reimagining ireland
VOLUME 80

Conor Caldwell and Eamon Byers (eds)

NEW CROPS, OLD FIELDS

REIMAGINING IRISH FOLKLORE

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From our homes to our houses of government, from our schoolyards to our stadia, from our galleries to our gable walls, folklore is not only preserved but continues to be reimagined in all aspects of everyday life in Ireland. In the twenty-first century, the traditions of Irish folklore are engaged in a constant process of regeneration, where the old and the new, the oral, the textual and the visual intermingle. However, while the 'first life' of Irish folklore has amassed a vast literature, what has attracted less attention is its 'second life': the variety of ways in which traditions have been reused and recycled in other contexts by politicians, poets, visual artists, sportsmen, tourism officers, museum curators, writers and musicians.

This volume is concerned with those moments of cultural creation that occupy the space between the 'first life' and 'second life' of folklore and, in particular, the ways in which folk traditions are reinvented. Featuring essays from both authorities in the field and emerging voices, this interdisciplinary collection demonstrates the rich diversity of folk culture, as a practice and as an area of study, in contemporary Ireland.

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EAMON BYERS AND CONOR CALDWELL

Introduction

In Dermot Healy's final novel *Long Time, No See* (2011), the narrator describes the assiduous and almost oneiric labour involved in building a wall with stones he has salvaged from the shore and the ruins of a monk's chamber:

> Some of the stones I used had come inland in storms. But today I started to haul from an old ruin up on the bank overlooking the sea. I got an awful bad feeling as I pulled the rocks out of the ruin. I had to tell myself over and over that they were going back into another wall. The ruin was supposed to have been a henhouse way back, but it was the strongest-built henhouse I ever came across. There were massive stones in her. I could have been demolishing a small church, and sometimes I thought I was.
>
> A beehive hut it might have been.
>
> A monk's chamber.
>
> I could even feel the sense of balance of the man who had built it.
>
> He drew the stone from the coral beach by ass and cart to the spot I was taking them from. As he built alongside me, I was pulling his work down. As he dropped a stone into place, I lifted it and carried it away. He built towards me, and I built away from him. I could feel the way he carried himself. He could have been a great-great-granduncle of mine. In his wall I came across chaffs of wheat that were still dry. The bones of coral. White marble. One clay pipe. I was over and back with the barrow then I began to build. And he came with me. Fit in, stand back, put in a small stone, and follow the twine.
>
> Good man.
>
> He stood to the side watching me work. (128–129)

This, we might argue, is how tradition works. The monk builds his chamber, hoping it will stand the test of time. His structure crumbles, but the stones are sound, and centuries later the narrator lays them in a new wall next to other stones. In doing so, he knows he is unmaking the monk's work, but things have changed, his needs are different. Yet the stones are the same,

and, in essence, so is the work. Thus, the centuries collapse and the men work side by side. And one day the stones may stand in a structure neither man can imagine. In a continuum of creation, tradition recycles material, methods and meaning with the knowledge that it has all been done before and the hope that it will all be done again.

This description of tradition, for it is a description rather than a definition, may be observed in any traditional society or any instance of folk cultural practice. Yet it is especially applicable to modern Ireland, which, like many postcolonial locales, is a curious mix of ancient culture and modern political structures. The activities of cultural nationalists from the nineteenth century onwards succeeded in researching, recording, reviving and, yes, inventing folkloric traditions that fuelled the romantic passions of revolutionary artists and activists alike. These traditions were then incorporated wholesale into the fabric of the Irish Free State, from the exalted status afforded the Irish language, through the symbolism employed on the new coinage under the direction of W. B. Yeats, all the way to the incorporation of aspects of Brehon law into newly devolved judicial structures. In Northern Ireland, cultural nationalism continued to function as an oppositional force to the new challenge represented by partition. At the same time, having previously sought to develop a separatist counter-narrative to nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ulster unionists placed their own customs and beliefs at the centre of their new sociopolitical structures. Of course, alongside such processes, in rural and urban communities across the country, folk culture was preserved – as it always has been – through practice, with dances, tunes, songs, stories, superstitions and cures perpetuated by many of the same cultural forces. Thanks to both these official and unofficial agents, Irish folklore is peculiarly present in the twenty-first century. From our homes to our houses of government, from our schoolyards to our stadia, from our galleries to our gable walls, folklore is not only preserved but continues to be reimagined in all aspects of everyday life in Ireland. The traditions of Irish folklore are engaged in a constant process of regeneration, where the old and the new, the oral, the textual and the visual intermingle.

