Some Aspects of Social Tradition

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We owe the development of the academic study of folk tradition in Ireland mainly to three events. First, the founding in 1927 of the Folklore of Ireland Society—An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann—by a small group of enthusiasts who were determined not to let the old tradition perish through neglect. Their motto was Colligite fragmenta qui superaverent, ne pereant—‘Gather up the scraps that remain, so that they will not perish’. This led directly to the establishment in 1932 of the Irish Folklore Institute, which was expanded in 1935 into the Irish Folklore Commission, the main function of which was to record that rather ill-defined phenomenon known as ‘Irish Folklore’.

The second of the events, and the first step towards systematic study, was the publication in 1937 of a small book called Lámhleabhar Béaloideasa by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, which was the outcome of a period spent by him in Sweden, first in Lund, and then in Uppsala where he had studied the Swedish research system in the Landsmålarkivet, the Dialect and Folk Tradition Archive. Later he expanded it into A Handbook of Irish Folklore, published in 1942. This is, of course, a handbook for field workers and students; it is also a detailed index of the material, and above all, a clear definition of what constitutes Folk Tradition, the scope and breadth of which, as defined by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, surprised many, not least some of the pundits of the folklore movement.

The third, and decisive, event was the establishment of the Department of Irish Folklore in University College, Dublin in 1971, to replace the Irish Folklore Commission, which had been dissolved a year earlier, in 1970. The Department inherited all of the Commission’s material, and has continued and systematised the collecting and archival work of the Commission. The significant innovation, however, was that the study of folk tradition was for the first time in Ireland, and indeed, in what are euphemistically known as ‘these islands’, recognised and established as an academic discipline in its own right with its own appropriate methods and aims, a situation which, it may be added, had already existed for over a century in parts of Continental Europe.

It is true, of course, that many academics in Ireland were interested in, even enthusiastic about, folk tradition. But, inevitably each from his own point of view. The pioneers of the nineteen twenties, all Gaelic enthusiasts, Fionán Mac Colm, An Seabhac, Douglas Hyde, Séamus Delargy, were concerned with its Irish linguistic and literary content. Others, geographers, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists, were interested in its relevance to their own areas of study, and, understandably, applied to it their own definition, their own criteria and their own methods, none of which fitted exactly.

Thus folk tradition was accepted as an occasionally useful ancillary to various other subjects, but without much voice of its own. Hence, until recently, and indeed, in some quarters even yet, its vague definition. Some years ago, an American firm published a work which, characteristically, they called A Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend in which they gave some twenty definitions of ‘Folklore’ by American academics,

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no two of which entirely agreed with each other, and many of which flatly contradicted
the others.

This state of affairs has, happily for us, been ended by the recognition of the study of
folk tradition, which we tend more and more, following the European fashion, to call
Ethnology, as an academic subject in its own right, in a fully established and independent
teaching and research department in University College, Dublin, and, more recently,
under the umbrella of other departments in University College, Cork, and University
College, Galway.

Most academic colleagues would agree with the truth of the assertion that one never
really learns a subject until one attempts to teach it. This assertion, I believe, is true not
only as regards the depth of a subject, but also as regards its breadth. From teaching a
subject our comprehension of it extends in many directions, and as regards Ethnology, the
study of folk tradition, one of these extensions encompasses Social Tradition by which we
mean that body of custom, usage, practice, rule and convention which governs the
relations to each other of the various individuals and groups which make up a society.
Men to men and women to women; men and women to each other; relatives, friends and
neighbours to each other; youth to age; master to servant, landlord to tenant and so on,
and so on. Indeed, as regards any society one can say that there is a natural social
environment, which has grown up within the society in accordance with that society’s own
traditions, and an artificial social system which is imposed from outside by some wider
power, such as the State, and to which the local community’s response or reaction is
conditioned by the local tradition.

