

An Introduction to the National Folklore Collection and Meitheal Dúchas.ie

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Introduction

In this paper, a brief description is given of the National Folklore Collection and in particular of the current project to digitize its contents and make them available at Dúchas.ie. Meitheal Dúchas.ie is described as well as some of its benefits.

The National Folklore Collection and the Dúchas project

The National Folklore Collection (NFC) is located in University College Dublin (UCD). Its mission is to collect, preserve and disseminate the oral tradition of Ireland.

A full history of the NFC and its antecedents can be found in Briody (2008). Much of the archival material housed in the NFC was amassed by its forerunners, the Irish Folklore Institute (1930-1935), the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1971), and the Department of Irish Folklore UCD (1972-2005). Also included are archive materials collected by the Folklore of Ireland Society (1926-), a group which has been closely associated with the National Folklore Collection. Since 2015 the Collection has resided administratively within UCD Library.

The importance of the NFC had been recognised for many years but limited opening hours and staff shortages meant that accessing the collection was difficult for researchers and members of the public. There is also a constant risk of damage to material which is not digitized and backed up securely. The decision was made therefore to commence a major digitization and publication project.

The Dúchas project commenced in 2012. The NFC partnered with Fiontar (now Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge or FSG), Dublin City University, who had considerable experience in managing digitization and publication projects. Their projects at the time included the National Terminology Database (téarma.ie), the Placenames Database of Ireland (logainm.ie) and Ainm, the national database of Irish-language biography (ainm.ie). All these projects were based on the organisation and presentation of information - terms, definitions, place names, research notes, biographical texts and all the related metadata - in a manner useful to both editors and the public. The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, in providing funding, recognised that Fiontar's technical, project management and editorial skills would complement the NFC's folklore and archival expertise.

The NFC's sub-collections and their presentation in digital format are described below.

The Schools' Collection

Three quarters of a million pages of folklore and local tradition were compiled by primary school pupils in the Irish Free State between 1937 and 1939. This includes oral history, topographical information, folktales and legends, riddles and proverbs, games and pastimes,

trades and crafts. The children recorded this material from their parents, grandparents, and neighbours using guidelines issued to the schools (Irish Folklore Commission 1937). The scheme is generally referred to as 'Bailiúchán na Scol' or 'The Schools' Collection'.

This collecting scheme was initiated by the Irish Folklore Commission, under the direction of Séamus Ó Duilearga and Séan Ó Súilleabháin, Honorary Director and Registrar of the Commission respectively, and was heavily dependent on the cooperation of the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organization. It was originally to run from 1937 to 1938 but was extended to 1939 in specific cases. For the duration of the project, more than 50,000 schoolchildren from 5,000 schools in the 26 counties of the Irish Free State were enlisted to collect folklore in their home districts.

There are 1,128 volumes, numbered and bound, in the finished Collection, with c.451,000 pages. A title page prefaces each school, giving the name of the school, the parish, the barony, the county and the teacher. A further collection of approximately 40,000 of the children's original exercise books (c.288,000 pages) are stored at the NFC. Material from these exercise books was selected by the teacher for inclusion in each volume (a discussion of how the teachers influenced and edited that material is available in Bhreathnach et al 2018).

Given the level of interest in the Schools' Collection¹, its broad appeal, and its importance, it was the first to be digitized as part of the Dúchas project. A digital archive and a custom-made data management and editorial interface were created by FSG for the purpose of indexing the material. A public interface was developed and designed to make the digitized and indexed material gradually available to the public. The volumes were scanned by specialist contractors. A team of editors was recruited to carry out the indexing work between 2012 and 2016 and these editors checked every story in the Schools' Collection, recording metadata about the collectors, the informants and the stories itself. Their work was double-checked by a senior editor. Any stories or pages considered sensitive were highlighted and discussed by an editorial committee; material considered likely to cause embarrassment or offence was not published. Examples of such material include derogatory descriptions of particular named families, or accusations of wrongdoing or some other sort of socially unacceptable behavior by an identifiable individual. Among the most common of these in the Schools' Collection are begging, theft, land-grabbing, murder, and political violence. (Ó Cleircín et al 2015).

