Béibhinn Breathnach
The Irish Folklore Collection as Public History in 1930s Ireland

From July 1, 1937 until January 31, 1939, school children aged 11–14 across the newly independent Irish Free State became the collectors of the young state's folklore.[1] The project was co-ordinated by the Irish Folklore Commission (I.F.C.) and endeavoured to collect "*seanchas*," the oral tradition which captured "the social life" of the "historic Irish nation."[2] Approximately 4,575 notebooks provided to the schools by the Department of Education were returned to the I.F.C., along with additional information in exercise books.[3] The material returned from 5,000 national schools contained approximately 740,000 pages of information about folklore from the 26 counties of the Irish Free State, collected by school children from their families and neighbors.[4] The information contained within this collection ranged from "local cures" to "In the penal times."[5] Today, this repository is commonly referred to as the Schools' Collection and it forms a significant portion of the National Folklore Collection (N.F.C.) in University College Dublin (UCD).

From its inception in the 1930s this was public history, an example of what Bronwyn Dalley, Christopher Hilliard, and others have referred to as the "pre-history of public history." The National School's Collection typified the "democratic potential" of Hilda Kean and Paul Martin's vision of the "public history as a process by which the past is constructed into history and a practice which has the capacity for involving people as well as nations and communities in the creation of their own histories."[6] Recently digitized, it has been hosted online by University College Dublin at *duchas.ie* since 2013. The digitization of the Schools' Collection's materials

1 Séamas Ó Catháin, "Súil siar ar Scéim na Scol 1937–1938," *Sinsear* 5 (1988), accessed July 3, 2021, https://www.duchas.ie/download/duchas.ie-suil-siar-ar-sceim-na-scol-2014.pdf, 5.

2 An Roinn Oideachais, *Irish Folklore and Tradition* (Dublin, 1937), 4.

3 Séamas Ó Catháin, "It's us they're talking about," in *Proceedings from the McGlinchey Summer School*, ed. Margaret Farren and Hary Harkin (1998), accessed July 3, 2021, https://www.duchas.ie/download/schools-scheme-ocathain.pdf, 14.

4 National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin (UCD), "National Folklore Collection (N.F.C.) and its collections," *dúchas.ie* (2021), accessed March 1, 2021, https://www.duchas.ie/en/info/cbe.

5 Headings taken from the digitized version of www.duchas.ie; see "In the penal times," "The Schools' Collection, Volume 1118, Page 53," by Dúchas © National Folklore Collection, UCD, licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

6 Hilda Kean and Paul Martin, *The Public History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013), xiii.

was already underway prior to the launch of the site, but the project received an additional boost of €1.75 million in funding from the government and UCD at the launch of *duchas.ie* in 2013.[7] The project can be contextualized within the rise of new media as a means of opening history to the Irish public.[8] It brought together "the old and the new in a way which allows for long-term possibilities regarding the understanding of our tradition."[9]

This appetite for digitization has produced projects like Virtual Treasury and the Collins Papers which were released "In response to the ongoing Decade of Centenaries" and the consequential increase of public interest in history.[10] Digitized primary sources are particularly effective in bringing a public accustomed to instant gratification into direct contact with the past.[11] These endeavors were further supported by the launching of the Digital Repository of Ireland in 2015 to assist in the management of digital heritage data.[12] Despite the benefit of increasing public engagement with the past, digitization also risks replicating the power structures entrenched in historical narratives and archives, with the aforementioned projects focusing on political history, a common bias in Irish historiography.[13] At both the collection and digitization stage, the Schools' Collection points to the "possibility of a participatory historical culture in which people have a firm hand in the making of their own pasts."[14] This article explores the context

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[7] National Folklore Collection, UCD, *Minister Launches Dúchas.ie Giving Global Access to Ireland's National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin*, December 18, 2013, accessed August 5, 2023, https://www.ainm.ie/pdf/13.12.18_Duchas_pr_EN.pdf, 1–2.

[8] Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O'Neill, "Negotiating Public History in the Republic of Ireland: Collaborative, Applied and Usable Practices for the Profession," *Historical Research* 90, no. 250 (2017): 821.

[9] National Folklore Collection, *Minister Launches Dúchas.ie*, 2.

