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IVRLA¹ RESEARCH REPORT: FOLKLORE SCHOOL GAMES

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1. CONTEXT

Inspired by the example of the 1937-38 Schools' Scheme, this project's remit was to collect folklore, and more specifically games, from schools in the Dublin area. The aim of the project was to collect contemporary accounts from children of games they play on the streets, in the playground or at home.

The 1937-38 Schools' Scheme was 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). Under the Scheme, schoolchildren were asked to explore given topics set out by the Commission, consulting with their parents, grandparents, and other members of the community to gather the information and writing their answers in school copybooks which were then returned to the Department of Education. There were over fifty topics covering a wide variety of folklore and customs. This was a truly impressive undertaking, involving 100,000 children in 5,000 schools and resulting in what is estimated to be over 650,000 copybook manuscript pages of material² which is now held in the National Folklore Collection in UCD.

This project, undertaken by one researcher over a three-month period, could not possibly attempt to replicate the 1937-38 project. Instead, it was decided to select a small sample of schools in the Dublin area and to focus on collecting information on children's

¹ 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.

² There were also larger official notebooks into which a selection of each school's responses was copied. These were bound as the official record of the project and contain over 400,000 pages of material; The copybooks themselves have also been kept and it is this direct record that is of interest to me in this project. Another IVRLA research project (Folklore Schools 1937-38) has carried out research on the copybooks returned as part of the original scheme <<http://ivrla.ucd.ie/ivrla/researchproj/id/57>>.

FOLKLORE SCHOOL GAMES

games. Dublin was one of the areas somewhat under-represented in the 1937-38 scheme and this project goes some small way towards correcting this. In carrying out this project I owe much thanks to Ríonach úí Ógáin, Principal Investigator of this project and Director of the National Folklore Collection and Dervila Layden, Research Co-ordinator with the IVRLA.

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Seven primary schools in the Dublin area participated in the project. The method of recording the material duplicated that of the 1937-38 survey in certain ways, in that school children handwrote the information in copybooks. The mediation was different; while the original collecting work in the Schools' Scheme was mediated directly through each teacher, for this project I visited each school participating in the survey to explain folklore in general, and this project in particular, to each participating class. Intervening advances in technology enabled this project to make audio recordings of each school and so preserve, in a very accessible way, the children's descriptions and enactments of the games they play.

A total of 174 copybooks were collected from the participating schools and thirteen audio pieces were recorded. Five of the copybooks have been digitised and made available online through the IVRLA, together with a sample of relevant material from the 1937-38 scheme and all thirteen of the audio recordings. Together, they form an exhibition collection and a resource for the study of children's games over a seventy-year timeframe.

3. DETAILED OUTPUT

Planning the Project

My first step was to write to a number of schools in Dublin city and county explaining the aims and purpose of this project, and briefly explaining what now exists in the 1937-38 Schools' Manuscripts Collection held in the National Folklore Collection at UCD. As this project was subject to time constraints,³ it was decided that fieldwork could commence once seven schools had agreed to participate. While awaiting replies, I set about organising appropriate consent forms so that we might obtain records in written form in copybooks from the children and also so that I would be able to make audio recordings of some of the games played. When planning how to approach and conduct the fieldwork, I consulted other studies

³ The overall IVRLA project was required to finish in December 2009 and the outputs from the project (copybooks and audio) needed to be digitised, catalogued and uploaded to the IVRLA before the project end.

and research resources in relation to collecting folklore and games from children. These included Iona and Peter Opie's *The Singing Game*, Iona Opie's *People In The Playground*, and Eilis Brady's *All In! All In!* Much useful material was found in Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* as well as the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) handbook *Irish Folklore and Tradition*. I also viewed footage of playground games⁴ recorded by the National Folklore Collection in St Brigid's Girls National School, Palmerstown in 2006.

When seven schools had been identified to take part in the study, I spoke with each of the teachers about the project and scheduled two days (each a week apart) with each school during November 2009 when I could meet with the children, discuss the project and begin collecting material. Consent forms were sent to each school at this stage so that parents could sign them in advance of collecting material from the children. The teachers, classes and schools who took part are listed below;⁵ I thank them all most sincerely for their enthusiastic participation.

1. John Corcoran, Sheila Clear and the pupils of sixth class in Ballyroan Boys National School.
2. Jonathan Adair and the pupils of sixth class in Rathgar Junior School.
3. Laura Thornton and the pupils of sixth class in Gardiner Street Convent School.
4. Aoife Kennedy, Patti Roche and the pupils of fifth and sixth class in Catherine McCauley National School.
5. Anna Geelan and the pupils of fourth, fifth and sixth class in Glasnevin National School.
6. Noeleen Conboy and Miriam Scally and the pupils of fifth and sixth class in St. Brigid's Girls National School, Palmerstown.
7. Dennis Monahan and the pupils of fifth class in Carysfort National School, Blackrock.

