



<b>Title</b>	Folklore schools 1937-38
<b>Authors(s)</b>	Dillon, Jonny
<b>Publication date</b>	2010
<b>Publication information</b>	Dillon, Jonny. "Folklore Schools 1937-38." Edited by Dervila Layden (2010).
<b>Series</b>	UCD Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive Research Report Series, 15
<b>Publisher</b>	UCD Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive
<b>Item record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2501">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2501</a>

Downloaded 2023-03-15T17:09:45Z

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd\_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

# IVRLA<sup>1</sup> RESEARCH REPORT: FOLKLORE SCHOOLS 1937-38

Jonny Dillon (Researcher)

## 1. CONTEXT

The purpose of this project was to begin to catalogue, number, and conserve the primary school copybooks entrusted to the National Folklore Collection under the 1937-38 Schools' Scheme, a joint initiative carried out under the direction of the former Irish Folklore Commission, with the assistance of the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). A scheme largely unparalleled in Europe, the Schools' Manuscripts Collection has been described by Séamas Ó Catháin, former director of the National Folklore Collection, as "a snapshot of the state of Irish tradition across the greater part of Ireland, a long exposure ... taken over a period of eighteen months" (1) and it is representative of a wide body of lore and custom as varied and diverse as the communities from which it was originally gathered.

The collection and transcription of this material was carried out nationwide by the primary school sixth class students<sup>2</sup> in 1937 and 1938, who, in exploring given topics set out by the Commission and distributed to their school via a small handbook titled *Irish Folklore and Tradition*, would consult with their parents, grandparents, and other members of the community to gather the information. Topics covered under the scheme included Hidden Treasure, Local Cures and Herbs, Old Crafts, Holy Wells, Fairy Forts,<sup>3</sup> Local Fairs, and

---

<sup>1</sup> The UCD Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive (IVRLA) is a major digitisation project which was undertaken by University College Dublin from 2005 to 2009. Material selected from UCD's extensive resources of archival and rare material was digitised and catalogued before being made available from a single virtual location (<<http://ivrla.ucd.ie>>). This digitised material covers a wide range of humanities and social science disciplines and is arranged in curated collections which can be browsed, searched, bookmarked, or downloaded. In addition to the digitisation of existing UCD collections, the IVRLA conducted a series of demonstrator projects. The remit of these projects was to develop additional digital research resources and to present these in the form of an exhibition collection. Some of these projects incorporated existing IVRLA material but many generated new content which was inspired by the potential of digital resources. Consequently, the IVRLA and its demonstrator projects show how digital repositories can provide access to diverse archival research materials as well as challenging the ways in which we consider digital content and generate research in a digital environment. The IVRLA is a component of the UCD Humanities Institute of Ireland and is funded under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLII) Cycle 3, administered by the Higher Education Authority.

<sup>2</sup> These students would generally have ranged from 10 to 14 years of age.

<sup>3</sup> Fairy forts are circular in form and are sometimes believed to be the remnants of old dwellings. Folk belief frequently holds that they are fairy dwellings and that those who interfere with them may suffer negative consequences as a result.

Games I Play.<sup>4</sup> The topics and responses were recorded in Irish or English depending on the district, the school, the teachers and the pupils. As this was a Collection undertaken at a particularly important time in Ireland's nation-building process,<sup>5</sup> some teachers may have requested students to complete their responses in Irish even if Irish was not the local vernacular.

Material was written first into the children's homework copybooks, and then re-written into the larger official notebooks that had been distributed for the scheme. The completed official notebooks were eventually bound, paginated and numbered, according to parish, barony, county and province, into a collection of 1,128 manuscripts. An interim catalogue was also completed by the Irish Folklore Commission, now in the National Folklore Collection, UCD in 1955, and the school copybooks were all boxed, labelled and numbered according to their corresponding manuscripts. It is important to make a distinction between the two separate components of this collection, that is, the large official bound notebooks and the copybooks of the individual children. The copybooks present their own fascinating research possibilities.

The collection is not without its shortcomings however, and the scheme did not extend beyond the confines of the State. As such, the province of Ulster is represented by only three of its constituent counties, namely, Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. Another notable imbalance is the lack of material from urban areas. The Department of Education regarded the scheme as voluntary in its application to schools in the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford. Guidance issued by the Department also suggested that

For historical and other reasons, some districts are relatively poor in folklore and that in some districts where folklore abounds the efforts of the pupil may be hampered by the apathy of the older people. It will be open to a teacher in such circumstances to make representation to the District Inspector for a modification or discontinuance of the scheme (CMT 9/37 §8).