[10] Trinity College Dublin, "About Beyond 2022 – Creating the Virtual Record Treasury of Ireland," *Beyond 2022*, (n.d.), accessed October 10, 2023, https://beyond2022.ie/?page_id=2#vision; Defence Forces Ireland, "The Collins Papers Online Release," *Military Archives*, October 14, 2019, accessed October 10, 2021, https://www.militaryarchives.ie/en/news-updates/single-view/article/the-collins-papers-online-release?cHash=9c270b7359f48e5a305d9e8b0623853a#.

[11] Michael Eamon, "A "Genuine Relationship with the Actual": New Perspectives on Primary Sources, History and the Internet in the Classroom," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 3 (2006): 298.

[12] Digital Repository of Ireland, "About DRI," *DRI: Digital Repository of Ireland* (n.d.), accessed December 12, 2020, https://dri.ie/about-dri.

[13] Sheila A. Brennan, "Digital History," *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook* (2019), accessed August 10, 2021, https://inclusivehistorian.com/digital-history/; Maeve Casserly and Ciaran O'Neill, "Public History, Invisibility, and Women in the Republic of Ireland," *The Public Historian* 39, no. 2, (2017): 26.

[14] Hilda Keane, "Public History as a Social Form of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, ed. Paula Hamilton and James B. Gardner, *Oxford Handbooks* (2017), online edn., Oxford

and delivery of the Schools' Collection of the Irish Folklore Commission as a key moment in the development of public history practice in independent Ireland and examines how principles familiar to public history practitioners today are visible in the history of that state-sponsored project.

Folklore and its Intersections

The Schools' Collection is situated between several broader subjects, namely folklore studies, oral history, and history education, all of which link closely to the key principles of public history. Mythical connotations associated with folklore are not misplaced but they limit the word's meaning and reduce the likelihood of folk material being deemed trustworthy by either historians or the public. Several folklorists have produced and revised definitions of their subject with varying levels of complexity. Francis E. Abernethy's definition of folklore as "the traditional knowledge of a culture" is helpful to understand the extent to which folklore is embedded within communities and the inherited nature of such knowledge.[15] Folklore is categorized not just as folk tales or beliefs but also as music, material culture, and customs, linking it closely with social history.[16] It is a wide ranging subject which not only encapsulates oral histories but also provides insight into cultures past and present, making it a strong pathway for the study of history.

Despite the compatibility of the two disciplines, a tension appears to exist between folklorists and historians. An image is conveyed in the folklore literature that historians are selective to a fault in the sources they value whereas folklorists eagerly accept "all the tales and songs and traditions that the historians allow to fall between the cracks."[17] That said, the digitization of the Schools Collection, along with interdisciplinary approaches to history, means that the material is becoming more popular for traditional historians. Historians such as Clodagh Tait,

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Academic, October 5, 2017, 405, accessed April 25, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199766024.013.22.

15 Francis E. Abernethy, "Classroom Definitions of Folklore," *Between the Cracks of History: Essays on Teaching and Illustrating Folklore*, ed. Francis E. Abernethy (Denton, TX; 1997), 4.

16 Paddy B. Bowman, ""Oh, that's just folklore": Valuing the Ordinary as an Extraordinary Teaching Tool," *Language Arts* 81, no. 5, (2004): 386.

17 Francis E. Abernethy, "Preface," *Between the Cracks of History: Essays on Teaching and Illustrating Folklore*, ed. Francis E. Abernethy (Denton, TX; 1997), vii.

Guy Beiner, and others have published material using the collection, in addition to folklore scholars who continue to use the material collected in the 1930s.[18]

For Beiner, "vernacular history" is excluded from narratives when Irish historians do not engage with sources like folklore collections, reducing the depth of an image of the past that the historian can produce.[19] These vernacular histories are linked to the question of authority in the construction of history which is relevant in public history discourse as there is an increasing drive to represent forgotten voices in narratives and cultural institutions. This includes starting conversations between traditional gatekeepers of history and the public surrounding both the narrative presented and the mode of display, fostering shared authority which is a central public history principle.[20] The Schools' Collection is a pre-public history project which encouraged students to be actively engaged with the preservation of the past. The format of the project appears familiar to public historians as an early form of oral history, an increasingly rewarding research methodology. The Schools' Collection closely aligned with public history principles by meaningfully engaging with vernacular history and sharing authority in constructing an image of the past.

