

Nomination form
International Memory of the World Register

The Irish Folklore Commission Collection 1935-1970

ID Code [2016-115]

Give a brief description of the documentary heritage being nominated and the reasons for proposing it.

This application for nomination to the Memory of the World register pertains to a finite collection within the National Folklore Collection (NFC), University College Dublin. *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* was assembled in the years 1935 to 1970 and forms the core archival material held in the National Folklore Collection UCD, one of Europe's largest archives of oral tradition and cultural history.

The Irish Folklore Commission Collection comprises varied documentary formats which include audio, visual, manuscript and rare printed materials, spanning all aspects of human endeavour and traditional knowledge, from material culture to oral literature, language and artistic expression. Inspired and guided by the systematic, pioneering cultural efforts of Scandinavian scholars to document their own folklore and cultural history, the Commission worked carefully and enthusiastically to document and record Irish material and oral culture at a point in time when the Gaelic language was in serious decline, while the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation had not yet eroded older cultural patterns and practices.

The Irish Folklore Commission Collection contains a number of unique items of national and international significance including:

- A collection of early wax cylinder sound recordings, including a recording from the inaugural Feis Ceoil Festival held in 1897 (*the first traditional Irish music festival of its kind during the cultural revivalist period*)
- Several thousand acetate disk records of native Gaelic speakers dating from the 1940s/50s
- A substantial collection of high quality magnetic tape/reel-to-reel recordings dating from the 1950s through to the 1960s.
- Audio and film footage from the 1940s of internationally renowned storytellers such as Peig Sayers, and performances of Irish folk drama such as "Wren Boys" and "Mummers" (*traditional Irish performances carried out at specific times of the year with distinctive costumes*)
- Almost 4,000 manuscripts consisting of interviews with informants as well as native hero tales and sagas, wonder tales, local legends, poetry, historical tradition and place-name lore, in both Irish Gaelic and English. They also contain invaluable descriptions of Irish material culture, including vernacular architecture, and traditional Irish society generally.
- A number of early manuscripts from the 18th and 19th centuries including a manuscript copy of the influential *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn (A History of Ireland, by Seathrún Céitinn / Geoffrey Keating)*, noted for its decoration and artistry.
- Some 90,000 archive photographs (film negatives and transparencies) taken by Commission fieldworkers throughout Ireland, and a substantial collection of paintings and drawings, some of which are of especial historical importance, such as Daniel McDonald's *The Discovery of the Potato Blight in Ireland* (1847), and Lady Elizabeth Butler's *The Eviction* (1890).

Through its online portal – www.duchas.ie – this rich collection of archival material is now being digitised and brought to the attention of a wider national and international audience. This initiative, launched in December 2013, is a joint University College Dublin / Dublin City University digitisation project, [Dúchas.ie](http://Duchas.ie), funded jointly by the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht and University College Dublin, and supported by the National Folklore Foundation.

In order to further safeguard the Collection, and to enhance efforts to preserve and to make this unique documentary heritage more accessible, it is proposed that it be accorded recognition by UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme.

2.0 Nominator

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

The National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

The *Irish Folklore Commission Collection* was placed in the permanent custodianship of University College Dublin by the Government of Ireland in 1971.

2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

Thérèse O'Connor, Deputy Director, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 23 Kildare Street, Dublin 2, D02 TD30

2.4 Contact details

Name Thérèse O'Connor

Address Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 23 Kildare Street, Dublin 2, D02 TD30

Telephone +353 1 631 3894

Email Therese.OConnor@ahg.gov.ie

Date 27 May 2016

3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given

For the purposes of this nomination *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* refers to the body of archive material within the NFC collected by the Irish Folklore Commission during the time of its operation (1935–1970). This specific collection forms a distinct, finite unit in itself, representing the efforts of a dedicated group of collectors, archivists and scholars to preserve knowledge of the disappearing material and vernacular traditions and customs of a predominantly rural population at a moment of key social and cultural transition. The collection has not been altered or supplemented, nor will it be in the future. It is now housed within the National Folklore Collection, UCD and is preserved as part of the latter organisation's broader archive.

The Irish Folklore Commission Collection, spanning the years 1935-1970, comprises the following materials. For a detailed overview please see Appendix 2 - Collection Catalogue

The Main Manuscript Fond

This consists of 1800 bound volumes of transcriptions of interviews recorded by the Irish Folklore Commission, from across the 32 counties of the island of Ireland between 1935-1970, amounting to

675,000 pages of material. The Main Manuscript Fond also includes older manuscript material acquired by the Commission, the earliest of which dates from the 1700s, as well as approximately 3,000 pages of original sheet music.