As a commonplace example, let us take the price of eggs. This may seem, nowadays, to
be merely another item on the weekly shopping list, but formerly, it was a matter of great
concern to country-women. ‘Egg-money’, as it was called, was a recognised source of
income for farmers’ wives and daughters, and often, too, for the womenfolk of rural
craftsmen and labourers. Often it amounted to no more than pin-money, but often, too,
especially on larger farms, it formed a considerable income. There was a country saying
that ‘tis many the girl that made up her fortune from the fowl and the eggs’. The
woman of the house, and her daughters managed the fowl run, marketed the eggs, birds,
feathers, and themselves pocketed and disposed of the money. This means that an
accepted part of Irish tradition was that women, in their own right, could earn an income
for themselves, be it large or small. We have information on this matter from about 350
places all over Ireland, with examples from every county north and south, and of these
only six, less than 2%, had any doubts as to who disposed of the egg-money. If we look
wider in this matter, we find that up to the end of the 19th century several other fields of
production and trading were dominated by women. The production and sale of butter was
largely a woman’s affair. The fish trade was almost entirely run by women—traditionally
the auctioneer at Dublin’s Smithfield fish market was a woman who used a large fish,
such as a pollock or a cod, held by the tail, to knock down the lots to the bidders. It is
interesting to note that, at the same time, butchering and the sale of meat was almost
entirely a man’s preserve. Open-air marketing and street trading were mainly run by
women and so were many small shops. Textile production was another source of income
for women—not for nothing was an unmarried woman called a ‘spinster’.

In our century all this has changed. The establishment of co-operative and other
creameries removed butter-making and its profits from the woman and gave it to the men.
Battery eggs and fowl have almost wiped out home production. That figure renowned in
song bean an leanna, bean an ósta, was generally ousted from her position by trade union
pressures earlier in this century. And so on in many other occupations. I was reminded of all this a couple of years ago when I and my wife stayed for a few days in a comfortable bed-and-breakfast place in the suburbs of Salzburg, in Austria. Going away, I got the bill from our very cheerful (and extremely talkative) landlady, but as I handed her the money, her husband interposed, took it and put it in his pocket. I still remember the shocked indignation on my wife's face, but our landlady appeared to take it as normal. I mention this because here in Ireland the provision of bed-and-breakfast, and other features of the tourist trade depend largely on women and are a source of income to them. But how long will this last? In this regard, as in many others we should reflect that many developments in economic change have been brought about without any advertise to their effect upon social conditions.

This leads us to consider some other features of family life traditional in Ireland. A married woman kept her own surname and was known to all by it, not by her husband's. This may indicate a traditional regard for women's independence and should be investigated further. There is a well-known adage, 'Children should be seen and not heard', and some may consider this an example of the repression of children in the past. But in Irish tradition it usually meant that if they were quiet and did not make a nuisance of themselves they could sit with the adults and listen to the seanchas and the story-telling around the hearth in the long evenings. The isolating of children in nurseries in the care of servants is a feature of the gentry and the haute-bourgeoisie—the social climbers—and not of the ordinary people.

Family relationships were very important. People knew all their relatives and marriage connections out at least to third cousins, and often farther. Social welfare was unheard of, and people depended for support on the family—this was expected as normal, both in everyday matters such as help at the harvest, and in the event of a catastrophe, such as a house burned down or the death of a husband or wife with young children.

Of course we know now that the facile view of historians in the past—that Irish society in the 17th to 19th centuries consisted only of a rapacious landlord class and a rack-rented and starving peasantry—is largely false, and that in most parts of Ireland, in both country and town, there was a multi-stratified society, from the great and powerful lord to the penniless beggar. In country terms there were the gentlemen, the squireen, the strong farmer, the poor struggling farmer, the tradesman, the labourer, the beggar, as well as clergy, teachers, doctors, officials, shopkeepers and so on. Again, communities tended to be small, both in the countryside and in the villages and smaller towns; everybody knew everybody else, and thus the necessity of maintaining one's position and good character was recognised by everybody. The good name of the family was the symbol of respectability, and its preservation was a greater sanction against wrongdoing than either the law of the land or any religious ethical code. Indeed, for many, being found out was more serious than the offence itself. People were ready to commit perjury, or to send the offender away to America, rather than lose the good name of the family.

