IVRLA RESEARCH REPORT: IRELAND LIFE-WRITING

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1. CONTEXT

This project focused on the material that had been collected by an earlier and still ongoing project, the Ireland Life-Writing Archive which is administered by the UCD School of English, Drama and Film. The Ireland Life-Writing Archive was launched in June 2006 and received UCD seed funding. Professor Andrew Carpenter originally directed the project and Dr Eibhlín Evans (and subsequently Dr Dervila Layden) provided contract research services. The project’s purpose is to solicit, catalogue, and archive the life-writings of Irish people who wish to contribute accounts of their life experiences. Once catalogued, the written pieces are held by UCD Archives where they can be consulted by researchers or members of the public. There are no restrictions in terms of format or contributors and no qualitative criteria – writing from young and old, emigrants and immigrants, rural and urban dwellers is all welcome and provides valuable accounts of a changing society for scholars now and into the future.

The process of life-writing is not new (indeed all biography and autobiography is life-writing); what is relatively recent is the use of the term “life-writing” to cover all such material as well as an academic interest in it. Life-writing does not have to be produced to an imposed set of standards and the emphasis is on the writer (or the collector of their story) recording their own lives in the words and format that seem most appropriate to the person whose story is being told. The discourse of life-writing seems to be informed by the discipline of psychotherapy which puts a value on the subject’s accessing and retelling of their memories, while its popularity has been driven by the rise in creative writing courses both inside and outside academia.

Those who do not see the value of collecting life-writing or who would wish to impose a particular qualitative standard on it might argue that the emphasis on a person writing their life promotes an overly individualistic point of view. Its proponents might point out that often those who write it (or about whom it is written) are the very individuals whose lives seem have been ignored by wider society and that, apart from the importance of the written account to the subject and his/her family, it also fosters a greater understanding of our

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1 Enquiries or submissions should be directed to the Administrator, Life-Writing Project at the UCD School of English, Drama and Film.
society. Life-writing allows the recording of the lived experience of history therefore forming an important corollary to the more official written histories which tend to focus on individuals who played a leading role in historical events. This is not only democratic in impulse but it also facilitates a more nuanced understanding by readers and researchers as to how the wider populace reacted to and engaged with the social, political, and cultural events and trends that become written as history.

Tom Zoellner, whose text *Homemade Biography* is a useful handbook for those setting out to record a life history, makes an eloquent argument for life-writing. Drawing on historian Will Durant’s analogy of civilization being the story of “what happens on the banks” while “[t]he stream is sometimes filled with blood from people…doing things historians usually record” (quoted in Zoellner, 6), he suggests that life-writing helps to fill a gap by recording the stories of

… the people who lived on the side of the river; the ones who never ran for elective office, made a scientific discovery, played in a World Series, built a dam, gave a speech, or otherwise attracted attention beyond their neighbourhood, but whose lives counted for something. They mattered. Ordinary people built the world with trillions of acts of obscure heroism lost to common memory. […] Publicity and luck may have secured visited grave sites for a select few, but both the famous and the forgotten have stories that ought to be preserved. (6-7)

There are many published histories of Ireland but many, many more stories of the people who lived through and contributed to Ireland’s changing times. The Ireland Life-Writing Archive exists to acquire, safeguard, and promote access to these important stories.

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

The scope of the IVRLA phase of the Ireland Life-Writing project was to take the material submitted to date to the Ireland Life-Writing Archive (which had not been fully catalogued due to shortages in funding), complete the cataloguing of it and make a list of these submissions available through the IVRLA. Writings are not transferred to the UCD Archives until they have been catalogued and, furthermore, no previous list of the material had been made publicly available; hence, the IVRLA work has significantly increased the accessibility of this important material. As the procedures followed in the IVRLA phase of the project continued those that had been put in place earlier and also published the complete
list of catalogued submissions, this report deals with the totality of the submissions received by the Ireland Life-Writing Archive and covers the work done over all phases of the project.

A total of 93\(^2\) life-writing accounts had been submitted to the archive. These varied greatly in terms of format, genre, and authorship. There were hand-written accounts and letters, typed or word-processed manuscripts, optical disc submissions with embedded photos, and even published volumes. Life accounts varied from full family histories to reminiscences of particular events and were rendered in forms that varied from memoir to stream of consciousness musings to poetry. Some people wrote accounts of their own lives specifically for the archive; some either wrote about or submitted writings by their parents, relatives or friends; others had collected material from particular communities; and still others submitted existing, sometimes published, writings that they felt were appropriate for the archive.

3. DETAILED OUTPUT

Archival Procedures Followed

When works are initially received by the archive, they are acknowledged in writing and contributors are asked to complete (if they have not already done so) a submission form and a chain of transmission form. These forms record information about the contributor as well as information about the history of the writing (for example, when and where it was completed, the period which it covers, if it was compiled from other sources, whether it – or its sources - was stored or discovered before being submitted to the archive). The submission form also asks contributors to consent to their work being made available to the public through the archive.

