

The Excluded Voice? Thurles Folklore

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Introduction

Irish folklore not only acts as a diachronic palimpsest of past traditions, but it can also be viewed synchronically, i.e. as reflecting the culture and ideologies prevalent during the period in which the folklore was collected. Nineteen-thirties Ireland was a period when de Valera and the Fianna Fáil Government sought to emphasise a separate identity, an identity which was to 'help forge a respectable national identity in the face of English suzerainty'.¹ The collecting of Irish folklore would help to advance this aim. As the countryside was swiftly changing, it was regarded as imperative to collect its folklore before it vanished from memory. In 1933, Fianna Fáil campaigned using the slogans, 'There must be certainty' and 'Give the Nation Security.' Their opponents were branded as 'anti-Irish' and 'anti-national', the antithesis being, that de Valera and the Fianna Fáil Government represented all that was distinctly Irish and nationalist.² Central to Irish distinctiveness was the land: de Valera attempted to present an idealised image of Ireland, as a rural idyll of a 'land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads....the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens'.³ Ironically, the idealisation of the west of Ireland and the Catholic Motherland was strongly influenced by the Romantic movement which had come to Ireland from English sources.⁴ Like the artists of the Romantic movement who painted out the squalor of the countryside, Seamus Ó Duilearga, the Director of the Irish Folklore Commission scrubbed out any reference to the urban life. The 'urban' signified the barbaric 'other'.⁵ England with its English language, its Protestant religion, and its urbanity became the antithesis of Gaelic Catholic and rural Ireland. Consequently, there were those living in Ireland who did not 'belong', especially those whose culture was much more rooted in England and in commerce than in Ó Duilearga's ideal. In a rigidly Catholic and conservative state: 'an attitude of xenophobic suspicion often greeted any manifestation of what appeared to reflect cosmopolitan standards'.⁶ It was a period when the 'alien' was excluded in order to 'emphasise native or ethnic achievements'.⁷

The Other

SHABINE LEAVES THE REPUBLIC

*I had no nation now but the imagination.
After the white man, the niggers didn't want me
when the power swing to their side.
The first chain my hands and apologize, "History":
the next said I wasn't black enough for their pride.⁸*

'Mongrel pure' in Thomas Kinsella's phrase, Thurles did not lend itself to ideological notions of ethnic essentialism – it was nothing in particular in ideological terms. The collecting of Irish folklore at this period, reflected the current ideologies appertaining in de Valera's Ireland. The

culture of the countryside became central to the collectors of folklore and regions which had been denigrated because of their geographical and political peripherality became spiritually central.⁹ In his introduction to *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, Seamus Ó Duilearga, as Director of the Irish Folklore Commission, outlines the reasons for the collecting of Irish folklore, reasons which correspond to the *mentalité* permeating the Ireland of the thirties and its endeavour at pushing back the 'filthy modern tide.'¹⁰

The entire fabric of Irish rural civilisation, so well portrayed in the present volume, is today as in the past beset by many enemies. Here as elsewhere the shoddy imported culture of the towns pushes back the frontiers of the indigenous homespun culture of the countryside, and the ancient courtesies and traditional ways of thought and behaviour tend to disappear before the destroying breath of the 'spirit of the age'. We have suffered great cultural losses as a nation, and can ill-afford to let pass unrecorded and unappreciated the spirit of Ireland, the traditions of the historic Irish nation.¹¹

But this ideal does not always accord well with lived realities in the more urban areas of a semi-modernised economy such as the area of Thurles town; some of whose schools took part in the 1937 Irish Folklore Commission's 'Schools' Collection' of folklore. It is significant that the bourgeois Ursuline Convent school in the town did not take part. Between 1937 and 1938 a booklet entitled *Irish Folklore and Tradition* prepared by the Irish Folklore Commission, was circulated to the schools by An Roinn Oideachais. The booklet contained instructions on the collecting of folklore from the pupils of the local primary schools. The instructions were primarily rural in their orientation and the urban seemed to be elided in the idealisations of the rural. Children in the towns were asked to collect information on the sowing and planting of crops, and examples of place names given were invariably belonging to the rural landscape – 'rock', 'lake', 'townland', 'parish', were given as examples of typical place names.¹² The folklore from the Thurles Schools' Collection, in adhering to the guidelines laid out in the booklet, appears to emphasise the folklore emanating from a rural context, and consequently there seems to be a lack of confidence and a reticence in revealing the equally valuable urban-based folklore. Nevertheless, there are elements of 'the shoddy imported culture of the towns' interwoven in the Thurles Schools' folklore collection. Instances of such an encroachment permeate many of the themes from the area, particularly in the section on 'old crafts' where references to their urban context and the marketing of the craft work are indicative of modernisation. Stories about weavers, millers, tanners, basket-makers, and nail-makers can be perceived as a residue of the old cottage crafts, but within the urban environment it is possible to see the influence of modernisation on these craft workers. The craft workers were generally situated inside the town or adjacent to it and they were dependent on an urban market for their sales. Indeed some were exporters as in the case of 'Mr Hayes a tanner' described in the Thurles Schools Collection but also listed as a significant manufacturer in *Bassett's County Tipperary Directory*:¹³