Miscellaneous manuscript material and a range of other documents chiefly relating to the operation the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1970) and related organisations form part of the Collection. The Collection also features a number of important deposited collections of scholarly papers.

The Schools' Manuscript Fond

By enlisting the help of schoolteachers, senior Primary School children (aged 10-14 years) and their communities in the school year 1937-38, the Irish Folklore Commission, with the cooperation of the Irish Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, collected an unprecedented 750,000 pages of oral tradition (1128 bound volumes) from across the 26 counties of the Irish Free State, complementing the materials gathered elsewhere by the Commission's professional collectors.

The Sound and Video Fond

Throughout its lifetime the Irish Folklore Commission employed a variety of audio recording devices with which to record interviews with tradition bearers. They include the Ediphone wax cylinder recorder, acetate disk-cutting machines, wire recorders, and reel-to-reel magnetic tape recording machines., besides a 16mm cinefilm camera. The interviews recorded cover many aspects of Irish folklore, folk music, ethnology and history, and has been collected, for the most part, by professional fieldworkers. The recordings are in English and in Irish, with other languages, such as Breton, Manx and Scottish Gaelic, represented also.

Photographs, Paintings and Drawings

Some 90,000 archive photographs (film negatives and transparencies, photographic prints etc.) taken by Commission fieldworkers throughout Ireland, and a substantial collection of paintings and drawings donated to the Commission.

Specialist reference library

The specialist library contains books, periodicals and offprints dealing with Irish and comparative folklore, ethnology and related fields.

3.4 History/provenance

“The traditions of Ireland are the background of our history; they have helped in large measure to mould the Ireland of the past; they are part and parcel of the Irish nation of today. We desire to see them known and honoured, for the Ireland of tomorrow will have need of them, finding in them a source of inspiration and pride.”

J. H. Delargy, Honorary Director, Irish Folklore Commission (1942)

With the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, following the War of Independence, there was a driving political and social impetus for establishing a clear sense of Irish nationhood and identity,

following the historical system of British imperial rule. The years preceding Irish independence had seen a growing level of engagement and support for the suppressed ideals and traditions of Gaelic and Celtic culture, through the operation of such cultural organisations as The Gaelic League, The Irish Literary Society and The Gaelic Athletic Association. With the birth of the new state, the value of Irish vernacular and material culture was recognised as a tool for consolidating new ideas of what the Irish nation was and would grow to be, one respectful of its past, and keen to safeguard its heritage, much of which was under threat, particularly in rural Ireland.

The presence of such political support lent itself to the establishment of the Irish Folklore Society in 1927 and its subsequent reincarnation as the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935. Heavily influenced and supported by noted international scholars such as Swedish folklorist Carl Von Sydow, Norwegian linguist Carl Marstrand and German folklorist Kuno Meyer, whose scientific working methods they adopted, the Commission's objective was to *collect, preserve and disseminate* the vernacular tradition of the island of Ireland. Recognising the threat posed to traditional ways of life, particularly in the rural Irish-speaking communities (Gaeltachtaí), seen as the last outposts of Gaelic culture, the Commission commenced its work with vigour in 1935. It deployed full and part-time collectors to all 32 counties of Ireland to collect data on folk traditions and customs, and vernacular culture, as detailed in *The Handbook of Irish Folklore*, published in 1942, for their instruction.

The collected body of material that makes up *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection*, across all fonds, preserves the vernacular and material culture of the native Irish population and can be said to encapsulate the following 14 key index areas, making it one of the richest folk archives of its kind in Ireland and Western Europe.

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.

4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

The *Irish Folklore Commission Collection* was placed in the permanent custodianship of University College Dublin by the Government of Ireland in 1971. The National Folklore Collection is a constituent part of UCD Library with appropriate custodial, conservation and protective measures in place.

Name: National Folklore Collection

Address: Newman Building, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4

Telephone 00353 1 716 8216

Email béaloideas@ucd.ie

4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)

Name: Dr. Críostóir Mac Carthaigh, Director

Address: National Folklore Collection, Newman Building, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4

Telephone 00353 1 716 8216

Email cristoir.maccarthaigh@ucd.ie

4.3 Legal status

Provide details of legal and administrative responsibility for the preservation of the documentary heritage

Following the dissolution of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1970, the Government of Ireland, with the agency of the Secretary General of the Department of Education, placed the library and archives of the Commission, and responsibility for personnel associated with it, with University College Dublin on a permanent basis in 1971. A new Department of Irish Folklore was established by the College in the same year. It was tasked with caring for the Commission's collections, allied to its role of teaching Irish folklore, the first course of its kind in Ireland.