Conducting the Fieldwork

Unlike the 1937-38 Schools' Scheme, ethics guidelines for this project required that material collected from children must preserve their anonymity and be gathered with parental consent. At the start of my fieldwork visit, I collected all the signed consent forms which each

⁴ These games included "Cat and Mouse" and "Shirley Temple."

⁵ The total number of copies collected was 174 made up as follows: Ballyroan Boys National School, 36; Rathgar Junior School, 21; Gardiner Street Convent School, 17; Catherine McCauley National School, 16; Glasnevin National School, 20; St. Brigid's Girls National School, 37; and Carysfort National School, 27.

FOLKLORE SCHOOL GAMES

teacher had already collected from the children in the class. I then handed out copies to each of the children asking them not to write their names on them. Each child was given a number, which was written on the copybook.⁶

I began with the general question “What is Folklore?” Depending on the school, some a few of the children had a certain idea, be it a story, a superstition or a custom, while some classes had done some preparatory work beforehand, which was of great benefit. To make the concept of folklore more understandable I mentioned luck and ill luck and asked the children what they do or say when they see one or more magpies. Their responses included “One for sorrow”, “Two for joy/mirth”, “Three for a girl/lover”, “Four for a boy/a birth”, “Five for silver”, “Six for gold”, and “Seven for a secret never to be told.” We talked more about luck and ill luck and the children mentioned common superstitions such as throwing salt over the shoulder, horseshoes, walking under a ladder, putting shoes on the table and so on. Some of the children later recorded superstitions in their copybooks (see St Brigid’s GNS).

Then I moved on to festival customs and, as it was early November, we discussed Halloween customs and the origin of Halloween, the Samhain festival of the Celtic calendar, before talking about the other Celtic festivals of Imbolc, Beltaine and Lúnasa. I also read extracts from the (IFC) handbook *Irish Folklore and Tradition*. Next we discussed the games that the children play and as we progressed I made a list on the board of the many types of games. These included playground games, street games, ball games, bicycle games, swimming games, card games, imitation games, flower games, fruit games, skipping games, clapping games and so forth. I read extracts from copies I made from the original 1937-38 Schools’ Collection, of games played around Dublin such as manuscript NFC S 790: 90-102, Mulhuddart, ‘*Games I Play*’, or manuscript NFC S 797:101-102, Kilternan, ‘*Games I Play*’; and 135-6 Taney, 238-9, Dundrum (Taney); manuscript NFC S 796: 81, Dalkey, ‘*Local Games*’; 189, ‘*Old Games*’ 193, ‘*Local Games*’, both Glasthule. We tried to see if these games were played today, perhaps under a different name. One such example is a game called “Cockfighting” from Mulhuddart which describes how two big boys carry two smaller boys on their backs, and each pair tries to knock over their opponents. Today I am informed this would be banned in the school playground but that the children play it in the swimming pool

⁶ A list was compiled for each school associating the number and the child’s name, to be kept securely in the National Folklore Collection in UCD. This facilitates participants who may wish in the future to see the material which they contributed to the project. The list itself will not be given to any participant but used only by the Director of the National Folklore Collection to identify the copybook number completed by that participant.

and that it is now called “Horse and Jockey.” Another familiar game from the Mulhuddart extract is “Marbles.”

Once we had discussed games at length, I then discussed folklore more generally, concentrating on aspects that would be of interest to the children such as riddles, proverbs, blessings, funny stories, spooky stories, as well as songs and music, holy wells, weather lore or an historic building in the area. The children at Carysfort NS had great knowledge about the cross in Blackrock village, while those of St Brigid’s GNS could tell many a scary tale about Mill Lane. Finally we discussed fairy lore and the Sídh and I read from Bob Curran’s *A Field Guide To Irish Fairies*, talking about the banshee, the leprechaun, and the changeling and these beings are definitely alive and well among the schoolchildren of Dublin. One boy from Catherine McCauley NS had a great story from the lanes where he plays. He told me how he and his friends were playing in an old abandoned car down the lanes, but on returning the next day the seats were all torn up and there was a banshee comb on the seat, so they all ran away and never went back!

At the end of the class, the children were reminded to write about games and folklore in their copybooks over the next week. When I returned a week later, we discussed what had been collected and how they had found the experience of recording this information. Once everyone who wished to had contributed to the discussion, we talked about the games that were most popular in the playground such as “Dodgeball,” “Red Rover” (although this is banned in most playgrounds), “Sardines” and “Ice-cream”, all of which are discussed in more detail later. Then I recorded the descriptions of some such games on an Edirol recorder.⁷ These descriptions include singing games such as “Shirley Temple” and “Concentration” as well as the rules of games such as “Dodgeball” and “Crocodile May I Cross the River.”