Irish folklore has long been observed in what the Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko termed its 'first life' of traditions, customs, narratives, tunes or

sayings transmitted amongst local, regional and national communities. The literature on this subject, from the eighteenth century until the present day, is inevitably vast. What has attracted somewhat less attention is the 'second life' of Irish folklore – the variety of ways in which traditions have been reused and recycled in other contexts by politicians, poets, visual artists, sportsmen, tourism officers, museum curators, writers and musicians. Of course, the act of separating the 'first life' of folklore from its 'second life' is akin to separating one grain of sand from another. For every repurposing of a folkloric artefact is essentially a perpetuation of the tradition itself. Just as the story told by a *seanchaí* at a premodern clan gathering responded to the socio-cultural climate of his time, the postmodern appropriation of his narrative in a work of fiction or drama uses the raw material of the tradition to respond to the author's own time and place. Like the builders in Healy's novel, their structures might differ, but the stones are the same.

This volume is concerned with those moments of cultural creation that occupy the space between the 'first life' and 'second life' of folklore – the various ways in which it is being, has been or indeed was, re-purposed and reinvented. Beginning with an analysis of Bram Stoker's literary appropriation of folklore in the nineteenth century and concluding with a first-hand account of the survival of arboreal folklore in the twenty-first century, the following essays reflect both the variety of contemporary Irish folklore and the vibrancy of contemporary Irish folkloristics. Rather than representing a niche discipline, the academic consideration of Irish folklore transcends disciplines promiscuously. Indeed, so far from being a work of folkloristics, this volume is rather a study of the cultural presence of folklore in its many and varied forms. This is a true reflection of the aims of the conference upon which the present collection is based.

New Crops, Old Fields: (Re)Imagining Irish Folklore was held at Queen's University Belfast in 2014, attracting academics, researchers and performers from around the world. A second conference was held in 2016, building on the dialogue established two years earlier and acting as a launch pad for the development of a nascent research forum. It is hoped that this volume will continue this process, disseminating the fresh and exciting avenues of research enjoyed by the conference audiences to a wider readership, as well as generating debate and further investigation.

In a fitting start to this volume, Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, among the leading voices of his generation in the field of folkloristics, considers whether folklore should be considered a 'zombie category', as was previously suggested by Beck (2002). Having given a comprehensive summary of the development of folklore in Europe since the seventeenth century, which acknowledges scholarship in linguistics, sociology, ethnography, political and religious theory, as well as the work of numerous historians, Ó Giolláin explores how the onset of modernity has challenged historical assumptions about class and culture, with citizens free to align themselves with communities other than those into which they were born. The role of the artist has also changed significantly as the phenomenon of commoditization reshapes folklore in the modern era. He examines public policy with regard to preserving folklore, drawing comparisons from the protection of geo-specific brands in the food industry, implying that Ireland has yet properly to acknowledge its own intangible heritage in the same manner. Ó Giolláin concludes his essay by lamenting the contraction of the discipline of folkloristics in the academy, arguing for its retention as a distinct 'national science'.

The collection continues with Manuel Cadeddu's refreshing discussion of Bram Stoker's much neglected novel *The Snake's Pass* (1890). The extent to which the Gothic writer drew upon both Eastern European and Irish folklore in the creation of his legendary character, Count Dracula, has been much discussed. The same is true of the ways in which questions of Transylvanian history and cultural identity informed Stoker's famous work. While he may have been ostensibly less concerned with questions of national identity than many of his contemporaries, Cadeddu reveals the crucial role Stoker's Irishness played in his literary development. Shedding fresh light on the author's extensive engagement with the personalities and activities of the Irish Literary Revival in the late nineteenth century, Cadeddu illustrates how Stoker took inspiration from the legends he might have heard in his own childhood, as well as those collected by the likes of Wilde and Yeats, in the writing of *The Snake's Pass*. Indeed, between its allusions to the legend of St. Patrick expelling the snakes from Ireland, through the archetypal Gothic touch of venerable and esoteric medieval manuscripts, to the United Irishmen's rebellion and the arrival of French

soldiers in 1798, the novel explicitly positions itself in a chain of events that include some of the most important points in the development of Irish cultural and political identity. Moreover, by celebrating both the power of oral storytelling and suggesting that Ireland's soil boasts an abundance of wealth thanks to the presence of buried treasure and natural resources alike, Stoker's novel is demonstrated to have been consonant with much of the rhetoric of Irish nationalist discourse.