Basic details about the both the writing submitted and the author (or compiler or submitter as appropriate) writer are then recorded in an excel spreadsheet. As well as listing the person’s name and contact details, the title, writing type, format and length, and the location and time in which the writing is set are noted. Additional columns also record the subjects covered by the writing submitted. These detail subject, specific locations, people, and organisations mentioned, providing a useful thematic index to maximise the research potential of these valuable first-hand accounts of life in Ireland.

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\(^2\) This number refers to individual lives for which accounts have been received. In some cases there were anthologies submitted which had compiled accounts from particular groups or communities; in these cases, the number of individuals whose stories were recorded in the anthology has been counted. In other cases, individuals chose to submit in the form of multiple short reminiscences or poems; although the catalogue records each item separately, for this quantitative purpose, such collected documents from one individual are counted as one.
The importance of consistent cataloguing of the subjects covered by each submission had been identified in the earlier phase of the project. Any inconsistency in recording subject headings can make searching more difficult for potential users. For example, users interested in accounts of saving hay may find themselves having to search for a myriad of related terms such as hay-making, hay making, and saving hay. By keeping an index of keywords and using that index consistently to assign subject headings to the writings submitted, searching is made significantly easier.³

As the various academic research staff who worked on this project did not have experience as librarians or cataloguers, it was not feasible to use the Library of Congress subject heading standards⁴ and a simpler index was needed for the project. Following discussion with Críostóir MacCárthaigh, archivist for the UCD School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Irish Folklore & Linguistics, it was decided to compile an index of subjects based on Seán Ó Súilleabháin’s A Handbook of Irish Folklore, a text based on Ó Súilleabháin’s extensive folklore fieldwork in the 1930s and 1940s which sets out appropriate classifications to be used when collecting folklore material. An excel keyword index was compiled based on this handbook, setting up each of Ó Súilleabháin’s fourteen categories as a column in the excel file and listing under each of these overall headings the actual subject headings that he used. This was a starting-point only and required adjustment based on the material collected by the Ireland Life-Writing Archive; it was necessary to add one overall heading (Politics, Government & Public Administration) as well as adjusting another (it perhaps says something about the time Ó Súilleabháin’s work was done that the heading of “Sports & Pastimes” required adjustment to “Leisure, Sports & Pastimes”).⁵

As cataloguing proceeded, it was also necessary to add new subject headings which were capable of reflecting contemporary developments in society and technology. For example, a number of accounts dealt with rural electrification and the arrival of the television; these items clearly required their own subject headings. Apart from technology other significant areas where subject headings were needed were the modern media, urban life (the emphasis of folklore was predominantly rural), and

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3 In the case of saving hay, it was decided that the simple subject heading of “hay” was sufficient.
4 The Library of Congress Subject Headings were developed in the US by the Library of Congress and are used as generally accepted international standards.
5 The fifteen overall categories used were Settlement & Dwelling; Livelihood & Household Support; Communications & Trade; Community; Politics, Government & Public Administration; Human Life; Nature; Folk-Medicine; Time; Principles & Rules of Popular Belief & Practice; Mythological Tradition; Historical Tradition; Religious Tradition; Religious Tradition; Popular Oral Literature; and Leisure, Sports & Pastimes.
industrialised society (including related environmental developments such as global warming). Finally, many accounts detailed specific events, buildings, people, organisations, and fictional characters or works. Rather than add these as subject headings, separate columns were added to the excel catalogue where these items could be noted.

The full catalogue of archived material to date has been compiled in two separate excel files, one for pieces submitted by the authors and the other for pieces submitted by someone else on their behalf. Both catalogue files, together with the keyword index, are now available through the IVRLA collection for this project. Apart from the name of the writer, submitter or compiler, all personal data (such as contact details and date/year of birth) was removed before the catalogue files were made available.

Overview of Material Submitted

Of the 93 accounts submitted to the Ireland Life-Writing Archive, 49 were submitted by the authors and 44 were either compiled or submitted by a third party. Unfortunately, not all submissions were accompanied by the required submission form which contains the submitter’s authorisation to make the material publicly available. Despite efforts to contact the people concerned, some submission forms have still not been received and hence this material cannot yet be made available through UCD Archives nor listed on the IVRLA catalogue. Therefore 21 of the accounts submitted by third parties (all of which were contained in one anthology) and 7 of the accounts submitted by authors are not available. All of this material has been fully catalogued so that it can easily be made publicly available if and when the submission forms are received.

The contributions varied greatly in terms of age of contributors, the format of the writing, the genre chosen and the length of the submission. Where the age of the person providing the account could be established, the average age at the time of writing was 67 and ages ranged from 36 to 96 years old. The value of having someone else record or collect the story was demonstrated by the fact that the accounts of the oldest cohort of contributors (all those aged over 86) were either submitted or collected by someone else; one example is Iris Park’s anthology of accounts collected from residents of a nursing home in Bray, Co. Wicklow. The majority of accounts (just under 55%) were in the form of a published book, many of which were self-published or privately published. Although most of these were

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6 Information was available or could be relatively reliably estimated for over half of the individuals (55%).