Some of the schools had a number of pupils of different nationalities (these included Spanish, Romanian, various African nationalities, Polish, Russian, Indian and American) and there was a young Traveller boy and girl in two different schools. I included some of their games to as they are now being integrated, very rapidly, into the schools by word of mouth from child to child. These games reflect the differing social and historical situations; a Somalian boy in Ballyroan BNS described a game called “Devil in a Cell” which references

⁷ I wish to thank the National Folklore Collection at UCD who kindly lent me this equipment for the duration of the project. Particular thanks are due to Criostóir MacCarthaigh, who showed me how to use it, and Anna Bale, who assisted in downloading the final recordings. The Edirol records in digital format in both MP3 and WAV (which is the preservation standard used by the IVRLA).

FOLKLORE SCHOOL GAMES

slavery, while a girl from Gardiner Street described a traditional Polish game and the Traveller girl told us a game played at the halting site.

We then went outside so that the pupils could play their games for me. Luckily, the weather permitted this each day. We played two versions of “Dodgeball” one in Rathgar Junior School, using one ball, and a very different version in Ballyroan BNS, using five balls. The children made all the decisions and made them very quickly, be it “Dodgeball,” “Ice-Cream,” or “Queenie-I-Oh” (played in Gardiner Street) or “Crocodile May I Cross The River” (played at Carysfort NS). Sometimes the children asked me to decide who was to be “on” but whenever I left it up to them, they very rapidly took charge. A pupil in Catherine McCauley School, in book 4, describes how such a selection is made using a “dip”:

...a dip is a fair way of choosing a way to pick someone fairly. Someone gives out numbers and another person calls numbers out. And if the number that you have been given is called out, you have to go to the left side. And the next person whose number is called has to go to the right side and so on (copy 4).

And so the game was afoot! In Carysfort, the person that was “on” was chosen as the last person to reach the back wall of the playground and, as she was quite petite, the teacher, Mr Monahan, stepped in to help her catch the other children, causing great amusement. During the playing of the game, the speed with which decisions were taken was again noticeable. If a disagreement occurred the children would either run to myself or their teacher for advice, but once left to their own devices very rapidly solved the problem and resumed the game as quickly as possible. Time in a school playground is clearly of the essence.

Finally the singing games discussed and recorded at St Brigid’s GNS, Palmerstown were wonderful, amazing to listen to and watch and I recorded quite a number of these in the classroom before we went outside. These included games such as “Sally at the Bus-stop,” “Shirley Temple” and “Concentration.” Likewise Gardiner Street allowed me to record their versions of some of the singing games like “Queenie-I-Oh” and “Concentration.”

Having recorded all of the audio material and thanked the willing volunteers, the copybooks were collected and this valuable record is now held on behalf of the IVRLA in the National Folklore Collection at UCD.

Preliminary Observations from the Material Collected

There are a number of games which proved very popular with school children in the playgrounds and streets of Dublin today. Extracts given below from the copybooks describe these in the children’s own words. Unfortunately, it was not possible to film the children

playing;⁸ had this been done the material gathered could have offered a more comprehensive view, giving researchers a greater understanding as to what is being played and how. The copybooks themselves offer a visual resource of a different type as many of the children chose to illustrate their descriptions of the games with drawings. One of these drawings (an illustration of hopscotch from copy 32, St Brigid's) has been chosen as the main research image for this project and conveys a sense of the visual culture of today's schoolchildren.

Out of all of the schools, "Dodgeball" was the game they all wanted to play at the end of my second visit, but we managed to vary it a bit. As already mentioned, it can be played with one or more balls depending on the size of the group or if it is a rougher all-boy game. This description was given by a Carysfort pupil:

Dodgeball is when there are two teams, one at each side of the court. In the middle there are balls. When the coach says go, both teams run to the balls and throw them at each other. If your [sic] hit by a ball your [sic] out, if you catch one, one of your player [sic] who are out come back in. It keeps going until one team [is] completely out. If you want a quicker game you put a time limit on it. At the end of it whichever team has the most players' wins (copy 1).

Another very popular game is "Tip-the-can" described by another Carysfort pupil in this extract:

Some of my favourite games are Tip the can, IRA and Rounders.

How to play TIP THE CAN is one person counts and the others hide. When the counter is finished they look for the hidiers, if the can is clear they run up and say "tip the can, I free me" (copy 18).

One of the games mentioned by this pupil, "IRA," is especially popular among the boys. It involves each team picking a word with each player taking one letter. The players chase each other, with the aim being to catch someone and get them to reveal their letter. This Carysfort pupil describes the game being played more gently by the girls using tickling: "IRA is played with two teams and each team member has a letter to make a word, the two teams tickle each other to get the letters" (copy 18). In the boy's descriptions in Ballyroan Boys National School they get the letters by any means of torture, pinching, punching and so on; needless to say this is often banned from the school playground.