Mr Hayes who lived in Friar St. Thurles was a tanniar. (sic) He bought the skins from the butchers and farmers around the district and sold the leather all over Ireland and England. He employed about fifty men and paid them at the rate of fifteen shillings weekly. The factory was started at the beginning of the eighteen century and existed until eighteen ninety three. Then the owner died and his brother worked the factory for some years but work ceased after about ten years. The leather was generally sold to harness makers as it was very suitable for harness. John Fahy and Steven Peters were two of the men who worked with him in the tan-yard in Friar St. They both lived at Molly Gorman's Cross. It was the biggest industry in the town at the time.

This story was told to: by: Mr Jack Dwyer,
The Mall,
Thurles.

to: Sean Sheehy,
Erry,
Ballinure,
Thurles.¹⁴

The economic context in which the tanner operated does not correspond to the idea of the craft worker in a bartering system. This was a period of transition for such small industries belonging neither to a pre-modern nor modern economy: it was an economic group which was soon to be overtaken by a more modernised economy. Another reference to a basket maker from the Thurles Schools' collection concurs more closely with the idea of the pre modern worker of 'old crafts' specified in the handbook issued by The Irish Folklore Commission, but yet there is a difference as the basket maker operated within an urban context and was dependent on a localised money economy. The craft worker in Thurles, 'being neither peasant nor proletarian, neither farmer nor petty merchant, and neither rural or urban,' does not conform to the rural categories promulgated by Seamus Ó Duilearga.¹⁵

Johnny Tappin lived in Rossa St, Thurles till two or three years ago. He used to make baskets. He cut the osaries in the river Suir. When he brought home the sallies he used to clean them and and skin and boil the better ones for household baskets. He depended on basket making for his living. He used to sell two or three dozen baskets on a Saturday or fair day in basket selling season. He got up to five shillings for some baskets.

This story was told to: by: Jack Dwyer,
Castle Avenue,
Thurles.

Maurice Sheehy,
Erry,
Ballinure.¹⁶

Stories expected to conform to a dominant ideology in which 'a new pantheon of heroes, myths, and religions, enabled by the land' were not likely to emanate from an urban area.¹⁷ Children coming from urban areas were asked to give accounts of 'great mowers', 'strong men' with their 'sacks of grain or potatoes' or 'men who could catch hares or rabbits'. Some did conform to the folkloric discourse, but many of the stories put the 'local Heroes' in a modern urban context. The following stories about 'local Heroes' with their references to The Great Southern Railway and steam engines respectively are examples of such folklore adapted to a modernised context:

About two years ago there was a man whose name is Dan Hayes, Kilbready Castle, Co.Tipp. One day he was coming for the train to go to Thurles. The train was in the station when he came. He went under a wagon to cross the line and when he was under the train started to go and he had to try to hold on to a link to keep himself up. My brother saw him and he shouted at the guard to stop the train. The guard stopped the train with the brake that was in the van and the man came out from the train. Only for my brother he would have been killed.

This story was told to: Pdraig Forristal,
Armoyle,
Cashel.

by: his brother Jim¹⁸

In the year 1930 Lisduff Quarry went on fire. The fire was caused by lightning cinders in the fire box of the steam engine. As the engine was on fire Mick Breen ran in and broke the exhaust pipe of an oil engine and carried it outside the door. The watchman was caught in the fire. Mick ran in under

the fire and caught the watch man by the coat and flung him out the window. The engine was badly burned..