By December 2016 all of the bound volumes from the Schools' Collection had been digitized, indexed and published as well as a selection of copybooks relating to schools that, for whatever reason, do not have material included in those volumes. (Other copybooks, which contain a lot of repetition, have not been digitized, but can be consulted in the NFC.)

There has been huge interest in the Schools' Collection since it was made available online. Because of the close links with schools, places and families, readers find it easy to discover

¹ A list of publications based on the Schools' Collection can be found at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/info/res> [accessed October 2019]

family connections and personal interests. This has been helped by the fact that the Collection can be searched on a map, by surname or by topic.

The Photographic Collection

Once the Schools' Collection had been published, the Dúchas team moved on to the publication of the Photographic Collection. In this case, the task was to organise and expand a digital catalogue of the Collection, over 80,000 records, and to prepare c.10,000 images for publication. This was carried out in 2017 and has been expanded since with photographs being digitized by the NFC on an ongoing basis.

The majority of the photographs in the Collection were taken by members of the Irish Folklore Commission and its successors, including staff of the National Folklore Collection. The Commission's ethnologist, Caoimhín Ó Danachair, who conducted field work throughout Ireland over many years, is responsible for a significant portion. Other Commission members, including its Director, Séamus Ó Duilearga, Michael J. Murphy, Leo Corduff, and many field workers also captured important images of folklore informants and Irish folklife.

The images are preserved in a variety of film formats: positives and negatives (including some 6,000 nitrate negatives), both black & white and colour, ranging from 35mm to larger format film. The collection also contains a significant number of early glass plates and lantern slides alongside a large number of photographic prints, drawings and art works which have been photographed. The collection continues to grow through the activities of staff and supporters of the National Folklore Collection, and the contribution of valuable historic photographs by members of the public.

The collection is catalogued thematically in accordance with the subject headings in Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1942). Themes include vernacular dwellings and other man-made features, livelihoods, crafts, commerce, transport, the sea, education, the practice of religion, food, dress, festivals and rites of passage, storytellers, musicians, pastimes and sport.

Although some information is included in each record, elements - date, place, people, circumstances - can be missing. These are often filled in by members of the public, who contact the Dúchas project with information and corrections.

The Main Manuscript Collection

Since 2018, the focus of the project has moved to the Main Manuscript Collection. This is a collection of all the folklore manuscripts (excluding the Schools' Collection) amassed by the Irish Folklore Commission and its successors.

The Collection preserves an important record of Ireland's oral tradition and material culture. It is recognized as one of the largest collections of its kind in Western Europe. It features folklore recorded from across the 32 counties, in both Irish and English. It covers 14 key subject areas, as follows: Settlement and Dwelling, Livelihood & 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.

The Collection also includes in-depth descriptions of the Famine period in Ireland (1845-1849), first-person recollections of the historically significant 1913 Lockout and the 1916 Rising, as well as oral traditional accounts of historical figures such as Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), making it a valuable primary source for scholars and educationalists.

In recognition of the ongoing decline of the Irish language, and the likely loss of tradition associated with this process, the Commission directed considerable resources to recording Irish-language tradition bearers in the early years of its operation. Some of Ireland's most famous traditional storytellers are in the collection, including Peig Sayers, the Great Basket Island, Co. Kerry; Éamon a Búrc, Carna, Co. Galway; Anna Nic a' Luain of the Blue Stack Mountains, Co. Donegal, and many others besides. There are also significant amounts of material in Scots Gaelic and Manx.

Much of the Collection was assembled by full-time collectors working for the Irish Folklore Commission, for example Seosamh Ó Dálaigh in County Kerry and Seán Ó hEochaidh in County Donegal². These collectors were very familiar with the dialect and lore of their respective districts. A large proportion of the material taken down by full-time collectors consists of verbatim transcripts of field recordings made on Ediphone (wax cylinder) recording machines and, in subsequent years, on gramophone disks and tape recorders.

All full-time collectors were expected to keep a diary, documenting contextual information about recording sessions, their informants and their working day in general. These diaries are also included in the Main Manuscript Collection and will be digitized in due course. They include valuable contemporary descriptions and biographical information relating to informants.