⁸ As the outputs from the project were to be digitised and made available online, ethics guidelines restrict the filming of children.

FOLKLORE SCHOOL GAMES

Catching games are still well loved in the playground and here is a wonderful description by a pupil in Gardiner Street NS:

1. What you need to play?

Sports clothes

Runners

Yard or space to play

Children (11 or more)

2. Rules, Catch

You are not allowed to hide

You are not allowed to leave the yard.

3. How to play

Make two groups, one group catches. The second group runs. When you catch someone, you become part of the first, and you have to catch the second group. The winning group is the group with the most children. This game is fun (copy 14).

Other very popular games are “Cat and mouse” (copy 1, St. Brigid’s), “Queenie-I-Oh” (copy 30 St. Brigid’s), and Red Rover, which is also banned from most school playgrounds (copy 30, St Brigid’s).

Skipping games have been reintroduced into St Brigid’s GNS by Principal Noeleen Conboy and it is also popular in Carysfort NS where it is described as follows:

Skipping is a fun game to play. Two people hold a rope and the rest try to jump in. If you mess up you will have to hold the rope. The person who had held the rope longer will be skipping again. There are different games to play with a skipping rope, most days people always play with the rope. I like skipping because loads of people like to play and it is very good exercise. It is very good for training, boys and girls can play. An example of girls and boys skipping is ‘JUMP IN’...Skipping is a nice game and can be played all year round. People stay longer if they practise more (copy 21).

Some more modern games mentioned are “X-Factor” and “Hannah Montana”, (RJS copies 12 and 7), while some pupils in St.Brigids made up their own games, such as “Ireland” and “Circles” to suit their playground (copy 11).

Other popular games that I had played myself in the 1970s include “Blind man’s buff,” “British Bulldog,” or “True or Dare” (Glasnevin copy 6), or funny games like “Granny’s Underpants” (Glasnevin copy 11). Some games are quite specific to particular schools; Rathgar Junior School describes “Marco Polo” and “Empires and Rebels” while “Cerbs” or “Curves” is a popular ball game with the boys of Ballyroan.

While many of the games played today have recognisably been passed down from previous generations, it can be seen that some of these games are subject to change. Equally, new games are being introduced as cultural changes express themselves in children's play. What I have noted here are very much preliminary observations and I hope that the availability of this resource will enable further research to be done in this fascinating area.

On a personal note, as a lover of Irish history, heritage, and culture, I want to say how proud I was to be a part of this precious project. To participate in keeping our children's past and present lore alive and just to hear them describe their games was sheer pleasure. I must make a special mention of Catherine McCauley National School as the pupils there have dyslexia and they really worked hard to write up the work for this project. For me the joy was just being there and being a part of it all. I have to confess to being a bit nervous at first, unsure as to what to expect, but I had no need to fear. The children and teachers had great energy and enthusiasm from the very beginning. These school children of Dublin, all with their very different backgrounds taught me so much and brought me back to my own school days and the past. The magic tales of the schoolyard games enthralled me. I cannot put into words how much the children showed me what fun they could have for free. This was an incredible journey into school children's everyday life. It was a great privilege for me to be entertained by so many new young friends, to be made to feel so welcome among them, and to find folklore and children's games so very much alive.

Exhibition Collection and Outputs

The online exhibition collection created for this project includes sample material relating to games from the 1937-38 Schools' Scheme copybooks, sample material from the 2009 copybooks (five of the 174 copybooks collected have been digitised), and the full audio material collected. Presenting sample outputs from two surveys over seventy years apart within the same virtual space will, it is hoped, encourage fertile comparisons and further research. The full complement of copybooks collected in 2009 is held on behalf of the IVRLA in the National Folklore Collection at UCD and may be consulted there by scholars and members of the public.⁹

⁹ The archives and library of the National Folklore Collection at UCD are open to the public. For further details, please consult the website <<http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/en/visitingthenationalfolklorecollection/>>

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This project has gathered and made available very useful material for the study of children's games today. However, there are many ways in which it could be expanded. In relation to the material already collected, this project's time constraints meant that only a sample could be digitised and no more than preliminary observations could be made in relation to the material itself. Further detailed study could be conducted on the copybooks and audio material gathered, while the remainder of the copybooks could be digitised, catalogued and made available online to enable wider access to this valuable material. The earlier film footage collected in 2006 by the National Folklore Collection could also be digitised to give a more complete digital resource for children's games. Finally, following the procedures developed for this project, material could be collected from more schools over a wider area to make the project more representative. I hope that resources will become available to undertake this work and to build on what has been a most enjoyable research experience.

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