---

<sup>4</sup> The remaining topics were: A Funny Story, A Collection of Riddles, Weather Lore, Local Heroes, Local Happenings, Severe Weather, Old Schools, Local Marriage Customs, Local Place-Names, Bird Lore, Home-Made Toys, The Lore of Certain Days, Travelling Folk, Local Poets, Famine Times, The Local Roads, My Home District, The Potato Crop, Proverbs, Festival Customs, The Care of our Farm Animals, Churning, The Care of the Feet, The Local Forge, Clothes Made Locally, Stories of the Holy Family, The Local Patron Saint, The Landlord, Food in Olden Times, Hurling & Football Matches, An Old Story, Old Irish Tales, A Song, local Monuments, Bread, Buying & Selling, Old Houses, Stories of Giants & Warriors, The Leipreachan or Mermaid, Local Ruins, Religious Stories, The Old Graveyards, A Collection of Prayers, Emblems & Objects of Value, and Historical Tradition & Strange Animals.

<sup>5</sup> Having achieved independence in 1922, the Republic of Ireland was officially created after the passing of the Constitution of Ireland by plebiscite on 1 July 1937.

There is no definite information as to how many schools or teachers made specific representations for such modification or discontinuance nor are there definite figures concerning the percentage of children or schools in any given area participated in the scheme. However, although material from the above-mentioned urban quarters is largely absent,<sup>6</sup> the scheme resulted in a comprehensive collection of material from other areas of the country and is a substantial resource for scholars of folklore.

## 2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

The aim of the project was to focus on a particular, previously neglected, portion of the 1937-38 Schools' Manuscripts Collection: the children's copybooks. As the emphasis of the IVRLA demonstrator projects was on providing digital resources, it was decided that a catalogue of copybooks would be created in digital form and made available online through the IVRLA. This would complement both the existing catalogue of the official notebooks (which can be consulted in the National Folklore Collection in UCD) and the two collections of digitised material from the official notebooks already available through the IVRLA.<sup>7</sup>

The project was carried out by one researcher between July and December 2009 and required examination of each individual copybook in order to catalogue it. However, because the original copybook material is over seventy years old and by its nature prone to degradation (being softbound and on relatively poor paper), there was an important physical conservation aspect to this project. As each copybook was examined, conservation procedures were followed to ensure that this valuable material remains physically accessible into the future. Conservation work is slow and delicate and significantly affected the number of copybooks that could be catalogued.

In order to give a sense of how this material was collected, it was also decided that sample material should be selected, scanned, and made available online through the IVRLA to act as a capsule exhibition for the many thousands of copybooks submitted from children across Ireland.

---

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting however that the *Urban Folklore Project*, which ran from 1979-80, went quite a way to redressing this, through extensive collecting of audio recordings carried out in the greater Dublin area. Some of these audio recordings are available through the IVRLA at <<http://ivrla.ucd.ie/ivrla/collection?pid=ivrla10-4632>> and the full collection may be accessed by visiting the National Folklore Collection at UCD.

<sup>7</sup> These are *Schools' Manuscripts Collection - My Home District* and *Schools' Manuscripts Collection - Carna & Ballinasloe*. The *My Home District* collection comprises some 2,700 essays written by schoolchildren from throughout Munster and Connacht and selected by archive staff at the National Folklore Collection from the official notebooks. The *Carna & Ballinasloe* collection comprises five complete volumes of bound official notebooks (almost 700 essays) from schools in the Carna and Ballinasloe districts of County Galway.

### 3. DETAILED OUTPUT

There had been no comprehensive cataloguing or indexing of the copybooks and this project began that process by going through each copybook box and recording the names of individual students, as well as numbering and labelling each separate copybook sequentially. The children's names, together with their copybook number, name of their school, teacher's name, school location and roll number were recorded in an excel catalogue which has now been made available through the IVRLA.

The copybooks and boxes are numbered according to the bound volume to which they relate, for example, material from Loch Conaortha School is contained in Schools Manuscript number 8 (NFCS: 8). This school returned the children's original copybooks as well as the larger official notebooks that were bound in the Manuscript Collection, and these copybooks are housed in Copybook Box 8A. As any one Schools Collection manuscript will usually contain work from several schools, their respective copybooks, if provided, will be housed together, with the material being separated by school as 8A, 8B, 8C and so forth. Numbers were assigned to each individual copybook, in the order in which they appeared in their respective boxes. For example, copybook box 8A contains copies 8A/01 through to 8A/06. In this way a record is kept of each individual entry for cataloguing purposes which will also assist in safeguarding the collection.