Many part-time and voluntary collectors contributed to the work of the Commission. A number of these were school teachers from throughout Ireland who had developed an interest in, and an understanding of, folklore in their local districts from their participation in the Schools' Folklore Scheme. In addition to submitting occasional items of local folklore recorded by them, these men and women also sent detailed responses to more than a hundred different Commission questionnaires concerning a variety of topics. The topics investigated varied greatly, the earliest questionnaires dealing with subjects as varied as Holy Wells and 'Tally Sticks'. Other subjects included The Feast of St Martin, The Last Sheaf, The Blacksmith, Roofs and Thatching, Ball Games, Matchmaking, Hurling and Football, The Great Famine, Funerary Custom, Food, Dress etc. The replies to the questionnaires comprise an important element of the Main Manuscript collection.

In recognition of its 'world significance' and 'outstanding universal value to culture', the Irish Folklore Commission Collection 1935-1970 was inscribed into the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in September 2017.

² Information about these collectors and storytellers can be found at ainm.ie, the national Irish-language biographies database.

As with the Schools' Collection, the manuscripts are being scanned and indexed, starting at Volume 139 from 1935 - the point where a consistent collecting and recording method was put in place. (Material from Volumes 1-138 will be indexed at a later stage.) Due to the often unclear handwriting and the difficulty of some of the material compared to the Schools' Collection, this can be challenging work for the editors and progress on some of the volumes is slow. Despite this, however, over 4,000 pages were published in 2018. An index of topics and a full database of informants and collectors was assembled simultaneously.

The Main Manuscript Collection consists of 2,400 bound and paginated volumes - approximately 700,000 pages of material. Clearly, it will take some years before the whole Collection can be digitized. The editors focus their indexing on the more obviously valuable volumes, aiming to represent a spread from all the Gaeltacht and other areas. A PhD student, Michelle Dunne, is indexing and editing the work of one collector, Seán Mac Mathúna of Luogh, Doolin, Co Clare, and the potential for further research in the Collection is obvious. The digitization and indexing work of the Dúchas project should facilitate such research.

The Audio Collection

Another part of the NFC on which digitization and publication work is ongoing is the Audio Collection. This collection encompasses over 12,000 hours of material, including what may be the oldest extant recordings of traditional Irish music from the first Feis Ceoil in Dublin in 1897; Irish-language material collected in Omeath in the very early 20th century; Irish-language material collected in the 1930s in Kilkenny, Tyrone, Louth and Roscommon; and the voices of storytellers such as Éamonn a Búrc, Seán Ó Conaill, Anna Nic a' Luain, Peig Sayers, Peadar Bairéad, and Nioclás Breathnach. There are also recordings of the last speakers of Manx and other material in Scots Gaelic, Breton and Welsh. This material will be made available over the coming years, starting with material recorded on acetate disks in the period 1947-56.

Meitheal Dúchas.ie

Crowdsourcing, and community transcription in particular, has many advantages: work can be carried out inexpensively; problems can be solved by participants with local or specialised knowledge; and the profile of the research itself is raised. The participants acquire new skills, and gain satisfaction from their work (if they don't, of course, the project won't work). On the other hand, the work is by no means effortless for the organisers: there is an administrative burden, the technical solution must be satisfactory, contact must be kept with the volunteers and publicity sought for the work. There can also be copyright and data protection issues to face.

It was decided in 2014 to trial a community transcription approach to the Schools' Collection, as a way to publicise the project as an educational resource and to increase community participation. This was a relatively new idea at the time, and many of the team's plans were based on two successful projects: *Transcribe Bentham*³, a University College London project

³ <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/transcribe-bentham/> [accessed October 2019]

to transcribe the complete works of Jeremy Bentham, and *Letters 1916*⁴ (subsequently *Letters 1916-1923*), a Maynooth University project to collect and transcribe letters.

Although Optical Character Recognition (OCR) could be tried out for the transcription task, the results were likely to be poor due to the mixture of Irish- and English-language material, the use of Roman and Gaelic script, nonstandard spelling and many different handwritings. (That said, OCR is constantly improving and may be a realistic option in the near future.)

