

Archivist

THE FOLKLORE AND FOLK MUSIC

folktales ballads legends dances proverbs superstitions chants
children's games marriage songs myths rhymes folk instruments
play party lullabies festivals tall tales folk lyrics cures jests

riddles
instrum
dreams

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THE IRISH FOLKLORE COMMISSION

Caoimhín Ó Danachair

The Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann) was set up by the Irish government in the year 1935 to undertake the collection, preservation, classification, study, and exposition of all aspects of Irish folk tradition. The Commission's field of enquiry is, thus, much wider than is usually implied in the term "folklore"; this may be seen in the Commission's system of classification of the material in fourteen main sections, which are:

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

These main headings are, in the mechanics of classification, again divided and subdivided under hundreds of subsidiary headings. We may note that this system is set forth very fully in the Handbook of Irish Folklore, by the Commission's archivist, Seán Ó Súilleabháin (Dublin, 1942, 699 pp). Thus it may be said that the Commission's work extends to all forms of human thought and endeavor in so far as these are remembered in popular tradition.

This work has been made possible by annual grants of money from the State, which enable the Commission to employ a number of full-time workers, of whom there are thirteen in the current year; six of these are engaged in archive and research work, two in administrative and office work and five as full-time collectors in the field. The Professor of Irish Folklore in University College, Dublin, acts as Honorary Director of the Commission.

Numbers of occasional and part-time workers have been employed from time to time as circumstances have allowed, and much good work has thus been achieved. But an outstanding feature is the wide measure of popular sympathy and support which the Commission and its work have enjoyed from the very beginning; it can be said that one half of all the material now preserved in the Commission's archive has been obtained by voluntary work.

The main bulk of the material preserved in the archive consists of manuscript or typescript of traditional lore hitherto preserved by memory and transmitted by word of mouth alone, and now for the first time written down from the recital of the older members of the community. We should note that a high proportion of this material has been obtained by the use of dictating machines, the employment of which ensures that the exact words of the narrators have been written down accurately without interruption of the natural rate of speech. To this has been added a very large number of descriptions of life and work, belief, custom and practice written down by people



A corner of the library of the Irish Folklore Commission

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THE IRISH FOLKLORE COMMISSION (cont.)

who themselves are sharers in the old tradition. The total amount of this written material now amounts to about a million and a quarter pages and fills 2,692 volumes bound in cloth and leather. It includes material from all parts of Ireland, but, as may be expected, the more remote districts, especially the Gaeltacht (Gaelic speaking areas), are particularly rich in many forms of traditions, and special attention has been given to them. Roughly two-thirds of the written material is in Irish (Gaelic) and one-third in English.

To supplement the written material two other important collections are being made. The first of these now contains over ten thousand photographs, plans, sketches, diagrams, and other pictorial representation of the visible aspects of tradition. The second is made up of sound records on disc and tape of such forms of traditional material as folktales and other folk narrative, songs, music, and other items which lose some of their character if preserved in written form alone. This sound record collection would occupy, in terms of the normal 12-inch 78 rpm discs, about eight thousand such discs. About four-fifths is recorded speech, the rest music and song.

A consistent effort has been made to reduce this large mass of material to systematic order, and the whole has already been indexed under about two hundred main subject headings. This index, however, is regarded as an interim measure only, and an extensive card-index catalogue, with full cross references, under several thousand headings, is in the course of preparation; this now covers only a little more than ten percent of the whole material and will take several years to complete. In its finished state it is expected to occupy some thousand index cards. A topographical and personal index, giving the names of all collectors and informants and their localities, is in the course of completion.

The Commission's library of printed works now holds some eighteen thousand books of books, periodicals, and papers, and is a specialist library for students and research workers. Its contents fall into three main categories, namely works dealing with Irish oral tradition and related subjects, works on the ethnography and folklore of other countries, especially those of western Europe, and journals and periodicals of institutions and learned societies engaged in similar work, mainly from Europe and North and South America.

Until recently the Commission has not produced any published work, but a series of studies of Irish folklore and folk life is now in progress. Mention must be made of the Folklore of Ireland Society (An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann), a voluntary body which is closely associated with the Commission's work, and which has published a journal, Béaloideas, since 1927, and a number of special volumes; a very extensive and important body of material has already appeared in these, partly in Irish, partly in English. Papers by members of the Commission's staff have appeared in many learned journals and symposia.

The office and archive of the Commission are to be found in an old Georgian house, no. 82, Saint Stephen's Green, Dublin. Built in the 1740's, this house has eight main rooms (averaging 20 feet by 16 feet), as well as basement, store rooms, and so on. The Commission's archive was moved to this house in 1950, up to which time it was accommodated in three rooms in the main building of University College, Dublin. The current budget amounts to £16,900 per annum.

Exchange of information with research workers in similar institutions in Europe and America is a regular feature of the Commission's activities, and efforts to facilitate the work of serious students are made as a matter of course. We may observe, however, that as the greater part of the material in written and sound-record form is in Irish (Gaelic), difficulties may be encountered by students not acquainted with that language. Finally, it must be stressed that hitherto the main efforts of the Commission's workers have been directed towards the collection and preservation of the material, rather than its study and exposition; this has been made necessary by the ever urgent consideration that they are engaged in rescue work, taking the last opportunities of recording a dying tradition. Secondary research work upon the recorded material, and its exposition must, for the time being, yield to the exigency of the more vital need.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

MANNE ERIKSSON is Head Keeper of the Landsmålsarkiv at Uppsala, Sweden.

CAOIMHÍN Ó DANACHAIR is Assistant to the Irish Folklore Commission in Dublin, Ireland.

GRACE WEIL is a private collector in the field of puppetry.

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