While oral storytelling was in rude enough health to be collected by folklorists in Stoker's lifetime, the contemporary author Frank Delaney expresses clear anxieties about the waning of the medium. Thus, though the characters in Stoker's *The Snake's Pass* inhabit a world in which local folklore both shapes and informs their daily lives, both Delaney's *Ireland* (2005) and his 'Ben McCarthy Trilogy' (2010–2012) represent an attempt to translate the art and act of storytelling into prose fiction. Anjili Babbar demonstrates how this anxiety, or sorrow, over the decline of the oral tradition is reflected in the encyclopaedic aspirations of *Ireland*. While clearly indebted to the novelistic sagas of James Michener, there is also something of the medieval saga in Delaney's novel, an effort to distil the entire history of the nation into an ur-text. Similarly, with its echo of Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), Babbar explores how Delaney's *The Last Storyteller* (2012) seeks to dramatize and memorialize the end of one medium at the same time as it reflects on the potentially transient position of modern media in an age when analogue and digital technologies are each susceptible to damage and decay.

Similarly, in Kate Thompson's children's book *The New Policeman* (2005), modern technology and media are seen to threaten the future of traditional culture through their potentially adverse effect on children and the experience of childhood. As Rebecca Long discusses in her essay, the book addresses contemporary anxieties regarding time, how the busy nature of modern life occupies adults so much they fail to foster a Rousseauian sense of freedom for their children to engage with their imagination, environment, folklore and history. While Thompson expresses an undoubtedly commendable desire to see Ireland re-engage with its heritage, Long concludes that the critique of Ireland that Thompson offers is something of a straw man, while her vision of the nation's future is fundamentally

conservative and damagingly regressive. In doing so, Long presents a valuable reading of one of the fundamental risks of folkloric revival; it is vital that traditions are preserved not merely for their own sake but for their use value to a society and their present needs.

The importance of music within the development of folklore in Ireland is not to be underestimated. Although many scholars have been historically frustrated by Ireland's failure to produce an internationally renowned composer whose language imbues that of 'traditional' forms of Irish music, the development of an aural culture containing the twin strands of singing (in both English and Irish) and instrumental playing has been of great significance since at least the early nineteenth century. An overlooked feature of Irish music is the focus of Maria Byrne's essay on the bandleader Harry Hardy's piece 'Valse Shilly Shally'. Framed by an investigation into the band of the Royal Irish Constabulary, which received royal assent in 1867 following its actions in quelling the Fenian Rising of the same year, Byrne's essay examines not only what she terms 'The Irish expression of the Viennese Waltz' but also aspects of Irish social and cultural history in the period of the Gaelic Revival and the beginnings of nation-building in the late nineteenth century. Her analysis is constructed through painstaking newspaper archival research that adds a unique perspective to this collection and is particularly demonstrative of how folklore studies, and the humanities in general, can thrive from advances in technology that make this sort of archival research more practical and fruitful. Her exploration of Ireland's 'collective amnesia' towards its citizens who worked within colonial structures has a particular resonance in the present day and challenges many prejudices which have become enshrined within contemporary Irish republican narratives. Moreover, her elucidation of how traditional melodies became embedded in a composition performed by such a resolutely colonial and bourgeois outfit as the Royal Irish Constabulary band reveals a forgotten and neglected aspect of the wide influence of Irish folkmusic.

A more familiar musical genre is addressed by Angela Horgan Goff in her discussion of contemporary art musical responses to the heroes and events of the Fenian Cycle. Full of rich musical and textual analysis, Goff skilfully unpacks works by Eric Sweeney, Elaine Agnew, and Phillip Hammond, demonstrating the contrasting approaches taken by each of

these composers as they attempt to render an interpretation of these folktales within their own musical language. In doing so, a discussion of wider cultural issues, such as language and gender, is undertaken, offering fresh perspectives on the continuing appeal of such familiar material to succeeding generations of creative artists.

Similar questions are posed by Daithí Kearney in his consideration of two extremely familiar – indeed, perhaps over-familiar – elements of Irish and global folklore, namely the festivals of Samhain and Hallowe'en. Kearney offers an ethnographic account of two separate productions by Siamsa Tíre/National Folk Theatre of Ireland, based on these celebrations. In addition to rich descriptions of the creative processes involved in developing and performing these productions, Kearney's discussion epitomizes the approach of this collection by drawing connections between the old and the new. While James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) may be viewed with scepticism and scorn by many contemporary folklorists, the fact remains that it is inarguably an influential contribution both to the modern field of folklore studies and, perhaps more importantly, the popular conception of folkloric practice. Whatever their veracity, many of Frazer's accounts have influenced the way society views such potent customs as Samhain and Hallowe'en. Thus, in his essay, Kearney illustrates this crossover between the 'first life' and 'second life' of folklore and the expressive ways in which creative artists exploit and explore such abundantly, and perhaps overwhelmingly, fruitful material.

