

'Lyrics' Murphy talking about Ringsend nicknames:

You had 'Muttsy' Fulham. You had 'Hoppy' Reilly. Another Byrne, this town is saturated with Byrnes, nearly as much as with Murphys. You had 'Bass' Byrne. You had 'Pollowalks' Lacey, 'Tear the Herring' Allen and 'Hoppy' Allen, no relation to one another.

Why was he called 'Tear the Herring'?
He was a remarkable man. He was always talking about herrings. They're great people for herrings, you know. And wait till I see now, you'd 'Hen' Atkins. He used to bushel the grain on the boats over there, you know. They used to call him 'The Hen'. He was so fast bushelling the grain, they called him 'The Hen'. The grain would disappear so quick.

You had 'Trowser' Memory, and you had 'The Bishop' Memory. They had a big house here where these flats are built. Think they had some connection with the church, you know, Church of England man.... You had 'Chase the Corpse' Murphy, and 'Shave the Corpse'. What's this his name was? Larry O'Neill. We'd call him 'Shave the Corpse'.

Why was that?
Anyone would die, you know. You know years ago most of them died at home. He'd go around and do the Good Samaritan, shaving them. And they christened that on him.

Why was someone called 'Chase the Corpse?'
This fellow was always ... he was a sort of agent for Massey, the undertaker, you know? He'd be going around like, before you'd be cold he'd be knocking at the door. 'How are you fixed?' 'How is your insurance?' Soften you up.

Paddy Lynch, O'Devany Gardens, Phibsboro.
Photo: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, 1980

There was one night here, a Saturday night, Lord have mercy … the Missus is dead, you know? And I had a good few drinks on me, and I was after coming out of Smith's and I was in bed. And this big tall man came knocking on the door. He said: 'I've come to measure up the corpse.' She says: 'What corpse?' 'I'm after getting a ring,' he says, 'to come down and measure Mr Lyrics Murphy.'

She says: 'Begob and I don't think he's dead,' she says. 'Wait till I see. You know more than I do,' she says, 'if he is.' She says: 'He's in there snoring his head off with a good few drinks on him.'

Some of the boys, you know, was after ringing up Murray's of Haddington Road. (NFC 1970: 358–63.)

While the Urban Folklore Project spread its wings over the whole of Dublin city and surrounding counties, Ringsend remained a focal point during the whole life of the project, thanks to its plenitude of excellent narrators and its rich life and lore. So even though we started in Ringsend in October 1979, we returned to record and photograph the annual Ringsend Regatta and Blessing of the Boats the following summer.

As the Urban Folklore Project developed, collecting was carried out thematically as well as geographically. One of the biggest projects focused on the lore of children. Rhymes, games, riddles, jokes, were collected from children in dozens of schools in many parts of Dublin and especially in Bray, Co. Wicklow. George McClafferty and his team were at the forefront here, but many others collected from children too. Seventy-five manuscripts of lore were assembled as well as innumerable photographs. In early 1980 the Department

'Bang Bang', Tommy Dudley, Drumcondra. Photo: Séamus Sisk, Gerard Brady, 1980

of Irish Folklore acquired a video recorder. 'Games Children Play' was the first, shaky, video made (one of the first video films made in Ireland – the technology was very new). Later, videos of the Swords Mummers and others were added to the collection.

As well as collecting oral lore, the Urban Folklore Project team documented material folk culture and folk life. Thousands of photographs of cityscapes and urban artifacts – bollards, lamp posts, shop fronts, houses, buildings – were taken. Information on crafts such as silversmithing, coopering, embroidery, bookbinding, and many others, was gathered. The thatched houses of North County Dublin were surveyed in detail by George McClafferty, Séamas Mac Philib, Bróna Nic Amhlaoibh, and their teams. Houses, many of them no longer extant, were thus surveyed. In addition, thatchers were interviewed and photographed at their work.

While most of those recorded during the Urban Folklore Project were talented oral narrators, such as the great Paddy Lynch of O'Devany Gardens, who were unknown and uncelebrated outside their immediate communities, some attention was paid to Dublin celebrities, or characters. Thus, Gerard Brady and Séamas Sisk visited and recorded 'Bang Bang', a famous Dublin character, in a care home in Drumcondra. Paddy O'Brien, famous barman at the literary pub, McDaids, was also recorded.

Paddy Lynch talks about Hardwicke Street slang:

> Now if we were playing ball and there was a guard coming we'd shout:
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> 'Ucklay outmay! Erestaay an awweray. Look out lads, here's a rawser!'
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> That's what we used to call the police. 'A rawser'.
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> They used to have the big helmet, you know? A chain. A beautiful chain and the crest and the chain and the big silver knob at the top. And the baton at the side. The baton was always there in the case. Tunic up, and a big belt and a big fancy buckle. Oh they were the well-dressed men.
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> All the splendour that was in this city is gone. The police, the fire-brigades. They were out of this world too. A big brass helmet. And it was a sort of feather. It went right up the centre of the helmet… a red tunic, blue breeches, and leather pull-up boots on them. Out of this world. (NFC 1975: 130–1)

The Urban Folklore Photographic Collection contains over five thousand photos of people, objects and places. Many of the best and most touching photographs are of ordinary urban scenes, like this one (opposite), taken by a collector as s/he walked the streets and noticed some person or thing which struck him or her as interesting at the time. That the collectors, almost always armed with their cameras, walked or cycled everywhere, or used public transport, was an unexpected bonus. They were always close to the pulse of life and on the spot when anything interesting was happening.

Window-shopping in O'Connell Street.
Photo: Séamas Mac Philib, 1980

Further reading

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