This story was told to:

Jack Grant,
Friar St.,
Thurles.

by: Mr James Grant,
Friar St.,
Thurles.¹⁹

Folklore is mutable. Part of its nature is its capacity to be reordered.²⁰ That it cannot be viewed as a monolith is evident in the different versions of key historical events in the area which were interwoven in the stories from the Thurles Schools' Collection: differing versions of the same story are given. But, again, it is possible to see the influence of Seamus Ó Duilearga and his shaping of the folkloric discourse in the booklet, *Irish Folklore and Tradition* on the folklore collected in Thurles. In the 'Historical Tradition' theme, instances of tensions in rural areas are seen to fit the folklore template more readily than the urban tensions surrounding the War of Independence of less than twenty years before. The War of Independence (known locally as 'The Black and Tan War') had produced significant casualties and nationalism – in both political and G.A.A. guise – was strong within the town.. In January 1920 the town had been in turmoil when a whole series of reprisals followed the shooting of R.I.C. men. The town was sacked by the R.I.C. and the murder of Sinn Féin and I.R.A. members followed, but yet there is no mention of these events in the Thurles Folklore Collection. The following stories deal with events which took place during the war of Independence (the context being rural) and during the Land War:

During the "Black and Tan" fight in Ireland there was an ambush in Kilcooly. The Irish were ready to ambush three lorries of the "Black and Tans". The Irish were stopping at two old broken down houses at the foot of the hill just at Mary Willies. When the English lorries came they let the first lorry go to the second house and when they heard the shots being fired at the second and third lorries they put up speed and thought they were off safe. Only one occupant of the three lorries was saved. That was the driver of the third lorry. He was let free because he did some good act for the Irish.

This story was told by:

Mick Kenna,
Coolcroo,
Thurles,

to: Willie Purcell,
Littleton,
Thurles.²¹

There is (sic) not many landlords in our locality now, but long ago the country was numerous with them. Some of them were very wicked. They had a hard life because they were in danger of death at any moment. In a certain place there lived a man alone in a house. One day a landlord named Ellis came to him and said 'I will give you only one week to pay your rent and if its not paid again then I will evict you out of your house'. So the week passed through and he had not his rent paid he told his neighbours what was to happen if he had not his rent paid in a week's time.

However when Saturday came five or six men planned that they would put sticks on the boreen in order when Ellis would come as far as that his agent should get down to take the sticks out of his way and then they could shoot Ellis. When Saturday came Ellis and his agent were coming in to evict this man out of his house and as they and as they came to a certain point in the boreen where they saw some sticks on the boreen and Ellis shouted and said 'I am finished' So his agent got down to take away the sticks and while he was down shots were fired through the car where Ellis was and killed him. The guards were then brought and they searched every house and every field until they came at last to Mac Cormack's house.

They arrested the two Mac Cormacks and took them off to the County gaol. They said 'We are as innocent as the baby that lay fast asleep in the cradle'.

There are many variations of this story in the Schools' Collection. It is based on a locally significant event, but one at best poorly documented by historians, indicating a mismatch between folk memory and official history.

The Other Within

When history falls away from a subject, we are left with Otherness, and all its power to compact enmity, recharge it, and recirculate it. An archetype is a hollow thing, but a dangerous one, a figure or image which through usage has been uncoupled from the circumstances which brought it into being, and goes on spreading false consciousness.²²

Finberg has defined community as a set of people occupying an area with defined territorial limits and so far united in thought and action as to feel a sense of belonging together, in contradistinction from many outsiders who 'do not belong'.²³ Like a babushka doll within the 'other' of Thurles' folklore, another 'otherness' can be uncovered. Much of the folklore emanating from the Thurles area is concerned with the 'outsider'. In nineteen-thirties' Thurles, there were some who did not 'belong' to the rigid Catholic homogenous community of the 'cathedral town', the 'cradle' of the G.A.A.²⁴

Some of the prayers collected from the Thurles schools are of universal themes, for example, the prayers vilifying the Jews. In a world before mechanical reproduction, mass media, and modern technologies of propaganda, it was through songs and sermons, folk tales, prints and pamphlets that an image of the Jew was formulated, circulated and perpetuated.²⁵ This prayer may also have had local resonances, as there were members of the Jewish community in Limerick during the early years of the twentieth century, who had been driven from the city in what became known as 'The Limerick Pogrom'. Thurles had always been an outreach centre for Limerick Redemptorism and it was possible to see its influence on the lives of the people who lived in the town. Processional Catholicism and Redemptorist-style confraternities were strong influences interwoven into their lives:

God bless Friday and Good Friday
The day Our Saviour was crucified
The Jews came up with a bloody spear
It being so sharp it pierced our Blessed Saviour through the heart.²⁶

There are various version of this prayer in the Thurles Schools' Collection of Folklore, each evoking the anti-semitism considered normal throughout Europe during this period. In 1937 Europe was on the brink of the Second World War, a war in which six million Jews were murdered.