We may reflect that this has largely disappeared, and that in many ways nothing has taken its place. Indeed, in some of our urban ghettos, where the family name is no longer respected and the old multistratified community has disappeared, we may wonder if much of the vandalism and delinquency has its roots in the loss of these social values?

Another symptom of family tradition was the fear of hereditary disease, especially of tuberculosis and mental disorder both of which were held, in tradition, to be 'in the family'.

It was the worst of bad manners, and the deadliest of insults, to accuse another of
having 'consumption' or 'lunacy' in the family. It was, indeed, bad manners ever to use these words. Euphemisms must be employed. 'A bit delicate, God help us', when some unfortunate was in the last stages of T.B. And 'A little bit odd, you know', when some poor wretch had been removed screaming in a straitjacket to the asylum. This matter of hereditary disease was especially important as regards marriage prospects and arrangements.

A characteristic of Social Tradition is coherence. Each of its elements fits and affects every other to a greater or lesser degree. Take, for instance the arrangement of marriages by the family, matchmaking, which incidentally, is in one form or another a common feature of society all over Europe and further afield. Such marriage arrangements are the expression of the wish of society that parity of position, both economic and social, should be maintained between the parties contracting the marriage. There were questions of property, money, inheritance, settlements on other members of the family, future position of the parents, and many other matters to be settled.

But what about the people who held no property either as owners or tenants? Especially, what about the most numerous class of these, the landless labourers? All the evidence, from both tradition and late 18th-early 19th century documentation goes to show that the conventions of matchmaking did not apply to them. All that was needed was a couple of pounds and the prospect of work, and as a result they married much earlier and with much less regard for the future than the settled farming community.

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For nearly a century, from the middle of the 18th to the middle of the 19th century, agriculture, especially tillage, flourished in Ireland, encouraged by various measures of protection, such as the Corn Laws. As most tillage was done by hand tools, many labourers were needed. The farmers' usual way of recruiting labour was to offer a man the site of a cabin, or one already built, and a plot of ground, usually half an acre, for a labour rent, that is to say, so many days' work at the usual wage against so much rent. Let us say a rent of £2.00 against a wage of 6 pence a day, which works out at 80 days' work to clear the rent, while on the other 200 or so working days of the year the labourer could earn a wage in cash. At first, from about 1750 onwards, labourers prospered in a modest way. According to Arthur Young, every labourer had a cow, some two. As a consequence, they married young and without restraint which led to a disproportionately high population increase amongst the poorest and least secure part of the community. The Union with Great Britain in 1801, and, fifteen years later, the end of the Napoleonic Wars, saw the coming of an agricultural decline. The condition of the labourers worsened. Very few by now could boast of so valuable a possession as a cow. The crash came in the middle 1840s by which time there was in Ireland a depressed impoverished rural proletariat living on the very outer edge of subsistence, and amounting to about a quarter of the whole population. The potato blight deprived the labourers of their staple food, and the repeal of the Corn Laws—intended to reduce the cost of food—effectively deprived them of employment. As a result, about four-fifths of this class of Irish society disappeared over the sea or under the sod. The dreadful antagonism between farmer and labourer which was so characteristic a feature of Irish rural society in the past, and which even today is in many ways evident, may not have originated in the dreadful catastrophe of the Great Famine, but the circumstances of that calamity certainly did nothing to lessen it. This whole matter of agricultural labourers in the past deserves more attention than it has received. What were its origins and developments? It was obviously a state of near-
serfdom. Is there some significance in the fact that the Irish word for labourer is the same as that for slave—scibháid? 3

In the first decade of the seventeenth century, a prominent English jurist was given the task of finally abolishing all the older forms of law in Ireland and firmly substituting English law for them. This is a very clear example of the abolition of a native institution and the imposition of one from outside in its place.