A transcription resource - named Meitheal Dúchas.ie⁵ - was developed with the aim of making volunteering as easy as possible. The resource comprises of a simple a text box into which a story can be transcribed. This is then saved, and can be edited by an administrator or another member of the Meitheal. Simple instructions are provided, with a guide to common issues ('r' and 's' in Gaelic script; lenition marks; 't' for 'agus', etc.).

Meitheal Dúchas.ie attracted interest from when it was launched in April 2015. Efforts were made to publicise it on a monthly basis, particularly on social media and in Irish-language media. Irish-language media provided coverage, and it was presented at various conferences (Léachtaí Cholm Cille XLVI and Daonscoil na Mumhan, for example). Posters and brochures were designed. An article about the Meitheal was published in the Gaelscoileanna Teo. newsletter and an ad placed in *Books Ireland*. The project was also advertised by Dairygold as part of their 'Make a minute' campaign during 2018.

The results to date (October 2019) have been impressive. There are 5,221 registered members of the Meitheal, as well as many unregistered transcribers. They have transcribed 220,012 pages. This is an average of 42 pages per registered user, but in reality much of the transcription work is done by a small group of dedicated 'super transcribers'. 69 members have transcribed more than 500 pages each, and the most active has transcribed 20,820 pages and corrected another 4,429. This tallies with the results reported by *Transcribe Bentham* (Causer et al 2018) who also found that a small, motivated group carried out most of the transcriptions.

Schools (both primary and secondary) and universities were among the most enthusiastic users of the Meitheal from the start. For example, pupils from Scoil Mhaodhóig, Poulfur, Fethard-on-Sea participated as a way to mark their move to a new school premises:

As we prepared to move to our new school, and our old school was being demolished, we thought it would be a cool idea to play our part in transcribing the material from our school, and so, 1st and 6th class came together to work as historians and transcribe the stories from Poulfur National School. This initiative ticked so many boxes for us, and gave many rewards to the children. It gave them an opportunity to work together, to learn about places, archaeological features, events and stories from their community. It was also an opportunity to learn about how some things have changed and others have stayed the same over those years. We

⁴ <http://letters1916.maynoothuniversity.ie/> [accessed October 2019]

⁵ <https://www.duchas.ie/en/meitheal> [accessed October 2019]

followed this up by collecting our own stories of life in school, and compared them with stories that had been collected.⁶

In 2019 two students, Kate Bagnall and Bobbi Beattie, from the King's Hospital School in Dublin won the Irish Research Council award at the Young Scientist Exhibition. Their project, 'Using statistics to investigate changing use of language in Irish Primary students' writing after 80 Years', involved transcribing and analysing material from a school in Co Meath, and comparing it to new writing by children at the same school.⁷

It is very important for a publicly-funded project such as Dúchas to be presented to the public in as engaging and easy-to-use a fashion as possible. The Meitheal is one way of doing this, as it allows the user to get involved with raw primary sources and to make a significant contribution to their preservation.

As well as the educational and engagement aspects, there are other positive results from the Meitheal Dúchas.ie transcription work. It vastly improves the search function on the site itself; for example, the words 'black and tans' only appear in 22 stories but in 352 transcripts; 'dolls' appears in 18 stories but in 286 transcripts⁸. This is because many of the story titles conform to the rather bland list of suggestions given by the Irish Folklore Commission ('local happenings' or 'homemade toys'). Given the number of searches made on the site (610,337 in 2018), this is a valuable improvement. A corpus of material is being created, too, which will be of considerable value for linguistic research on both the English and Irish languages in Ireland in the 20th Century. And of course the transcribed texts are much easier to read than the scanned images.

The Irish Folklore Commission was reliant on the goodwill and generosity of the public while the Schools' Collection and other collections were being compiled. Meitheal Dúchas.ie continues that tradition into the digital age.

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⁶ <https://www.gaois.ie/blg/ga/cupla-focal-o-bhall-de-mheitheal-uchas.ie/> [accessed October 2019]

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