The Jew was the thorn in the flesh of Christian culture, for it could neither completely rid itself of "him" nor accept "his" difference as legitimate and permanent. Christianity needed its Jews to make sense of its own redemptive mission but this usually involved a fantasy of annihilation, if not of Jews themselves then of Jewishness as a system of belief and a code of behaviour. Christian Judeophobia was always therefore, conflicted: even as it vilified the possibility of a second coming when all differences would disappear in the utopian realization of a universalized Christian paradise.²⁷

This theme of the 'outsider' is found in many of the stories from the Thurles Schools' Collection

of folklore. The landlord, the witch, the Protestant Minister, and the Traveller, all become signifiers of the 'Other' in a homogenous community:

There was once a very holy man and he used to go to Mass every Sunday. He had a cow and he had not enough of grass for her. He met a minister one day and the minister asked him to go to hear his ceremony every Sunday and if he did he would give him grass for the cow. The man said he would. When Sunday came the man went to Mass as usual. After Mass he was going to church. When the minister met him he said that he heard that he was at Mass. Oh! said the man I went to Mass for the good of my soul and I am going to hear your ceremony for the good of my cow.

These stories were told by: Maggie Sweeney, to: Maurice Sheehy,
Erry, Erry,
Ballinure, Ballinure,
Thurles. Thurles.²⁸

Conclusion

The Thurles Schools' Collection of folklore, illustrates the contradictions and complexities inherent in the collection of folklore during the period in which the collection of folklore became a function of the state. The collecting of folklore became identified with the advancement of a nationalist political project. This was a project in which urban culture was made secondary to the idealisation of the rural, while folklore as an intellectual discipline was compromised by its identification with the culture of the countryside and the attempt to exclude 'the shoddy imported culture of the towns.' Hence Thurles, the Norman market town, whose people were 'neither peasant nor proletarian' could only be peripheral to an ideologically-driven project, a project in which 'the privileged areas of Irish culture in the literary imagination were the distant, pre-Norman or mythical past and the contemporary native, as yet un-anglicized, peasantry.'²⁹

Notes

- 1 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), p.334.
- 2 Richard Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland 1923-1948* (Oxford, 1995), p.212.
- 3 Joe Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989).
- 4 Patrick J. Duffy, 'Writing Ireland: Literature and Art In The Representation Of Irish Place' in Brian Graham (Ed.), *In Search of Ireland* (London, 1997), p.43-64.
- 5 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1991), *passim*.
- 6 Terence Brown, *Ireland A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London, 1981), p.147-148.
- 7 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), p.334.
- 8 Derek Walcott, *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (London, 1980), pp. 3-20.
- 9 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork, 2000), p.70.
- 10 William Butler Yeats, *The Statues, Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, (London, 1981), p.375.
- 11 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin, 1942).
- 12 *Irish Folklore and Tradition*, (Dublin, 1937), p.5.
- 13 George Bassett, *County Tipperary One Hundred Years Ago: A Guide And Directory 1889* (Belfast, 1991), p.381.
- 14 D.I.F., Schools' Collection, V552, Thurles, p.81.
- 15 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork, 2000) p.177.
- 16 D.I.F., Schools' Collection, Thurles, p.83.
- 17 Edward Said, 'Yeats and Decolonization' in Dennis Walder (ed.), *Literature in The Modern World* (New York, 1990), p.36.

- 18 D.I.F., Schools' Collection, V552, Thurles, p58.
- 19 D.I.F., Schools' Collection, V552, Thurles, p.56.
- 20 Linda Ballard, The Folklorist and Local History, in Raymond Gillespie and Myrtle Hill (eds.) *Doing Irish Local History* (Belfast, 1998), pp 47-61.
- 21 D.I.F., Schools' Collection, V552, Thurles, p.60.
- 22 Marina Warner, *From The Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, (London, 1995), p.239.
- 23 H.P.R. Finberg, *The Local Historian and his Theme* (Leicester, 1965).
- 24 William Corbett, William Nolan: *Thurles – the Cathedral Town* (Dublin, 1989), *passim*.
- 25 Tamar Garb, 'Modernity, Identity, Textuality, in Linda Nochlin & Tamar Garb (eds.) *The Jew in the Text*, (London, 1995), p.20-31.
- 26 D.I.F., Schools' Collection, V552, Thurles, p243.
- 27 Tamar Garb, 'Modernity, Identity, Textuality, in Linda Nochlin & Tamar Garb (eds.) *The Jew in the Text*, (London, 1995), p.20-31.
- 28 D.I.F., Schools' Collection, V552, Thurles, p.21.
- 29 Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*. (Cork, 1996), p.221.