7 All analysis in this section refers to the full body of submitted accounts i.e. including those for whom submission forms have not yet been received.
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written in the form of family history or (auto)biography/memoir, one was a travel memoir and two were presented as poetry collections; indeed many of the accounts included poetry or song lyrics, some of which were written by the contributors. Typed or word-processed manuscripts formed a significant proportion (over 37%) and a small number of these were softbound. Again, most were in the genre of family history or (auto)biography/memoir with some poetry and travel memoirs contained within these. As these submission were less formal than the published book format, many contributors also included clippings, letters (mainly published in newspapers or magazines), and magazine articles. The remainder of submissions were either letters or collections of letters (three, all handwritten), relatively short handwritten autobiographical accounts (two accounts, between 6 and 10 pages in length), a memoir submitted on CD format (one, a 59-page Microsoft Word document with embedded photographs), and a collection of published articles (one, mainly covering local history).

Accounts from individual contributors varied in length from as little as 2 pages (in the case of one account included in an anthology) to as much as 337 pages (for a self-published memoir) and included reminiscences of specific events or activities as well as more comprehensive personal and family histories. Writings were almost exclusively in English with only two items (both within an anthology for which no submission form was received) in Irish.

The contributions received were written about periods from the late nineteenth century right up to 2007. As many of the lengthier accounts themselves covered a range of sixty or seventy years, it is difficult to provide an accurate breakdown by time period or decade; however, over 80% of the contributions seem to be centrally concerned with periods up to the 1950s – perhaps demonstrating the need to record the history of a time that is fast receding from popular memory. Location (in the almost 83% of cases where this could be determined) also exhibited significant diversity and many accounts covered several places due to both internal and external migration. However, by ascribing writings to their originating or main location, it becomes clear that the location most written about is Dublin (36%) while 19% of accounts centre on Munster, 18% deal with the rest of Leinster, 13% write about Connacht and just 10% are focussed on Ulster. Although only 3% are entirely based abroad, a significant number feature either temporary or permanent emigration locations. In urban/rural terms, rural or small town accounts seem to predominate over those of the larger cities.

Much more detailed work would need to be done to arrive at a comprehensive analysis of topics covered and it is hoped that the existence of this archive will provide the impetus for

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8 This was only for the purposes of this analysis; the catalogue itself details multiple locations where appropriate.
scholars to do research on particular topics, areas, and themes. However, it is appropriate to make some preliminary observations. The sheer range of subjects covered in a relatively small number of contributions is impressive and bodes well for future development of the archive. Descriptions of schizophrenia or showbands sit side-by-side with threshing or television, details of time and seasons marked by socially- and institutionally-led religious observances are contrasted with accounts of atheism and personal faith journeys, memories of the Irish war of independence and its aftermath give way to reminiscences of World War 2, and documenting the now-forgotten occupation of domestic service turned into accounts of office work and business schools. Topics that seemed to hold particular interest for the writers were customs around food production and religious celebrations; interestingly certain aspects of the coming technology that was to prove the deathknell for these customs, such as television and rural electrification, held an equal – if not stronger – fascination. Institutions considered are not only the expected religious, cultural, and sporting ones (the Catholic Church, the Abbey Theatre, hurling, and horse-racing) but encompass more commercial ventures such as Dublin Airport and Switzers department store. Many accounts are of the period from the 1930s to 1950s and deal with the minutiae of life in Ireland at that time; however, it is by no means insular as demonstrated by a number of accounts of travel and emigration as well as a concern with world affairs both politically (such as Nazi concentration camps, Rudolph Hess, and Henry Kissinger) and culturally (many international stars of stage and screen as well as their fictional personas are mentioned). It is hoped that making this wealth of material available to the public will allow it to be the subject of further research and analysis.

Apart from the formal submission forms and catalogue information, correspondence with contributors to the archive provided interesting anecdotal information about the effect and purposes of life-writing. Some noted that the writing of their story was an important part of dealing with their past (supporting psychoanalytic theories on catharsis) while others welcomed the opportunity to have their writing preserved as a record of a disappeared or disappearing way of life. In particular, children appeared to be interested in either encouraging their parents to write their life histories or in submitting their accounts to the archive; two common themes here were that the parent didn’t necessarily see his or her story as different or important and that the children wanted to ensure that the accounts by their parents would remain available for consultation by future generations of their family. A number of contributors also noted that their accounts were produced as a response to attending life-writing or creative writing classes. Both the material submitted and these
anecdotal responses demonstrate the importance of projects designed to elicit and preserve these individual and diverse life histories.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This body of writing, which will hopefully continue to be added to over the coming years, already provides interesting material for researchers of Irish social history. The continuation of the processes of material-gathering, cataloguing, and updating of the online index is in itself a very useful research activity. There is also scope for expanding the project in many directions: increasing awareness of it and thus garnering a greater level of contributions through active promotion with writing groups and public library networks; running outreach life-writing programmes and classes; establishing a life-writing journal to provide an appropriate publication outlet and which could have issues based around particular themes, periods, or parts of the country; and linking with academic investigation into the process of life-writing both in Ireland and internationally.

WORKS CITED