Our English legal authority, Sir John Davies, gave it as his clear and unequivocal opinion that at the time that “There is no nation of people under the sun that doth love equal and indifferent justice better than the Irish, or will rest better satisfied with the execution thereof, although it be against themselves, so as they may have the protection and benefit of the law when upon just cause they desire it.” 4 This, as everyone knows is a direct and very evident contrast to the state of affairs a couple of centuries later, say towards the end of the 19th century, when defiance of the law was not merely a normal characteristic of Irish society but almost regarded as a pious or patriotic duty, a state of affairs brought about by the fact that English law was to the Irishman an imposed foreign law, which not only deprived of customary rights and freedoms, but also was often deliberately manipulated for their own profit by the ruling classes who were also the lawgivers. Thus it came about that while to cheat or injure a neighbour was to do him a personal wrong, a breach of Christian charity and neighbourliness, no such inhibition was evident when it came to flouting the impersonal decree of an outside authority. To poach fish or game, to distil poitin, to cheat the tax man, to appropriate wreckage, to ignore traffic regulations and bye-laws and other such annoying impositions, far from savouring of civic transgression or moral depravity, were, to many, good, praiseworthy and even patriotic acts. I remember, as a child, hearing my father remonstrating with a neighbour. “John,” he said, “You really should speak to that son of yours. If he goes on like that, getting drunk and attacking a Civic Guard, he’ll be in bad trouble.” And the answer was “God knows, master, I’m surprised at you! I always thought you were a patriot! I’d never blame my son for striking a blow against the enemies of our country.”

We may wonder if the love of justice once characteristic of our people is completely eroded; or are the embers still there to be kindled again, perhaps by a more sensitive application of the law?

Another example of the impingement of outside authority upon the local communities is the gradual destruction mainly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of whatever form of local rule or authority existed in them. In most cases this rule seems to have been exercised by the local lord or chieftain. I have argued elsewhere, that such characters as “Rí na mBlaícaid” or “Rí Phort Uílann” may be survivals of a system of election of local rulers. 5 Whatever the case, we have a people deprived for some centuries of any part whatever in the selection of their rulers, and, not surprisingly, rejecting the authority and even the legality of those imposed upon them. How far, then, we may ask ourselves, was the regaining of traditional rights (real or imaginary) a factor in the

4Sir John Davies: A Discovery of the True Causes why Ireland was never entirely Subdued and brought under Obedience to the Crown of England until the beginning of His Majesty’s happy reign, quoted in Ancient Laws of Ireland (Rolls Series), Vol. II Dublin 1869, Preface.
emergence of such bodies as rapparees, defenders, whiteboys, rockites and molly maguires, who claimed authority, issued proclamations and purported to dispense justice, usually indeed for their own private or sectional interest but usually, too, in the name of some national or general ethic or ideal.

We may wonder too, as to our lack of a sense of local organisation and administration. We can contrast our state of affairs with that of great areas of Continental Europe where the small local authority, the village council, the Burgermeister, and so on, have real authority over local administration, local decision, local finances. Even in a free society of our own choosing, we are content with participation in the election of government from time to time, and to take no further part in a democratic process. And we have seen in our own time a gradual erosion of such power as local authorities possessed, and its assumption by central authority.

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Another outside influence on the local community is that of religion. The main characteristic of religion, in this regard, is that it is hierarchical and authoritarian, affecting people more by its imposing of an ethic, than by its idealistic or ceremonial or philosophical content. Now, as we know, the nineteenth century re-emergence of a Catholic way of life in Ireland was marked by—one could perhaps say marred by—a very remarkable and very persistent confusion of convention with morality. 'Respectability' was regarded as virtuous, 'vulgarity' was looked upon as sinful. Consequently, many harmless customs, practices, amusements, even devotions, were condemned as vulgar. Perhaps the lowest depth of this aberration was reached by those good sisters in convent schools who, in teaching deportment, insisted that greetings like "Bail ó Dhia ar an obair!" or "Dia's Muire dhuirt" and exclamations like "Dia linn" or "Ó, a Mhuire Mháthair" were the height of vulgarity, and that the proper thing was to say "Good afternoon", "How do you do?" and "Oh dear me!"