In its dramatization of the musings, grievances and petty squabbles of the dead, Máirtín Ó Cadhain's celebrated novel *Cré na Cille* (1949) taps into many of the ideas inherent in the popular understanding of both Samhain and Hallowe'en, that the land of the dead is, in a way, co-incident with the land of the living. However, rather than representing an exercise in folk horror, Ó Cadhain's text is instead an almost Beckettian reflection on the power of ancestry and remembrance, as his incessantly talkative deceased protagonists bring their memories with them to the grave, replenishing the subterranean memory bank with every death. In Eilís Ní Dhúill's reading, the novel and its subsequent adaptations illustrate significant aspects of the communal and cultural development of the Irish language. Viewing TG4's film adaptation through an hermeneutic lens informed by the work

of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricouer, she demonstrates how the innovative dialogic form favoured by Ó Cadhain comes to life on screen, dramatizing both the petty squabbles of the characters and the ideas of cultural communication inherent in the transmission of Gaelic from older generations, for whom monolingualism was a living memory, to younger generations, whose linguistic lives are informed by nationalism, postcolonialism and postmodern media.

Intergenerational relationships, both with regard to familial structures and folkloric transmission, underpin Jack Casey's rich and powerful account of the emotional politics of four modern Irish films – *Into the West* (1992), *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), *A Shine of Rainbows* (2009) and *Ondine* (2009). While seemingly disparate in many ways, Casey demonstrates how each film employs archetypes of both a legendary and a cinematic nature. Mother Ireland, perhaps the most enduring and affective national symbol, is revealed to inform the presentation of mothers and motherless children in each of these films, while the rugged vision of Irish masculinity portrayed in Robert J. Flaherty's seminal film *Man of Aran* (1934) inevitably influences the cinematic presentation of fathers and sons. In addition to unpacking these almost mythical characterizations, Casey also considers the contrast between Ireland's urban east and rural west as it has been presented on screen, suggesting that in *Ondine*, writer/director Neil Jordan both challenges such dichotomies and, in the figure of the eponymous character, relates them to the contemporary realities of international migration and multiculturalism.

A similar concern for the ways in which the realities and demands of modern society affects the transmission and reception of tradition underpins Ben Simon's account of 'The Forest of Belfast', a project that studied and promoted the social benefits of trees in the city from the early 1990s to 2014. Drawing on his own experience as Forest Officer for Belfast City Council and a variety of folkloric and ecological studies, he delineates the many ways in which trees form the focus of folkloric customs and beliefs throughout Ireland. Moreover, he illustrates that, so far from being a long forgotten vestige of rural belief, many local communities still maintain, cherish and develop their own arboreal traditions.

It is appropriate to close this collection with such a potent illustration, both figuratively and literally, of the theme *New Crops, Old Fields*. Today, while the landscape of Ireland might be the site of a variety of contested buildings, borders, communities and cultures, the idea of Ireland is as potent as ever. Indeed, the very processes of globalization that have transformed and, it has often been argued, threatened traditional culture, have facilitated the reimagination of this culture on a global scale. In the twenty-first century, issues as diverse as economic recession, enduring political divisions and attitudes towards abortion, homosexuality and transgender rights continue to prompt thousands of people to emigrate from Ireland every year. This has ensured the enduring appeal of the image of Ireland as 'Kathleen ni Houlihan', either weeping as her children abandon her, or as a cruel mother incapable of nourishing them. However, for all its adverse effects at home, emigration has allowed Irish traditions to take on new life in foreign fields, from Gaelic games being enjoyed in Rome to Irish dancing enthusiastically practised by young girls in Hong Kong.

At the same time, immigration into Ireland has become a far more familiar phenomenon. As a consequence, having exported its culture to the rest of the world for so long, contemporary Ireland is now home to many diasporas that have imported, perpetuated and reimagined their own customs. Today, the culture of the country has space for communion dresses as well as saris, potato bread as well as pyzy. This is modern Ireland, at once connected to the world through the absence of millions of its own children as it is by the presence of diasporic peoples from around the world. Indeed, one of the most popular tourist attractions in Dublin is the statue on Harry Street commemorating Phil Lynott, an Irish/Guyanan artist born in the midlands of England whose music combined the raw power of rock 'n' roll with lyrics enthralled by the myths and legends of Ireland.

Yet perhaps the greatest impetus to the reinvention of tradition has been offered by the cultural interconnectivity afforded by the Internet. As the notorious trope of the 'Slender Man' exemplifies, social media are a potent avenue for the creation and dissemination of modern folk idioms in a way that transcends national borders. Obversely, the processes of remixing and mashups upon which so much online content depends has seen elements of Irish folk culture placed in uncanny and unfamiliar territory.