In 2005 the Department of Irish Folklore became a constituent part of the newly created School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Irish Folklore and Linguistics. In 2015, overall responsibility for the management of the National Folklore Collection, comprising all of the archival materials inherited and generated by the Department of Irish Folklore, was transferred to UCD Library.

4.4 Accessibility

Describe how the item(s) / collection may be accessed

All access restrictions should be explicitly stated below:

The guiding mission and institutional values of the National Folklore Collection ensure that its collections are made readily available to the public. *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection*, within the broader National Folklore Collection archive, is open to the public Tuesday – Friday, 2.30pm-5.30pm each week, save for specific holiday periods. All collections are closed to the public in August each year for conservation, cataloguing and maintenance work.

Public access comprises:

- Guided tours
- Information sessions
- Digital Access, www.duchas.ie and www.ucd.ie/folklore
- Public Participation and Outreach
- Publications
- International/National Cooperation

A detailed overview of all access opportunities is available within the National Folklore collection's Management Plan, attached herewith for ease as Appendix 2

4.5 Copyright status

Describe the copyright status of the item(s) / collection

Copyright for the National Folklore Collection rests with University College Dublin. Written permission from the Director of the National Folklore Collection must be obtained in order to publish, broadcast (or reproduce in any format) archival material from the NFC. The Dúchas.ie digitisation project and website is governed by the Creative Commons license [CC-BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

5.1 Authenticity

Detailed historical information regarding the foundation of the Irish Folklore Commission and other contextual information regarding its operation and dealings with state bodies and international organisations and other interested parties are contained in the archives of the National Folklore Collection. The authenticity of *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* has been confirmed and is well documented in such sources as those listed below:

- Historical foundation documents including meeting minutes, financial records, organisational diaries, organisational correspondence and annual reports
- Department of Finance and Department of Education correspondence on its initial planning, creation and management
- Irish Folklore Commission correspondence on the planning, implementation, management and preservation of the Collection
- Irish Folklore Commission catalogue outlining content
- Peer reviewed academic publications, including work by notable scholars such as Michael Briody's *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*, The Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki, 2007
- Hundreds of published articles and books since 1935
- Broadcast documentaries
- Historic newspaper clippings

5.2 World significance

One of the largest collections of vernacular folk literature in Western Europe, *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* also preserves for posterity the rich material culture of rural Ireland, much of which was lost through the decline of the Irish language, the rise of urbanisation and the passing of tradition bearers during the mid 20th century period. Both a unique and now irreplaceable example of documentary heritage, the loss of this Collection would impoverish the Irish and global memory, owing to its value and significance in the spheres of comparative folklore studies, linguistics, migratory studies and ethnology.

5.3 Comparative criteria:

Does the heritage meet any of the following tests? (It must meet at least one of them.)

1 Time

The years 1935-1970 oversaw a period of dramatic social and cultural change in Ireland, particularly in rural Ireland, which witnessed increasing depopulation through emigration, the decline of the Irish language and the erosion of traditional material culture through modern urbanisation. Such significant change meant that older practices – storytelling, crafts, local customs and traditions – would be lost within two generations as the final tradition bearers passed away. The Collection amassed by the Irish Folklore Commission bears testament to the richness of this traditional store of information, which

survived for centuries on the lips of its citizens, and is preserved for posterity as a priceless evocation of a time now passed.

2 Place

The Collection represents the vernacular and ethnological traditions of the 32 counties of the island of Ireland, broken down by townlands and parishes. The Collection also encompasses, through the work of Calum Maclean, materials from Western Scotland. The collected material, including manuscripts, photographs and audio/visual matter, paints a unique picture of these individual regions. Such data - that on dwellings, settlements, townlands, local ruins, many now lost, would never have featured in official data gathering exercises and so the Collection captures much information on these places not readily available in other primary historical sources.

In addition to its local, regional and national importance, careful study has also revealed within the Collection the presence of folkloric material of international import. Samples of key narrative tales preserved within the Collection offer opportunities for further comparative studies with collections in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Estonia, nations with vernacular traditions known to have had interaction with Irish frameworks, providing further insights on the migratory impulses of people and traditions in Northern and Western Europe.

3 People

The Main Manuscript Fond features transcribed tales from some of Ireland's most famous traditional storytellers, including Peig Sayers and Tomás Ó Criomthain from Co. Kerry in the South of Ireland, to Anna Nic a' Luain from Co. Donegal in the North West. The Sound and Photograph Fond holds rare recorded audio material from Dr. Douglas Hyde, the first President of Ireland, as well as audio samples from native storytellers Éamonn a' Búrc, Seán Ó Conaill, Peadar Bairéad and Nicolas Breathnach, capturing their recitations in the Irish language and dialect of their respective regions.