Of course, this peculiar aberration was not confined to Ireland in the Victorian and Biedermeier era, but for a variety of social and historical causes it was more intense here than in most other regions. Examination of this phenomenon and its effects might explain some anomalous features of our present society.

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One last example. Whether, in former times formal education may be regarded as deriving from within or from outside the local community is a moot point. Indeed, we may speculate as to the identity of literacy and education. Nowadays illiteracy is equated to ignorance and stupidity. This was not the case formerly. The builders of Newgrange and of Staigue Fort could neither read nor write. Neither could some of our greatest storytellers within living memory. It was well known and clearly recognised in our local tradition that illiterate people might be well-informed and wise, as well as expert in their occupation or trade.

Of course, for professional and commercial people, literacy and learning were taken for granted, but the ordinary man, the farmer, the fisherman, the artisan and the labourer did not need it. They learned all their skills and crafts in the old way, by word of mouth and example. But, for ordinary people, book-learning was a status symbol, a social grace, something to be admired, and, if possible acquired. To read the classics, to quote Latin and Greek authors, to solve Euclidian problems, to read the stars—a man or woman who could do these things was set above the common herd and admired accordingly.
In this connection we may refer to that interesting figure of nineteenth century rural Ireland, the dancing master. Dancing was regarded as the ultimate in physical virtuosity, and as a social grace of the highest order. The dancing master also taught deportment and 'company manners'. Parents wanted their children to shine in these accomplishments; classes were crowded and the ultimate disgrace was to have a child rejected as unteachable by the dancing master.

All of this is in contrast to the ideal of a 'sound, practical education' directed towards profit and prosperity, in which, as P. H. Pearse said, "...children are the "Raw material"; we desiderate for their education "modern methods" which must be "efficient" but "cheap"; we send them to Clongowes to be "finished"; when "finished", they are "turned out"; specialists "grind" them for the Civil Service and the so-called liberal professions."  

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To sum up. All folk tradition is functional. It serves a need in the community in which it flourishes. It is developed and fostered because, and as long as, it is necessary or useful.

It is evident that in Irish traditional society there were certain characteristics which we are losing, or have already lost.

There was an old-established and very strong tradition of women as independent money-earners, and in spite of a certain expansion of this in professional, clerical and industrial life there has been a marked retrogression in Irish rural society, a phenomenon which, incidentally, is not unique to Ireland, but is evident in other modernising societies.

There was a multi-stratified social and economic gradation in which the gap between farmer and labourer was at least as great, and very much more evident, than that between landlord and tenant, and which may be even yet of considerable social significance. There was a very great degree of family solidarity and interdependence between relatives, in which each generation and each degree of relationship had its rights, privileges and duties. This was marked by a great pride in the family and a great respect for the family name, the modern breakdown of which has brought serious consequences.

There was, once upon a time, a great respect for law and justice—and there is no need to stress what the loss of this implies.

There were traditions of local organisation, and co-operation. There was a critical outlook on ecclesiastical authority and dicta. There was a liberal view of the purpose of education as something higher than mere "fumbling in the greasy till."

These, and many other elements of our folk tradition are being lost. I think we should ask ourselves if we are replacing them with something better, or are we leaving a dangerous social vacuum, which may be filled haphazardly, to our detriment, and which we may be neglecting to our own danger?

The study of our social folk tradition has only recently begun. The above is but a very meagre sketch of a few of its elements, which, together with many more, demand full and thorough research and investigation.

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