



MÍCHEÁL BRIODY

The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970

History, ideology, methodology

Studia Fennica
Folkloristica 17

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‘I wish to thank you again for the warm-hearted appreciation of my talk at the Finnish Literary [*recte* Literature] Society. I was myself deeply moved by the experience, and I shall never forget that night as long as I live. It will always be my proudest memory, and I value the great privilege accorded to me of speaking in the heart of Finland – your archive. When I got home I spoke in Irish about that visit to the room where the Irish Folklore Commission was born, 23 years ago.’ Séamus Ó Duilearga to Martti Haavio, 7.IX.1951

To my father, Thomas (Tosty) Briody, and in memory of my mother, Nora O’Hickey

Preface

This is the last part of this long work to be undertaken, but in many ways the hardest part to write: so much to say, and so much that cannot be said. This present work grew out of another study, on the Irish Heroic Folktale, that I began in the late 1980's, which I had hoped to present as a doctoral thesis. When most of the basic archival work was complete around autumn 1990 certain difficulties arose that forced me in time to abandon this piece of research. A day or two after these difficulties first arose, by a strange coincidence, or perhaps a stroke of fate, I became aware of the existence of files on the Irish Folklore Commission in the National Archives of Ireland. However, it was not until the summer of 2000 that I officially applied to undertake a doctoral thesis on the subject of the Irish Folklore Commission, and later that year, while on a sabbatical in Ireland, began in earnest to research the subject.

Researching and writing up this work has not been an easy task as most of my sources lie at the other periphery of Europe. It could not have been brought to completion without the assistance of many individuals and institutions. First and foremost I have to thank Diarmuid Ó Giolláin of University College Cork. If it were not for his encouragement and inspiration, it is unlikely that I would have persisted with this work, and indeed with the study of folkloristics. He has also assisted this work in numerous other practical ways. I also owe a particular debt of gratitude to Jukka Saarinen of the Finnish Literature Society for coming to my aid on innumerable occasions with help and advice while I was engaged in this study, as well as for his friendship down through the years.

But for a chance conversation with the late Dr. Philomena Connolly one afternoon in August 1990 as I was about to leave the National Archives of Ireland I would not have become aware of the existence of Government files on the Irish Folklore Commission in the first place. Moreover, without the assistance of her colleague Eamonn Mullally, who during the early 1990's helped locate further material on the Commission in the National Archives for me, my interest in this subject might not have been sustained nor have developed beyond the initial fascination it stirred in me. To both I owe a great debt of gratitude.

The Irish proverb says 'Níor dhún Dia doras riamh nár oscail sé doras eile' ('God never closed one door but He opened another'). Philomena Connolly

and Eamonn Mullally opened a door for me back in 1990, which might otherwise have remained closed, but many people in Ireland and abroad have subsequently opened other doors for me. In respect of Ireland, I must first thank Denis Tuomey of the Department of Education. But for his quick action in 1994 a great deal of the files on which this study is based might have been lost. Denis Tuomey's successor, Andrea Hudson, also assisted my research both by finding further Education files for me and by facilitating my access to them in the Department of Education. Without the files that both Denis and Andrea saved and made available to me I could never have attempted writing a comprehensive work on the Commission.

In respect of those who have helped me access archives outside Ireland, above all I must thank Marlene Hugoson of the Institute for Language and Folklore in Uppsala. From the first initial contact I made with her she has gone out of her way to help me in my research. Moreover, during my short visit to Uppsala in December 2004 she and her colleague, Bodil Nildin-Wall, did their utmost so that I could maximise the short time I had available to me to spend researching among the Åke Campbell papers, a source that was to prove crucial for aspects of my research.

In connection with the archive whose collections I have used most in this study, namely the National Archives of Ireland, in addition to the two members of staff mentioned above, I would like to thank all the rest of staff who have helped me down through the years. Moreover I would like to thank the Director of the National Archives of Ireland for permission to publish material in its possession. The papers of Stith Thompson and Richard M. Dorson are utilised courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana (my thanks to Sandra Taylor and Rebecca C. Cape), and various papers in the National Library of Ireland courtesy of its Trustees. I would also like to acknowledge the UCD Archives as well as the UCD-OFM Partnership for permission to quote from materials in their possession, and to express a special word of thanks to Seamus Helferty for all his help. In addition, I would like to thank the following institutions and individuals for help in accessing as well as permission to utilise and publish materials in their care: (in Ireland) 1) Coláiste Íde, an Daingean (Fionán Ó hÓgáin); 2) National Museum of Ireland/Museum of Country Life (Séamas Mac Philib); 3) Radio Telefís Éireann/Sound Archive (Malachy Moran and Ian Lee); 4) University College Cork, Folklore Archive (Diarmuid Ó Giolláin and Marie-Annick Desplanques); 5) University College Dublin, James Joyce Library, Special Collections (Catherine McSharry and Norma Jesop); 6) University College Dublin, Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore (Prof. Patricia Lysaght, then Acting Head of Department); 7) University College Galway, Hardiman Library Archives (Kieran Hoare); (Nordic/Baltic) 8) Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, Tartu (Piret Noorhane, Ergo-Hart Västriik, Kristin Kuutman and Monika Tasa); 9) Institutet för Språk och Folkminnen, Uppsala (Bodil Nildin-Wall); 10) Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura (Anna Makkonen); and 11) Universitetsbiblioteket, Lund (Birgitta Lindholm).