The Art fond contains works from noted artists such as Daniel McDonald and Lady Elizabeth

Butler, unavailable in any existing private or public collections, and crucial items in those artists' artistic canons.

The Correspondence Fond holds letters from individuals as varied as animator Walt Disney and Irish Prime Minister Éamonn De Valera. In addition, the Correspondence Fond also speaks to the development of a number of cultural and social movements in transition during the period 1935-1970, making it a valuable source of research data for social, cultural and historical scholars. On a final note, bequests contained within the Collection include those pertaining to noted music collectors Seamus Ennis and Tom Munnely, Scottish folklorist Calum Maclean, Deputy Keeper of the British Museum Dr. Robin Flower and lexicographer Fr. P.S Dineen. All these combine to offer a unique insight into the lives of these prominent individuals as they interacted with this very particular subject sphere.

4 Subject and theme

Heavily influenced by the scientific methods of folklore collection pioneered by Scandinavian scholars, the subject matter contained within *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection*, across all fonds, was systematically collected and catalogued using 14 key subject index chapters. These are as follows:

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.

To highlight just a sample of the significant items embraced within these headings, the Collection includes in-depth descriptions of the Famine period in Ireland (1845-1847), first-person recollections of the historically significant 1913 Lockout and the 1916 Rising, as well as third-party recollections of historical figures such as Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), making it a valuable primary source for scholars and interested parties.

5 Form and style

Linguistically, two thirds of the Collection's manuscript material was collected and transcribed in the Irish language, and some of these transcriptions are rendered in the now-obsolete Cló Ghaelach typescript. As the Irish language has progressively regressed across much of Ireland in the years since the Commission's operation, including the main Irish-speaking regions (Gaeltachtaí), the Collection offers a key record of the four main dialects of the language as they existed in 1935-1970, in all their diversity and richness – Ulster, Connaught, Munster and Leinster representing the four main dialect locations. Much of the vocabulary used in the materials is no longer readily used by modern, contemporary speakers and so renders the Collection a valuable repository of vernacular Irish, and a source of rich linguistic investigation.

Recordings within the Collection of various regional styles of music (fiddle, uilleann pipes, whistle, flute, accordion etc) from the 1940s have become increasingly sought-after due to their undiluted and pure quality, uninfluenced by the introduction of mass media.

In addition to its linguistic importance, the Collection also has huge aesthetic value owing to its impressive array of artwork and photographic material, including Lady Butler's *The Eviction*, Daniel McDonald's *The Discovery of the Potato Blight* and Maria Spilsbury Taylor's *Pattern at Glendalough*.

The early manuscripts acquired by the Commission are also excellent examples of the early medieval script and associated illustrative art. Similarly, the early wax cylinder ediphone recordings are now rare examples from this burgeoning period in early sound recording technology.

6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:

Speaking at the 75th anniversary of the Irish Folklore Commission's creation, the noted American Professor Henry Glassie stated that its foundation was "*the most important event in the history of folklore in the twentieth century.*" The importance of its subsequent Collection is equally significant, nationally and internationally. It continues to bind itself to the collective memory of the Irish population but also holds a strong attachment for international audiences.

Extending into each of Ireland's 32 counties, and to a greater or lesser extent the majority of townlands within, as well as the Isles of Western Scotland, the *Irish Folklore Commission Collection* preserves a snapshot of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland at a moment of key social and cultural transition. It reflects the lives of citizens not ordinarily captured by primary sources to the same degree. Subsequent generations (local, national and international) continue to be drawn to its content, for reasons as varied as genealogical attachment, scholarly research, or historical and cultural validation.

6.0 Contextual information

6.1 Rarity

Within the broader collection of the National Folklore Collection in UCD, *The Irish Folklore Commission Collection* continues to be recognised as one of Europe's richest archives of western vernacular tradition, with many of its items noted for their distinct rarity. Examples include the sound recordings of the first Féis Ceoil Festival in 1897, 18th century manuscript editions, as well as rare audio and film footage of notable tradition bearers.

6.2 Integrity

This corpus of original material, encompassing manuscript, audio, photographic and art fonds, is finite, static and unchanging and thus distinguishable from the rest of the National Folklore Collection whose constituent parts are dynamic and developing. Housed at the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin, the *Irish Folklore Commission Collection* is preserved and

maintained by the experienced Collection staff to ensure its integrity and continued survival for future generations through traditional conservation methods alongside new digital access opportunities.