The books have had their staples removed in order to conserve them and avoid further corrosion or damage. Over time, the staples have rusted, causing the paper surrounding them to rot and be eaten away. Though most of the copies are in good condition, others have fallen into various stages of degradation, and as such, their conservation and preservation are of the utmost importance. Having removed the staples from the copies, individually labelled each one, and entered all of the relevant data into the excel catalogue, the copies were re-housed in acid-free archival boxes that will further guarantee their safety for the future. These boxes have been individually labelled and numbered, and these numbers are recorded on the excel catalogue.

The various fields listed in the catalogue file are the bound manuscript volume number, copybook box number, county, school, parish, barony, teacher, notes, student, copybook number and school roll number. Sections where students' names are given in Irish have the original spelling in brackets alongside the standardised spellings. In English-speaking areas, the children's names often appeared in Irish on the front cover of the copybook, but were signed in English for all other entries into both copy and manuscript.

Because of this, the English names have been provided first, being the more likely names actually used by the children, with the original, non-standardised Irish equivalents placed alongside in brackets. It was only possible, within the timeframe allotted to the project, to enter the details of each student and conserve each copybook for the first 25 boxes. The remainder of the catalogue, which is based on the interim Irish Folklore Commission catalogue drawn up in 1955, does not contain names of the individual pupils. Also, several of the copybook box details are incorrectly allocated in the original catalogue, with, in some cases, more than one copybook box existing with the same numbers. The full catalogue has been provided as an aid to scholars and other interested parties; however, all entries from box number 26 onwards should be regarded as provisional.

The digital catalogue hosted by the IVRLA serves as the research tool through which to access information regarding the Schools' Collection. Anyone interested in consulting this material can now access the catalogue to see which schools took part in the scheme and to establish whether or not these Schools returned the original children's copybooks<sup>8</sup> as well as the official manuscript books. Details as to particular students who participated in the scheme are now available for the first time. The online collection for this project also includes sample scans of material, including original postage labels from the boxes of copybooks submitted, copybook covers, and extracts of written work from four of the copybooks; this offers users a sense of the physical material represented by the catalogue.

Because of the conservation aspect, the project work was extremely time-consuming and it has not been possible in this phase of the project to progress beyond the copybooks of County Galway. Thus far, a total of 52 copybook boxes have been catalogued. This amounts to 1036 separate copybooks, from 796 individual students across 80 different schools, and covers the first 25 manuscripts in the Schools' Collection. This of course, is but a tiny representation of the full extent of the collection. On completion of the scheme, the commission received an initial 4,271 manuscript books, an approximate 375,660 pages in total. The Department of Education delivered a further 300 manuscript books to the Commission, bringing the total amount to 4,571 (Briody 269). These books are what form the 1,128 bound volumes of the Manuscript Collection, and can be estimated to amount to approximately 430,000 pages in total. The Schools' Scheme copybooks however, have been estimated to contain approximately 650,000 pages (Briody 270). It was initially believed that the copybooks consisted for the most part of duplicate material, or items believed to have

---

<sup>8</sup> If a school did not return the copybooks, the field for "copy box" in the excel catalogue is left blank.

already been transcribed into the larger manuscript notebooks. However, this is now known not always to have been the case, and in some cases as little as ten percent of material was transcribed from the copybooks into the larger manuscript books (Briody 270). These copybooks form a central part of the Schools' Manuscripts' Collection and offer many avenues for further research and exploration.

#### **4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Until a full catalogue of these copies is completed, the whole scope and breadth of the Schools' Manuscripts Collection can only be estimated. The National Folklore Collection hopes, subject to the availability of funding, to be able to continue this valuable work in the future and to make the resulting complete catalogue available online. Adding sharper focus to the contextual details of the families and communities who recorded this material over seventy years ago, these copybooks and the wealth of material contained within them serve to add to the resonance of this unparalleled collection, the enthusiastic work of teachers, pupils and parents nationwide, carried out and directed under the Irish Folklore Commission and Department of Education. Making the complete catalogue available online would truly bring this resource back into the public domain from which it originated. Should resources ever permit it, the digitisation of the entire collection would create a tremendous resource, allowing scholars, contributors and their descendants access to the wealth of material gathered from the Irish people in 1937-38.

#### **WORKS CITED**

Briody, Michael. *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007.

Department of Education. "Circular to Managers & Teachers of National Schools: Scheme for the Collection & Preservation of Folklore & Oral Traditions." Dublin: 1937 (abbreviated as CMT 9/37).

Ó Catháin, Séamas "Súil Siar ar Scéim na Scol." *Proceedings from the McGlinchey Summer School*, Donegal 1998. [Pagination assigned]