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To my supervisor Prof. Satu Apo I owe a special debt of gratitude. The initial positive feedback and practical advice I received from her on my rather bulky text was a source of much solace and help to me. Anne O'Connor, already mentioned, in time became one of my two doctoral examiners and her reader's report was both a source of encouragement and practical assistance to me, as was that of my other doctoral examiner, Guy Beiner. I benefited much from many conversations I had with Guy over a period of some years after our first meeting in June 2001. While working on this research I have also greatly benefited from regular discussions I had with my colleague and friend Gaela Keryell, who is not only a gifted scholar, but a rarity enough among scholars, someone with many original ideas.

I also need to thank Prof. Anna Leena Siikala for accepting this work for publication in the *Studia Fennica/Folkloristica* series of the Finnish Literature Society. Some may wonder why a work on the history of the Irish Folklore Commission should be published in this Finnish series. The epigraph to this work, I hope, shows how the contrary is in fact the case. I would also like to thank Päivi Vallisaari and Kati Lampela of the Finnish Literature Society for seeing this long work through the press, and a special word of thanks to Paddy Sammon for all his help with proofreading.

Apart from the assistance I received from the people listed above, this work could not have been completed without the help of my large family in Ireland. I owe a special debt to my father, now in his ninety fourth year. He was my first reader, of a much longer earlier draft. Born the same year as a number of the staff of the Irish Folklore Commission (1913) and having worked as a Civil Servant (as a State Forester) for most of the period of the Commission's operations, the insights he has given me into the workings of the Civil Service and into the history of the early decades of the independent Irish state, as he lived and experienced them, have been of much assistance to

me. He has also helped my research in another very substantive way, which I detail in the Introduction to this work. I dedicate this work to him and to my late mother, who died suddenly in November 2000 when this work was only in its embryonic stage. All my siblings and extended family, too numerous to name, have helped my research in various ways: by accommodating me while accessing the primary and secondary sources used in this work; by ensuring that I was not distracted too much or too many demands made on my time when I needed to write or rewrite parts of this work while staying with them on my trips to Ireland; and by helping me procure books, newspapers and journals that I needed. In this connection, I also wish to thank Martin Arthur and Janet Rooney, Séamas Mac Philib and Emer Crean as well as Geraldine Prunty and Derek Hanley for also accommodating me on my many trips to Ireland, and for the hospitality they have shown me.

My late cousin Máirtín Verling provided me with the photographs of Bólas Head and the ruined hamlet of Cill Rialaigh on the cover of this book, the district where Séamas Ó Duilearga was first inspired to save the folklore of Ireland. These pictures were taken in mid-August 1990. Máirtín died suddenly in March 2007 when I was in the final stages of preparing this work for publication, finishing his fifth anthology of material collected by the Irish Folklore Commission a short time before he died. Down through the years I benefited greatly from his intimate knowledge of the Commission's collections, as I have from his publications. Of all those who edited material derived from the Commission's Main Collection, Máirtín Verling was, without doubt, if not the most professional, certainly one of the two most professional and thorough. His books should stand as exemplars for those who in years to come will mine this great treasure house. Confined to his home for the past few years by illness, I had hoped my study of the Commission when published would help him pass the long hours of the day and night. Alas, that was not to be!

The University of Helsinki assisted this study on two occasions. Firstly by facilitating my going to Ireland for the academic year 2000–2001 and subsequently by allowing me three months' leave in early 2005. Otherwise this research was completed while holding down an ever-demanding teaching post. I could not have completed it without the understanding of my many students. To them I owe more than I can ever express.

My wife Tuula I need to thank on many counts. After the fate of my first attempt at a doctorate in the early 1990's, I might, in despair, have lost all hope of ever undertaking a doctorate again but for her constant support and encouragement. Throughout the process of researching and writing this study, which has often necessitated trips to Ireland and Sweden, she has accepted my absences with understanding, no matter how inconvenient such trips have sometimes been for her. She has also helped my work in many other ways, not least in being prepared to listen to me expound on aspects of my research, and in giving much solid advice on how best to present my ideas. For all this, and much else, especially for her companionship of almost three decades' duration I am eternally grateful. To my children Katariina and Tuomas I wish to express my gratitude for their forbearance during the years I have been researching this long work and for agreeing that the family go

Between 1935 and 1970 the Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloidéasa Éireann), under-funded and at great personal cost to its staff, assembled one of the world's largest folklore collections. This study draws on the extensive government files on the Commission in the National Archives of Ireland and on a wide variety of other primary and secondary sources, in order to recount and assess the work and achievement of this world-famous institute. The cultural, linguistic, political and ideological factors that had a bearing on the establishment and making permanent of the Commission and that impinged on many aspects of its work are here elucidated. The genesis of the Commission is traced and the vision and mission of its Honorary Director, Séamus Ó Duilearga (James Hamilton Delargy), is outlined. The negotiations that preceded the setting up of the Commission in 1935 as well as protracted efforts from 1940 to 1970 to place it on a permanent foundation are recounted and examined at length. All the various collecting programmes and other activities of the Commission are described in detail and many aspects of its work are assessed and, in some cases, reassessed. This study also deals with the working methods and conditions of employment of the Commission's field and Head Office staff as well with Séamus Ó Duilearga's direction of the Commission.

This is the first major study of the Irish Folk Commission, which has been praised in passing in numerous publications, but here for the first time its work and achievement is detailed comprehensively and subjected to scholarly scrutiny. This work should be of interest not only to students of Irish oral tradition but to folklorists everywhere. The history of the Irish Folklore Commission is a part of a wider history, that of the history of folkloristics in Europe and North America in particular. Moreover, the Irish Folklore Commission maintained contacts with scholars on all five continents, and this work has relevance for many areas of the developing world today, where conditions are not dissimilar to those that pertained in Ireland in the 1930's when this great salvage operation was funded by the young, independent Irish state.



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