A high proportion of the academic material pertaining to the Schools' Collection is written in Irish, likely due to a focus from the I.F.C. on Gaeltacht regions which were perceived to be rich in folklore.[21] The prominence of the Irish language can be seen by surveying the resources segment on *dúchas.ie*, but specific works like *Dúchas.ie: Ré Nua i Stair Chnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann* (2014) prove the limitations placed on non-Gaeilgeoir researchers as this reflection on digitiza-

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18 Clodagh Tait, "Worry Work: The Supernatural Labours of Living and Dead Mothers in Irish Folklore," *Past & Present* 246, Issue Supplement (December 2020): 217–238, https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtaa042; Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison, WI; 2007); Niall Ó Ciosáin, "Approaching a Folklore Archive: The Irish Folklore Commission and the Memory of the Great Famine," *Folklore* 115, no. 2, (2004): 222–32; Caitríona Nic Philibín and Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, "An Exploratory Study of Food Traditions Associated with Imbolg (St. Brigid's Day) From The Irish Schools' Folklore Collection," *Folk Life* 59, no. 2 (2021): 141–60; Patricia Lysaght, "Collecting the Folklore of Ireland: The Schoolchildren's Contribution," *Folklore* 132, no. 1 (2021): 1–33.

19 Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 12.

20 Kathleen McLean, "Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?," *Letting Go: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia, PA; 2011): 71–72.

21 Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki: Studia Fennica, 2008), 249.

tion is only available in Irish.[22] The Folklore of Ireland Society's journal, *Béaloideas*, is also a bilingual publication, making a number of the articles similarly inaccessible.[23] In addition to hierarchical attitudes to primary source material on the part of earlier historians, the Irish language component of the Folklore Collection may account for subsequent reluctance to engage with the Irish folklore archives by those not fluent in the language; there is a generational element here. Recently, Irish Folklore has found a place in academic works, such as Mícheál Briody's monograph on the I.F.C., but *dúchas.ie* speaks to the more frequent employment of the subject for local history books. A variety of publications have been produced using the Schools' Collection, and other material from the N.F.C., by heritage groups, county councils, and local historians.[24][25] Folklore is understood in this context as intensely local and nostalgic. A recent publication by broadcaster John Creedon, *An Irish Folklore Treasury: A Selection of Old Stories, Ways and Wisdom from the Schools' Collection* (Dublin, 2022), reveals a newer, popular iteration of more local, and academic, publications that have used the collection in the last decades.[26] The national reach of this volume, its production values, and the previous work of the author in highlighting Ireland's heritage has brought the School's Collection to another audience.

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22 National Folklore Archive, "Information Resources," *dúchas.ie* (2021), accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.duchas.ie/en/info/res; Gearóid Ó Cleircín, Anna Bale, and Brian Ó Raghallaigh, "Dúchas.ie: Ré Nua i Stair Chnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann," *Béaloideas* 82 (2014), accessed September 10, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24862792, 85–99.

23 Folklore of Ireland Society, *Béaloideas* (1927–2015), accessed August 20, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/journal/bealoideas. The website for the Folklore of Ireland Society, accessed September 11, 2024, https://bealoideas.ie/en/home/.

24 Eithne Ní Ghallchobhair, *Sceáltaí: The 1930s Schools' Manuscript Collection in County Donegal* (Donegal, 2017), 4; Jimmie Cooke, *Kilmacow Folklore: County Kilkenny St. Senan's Boys National School Kilmacow for Schools' Scheme 1937–39, Irish Folklore Commission and Memoirs of Kilmacow* (Naas, 2008); Jimmie Cooke, *Kilmacow Folklore 2: County Kilkenny St. Joseph's Presentation Convent Girls N.S., Upper Kilmacow, St. Patrick's Strangsmills Mixed N.S., Dunkitt, Kilmacow Schools' Scheme 1937–1939, Irish Folklore Commission* (Naas, 2014).

25 Kathleen Laffan, "Foreword," in *Kilmacow Folklore: County Kilkenny St. Senan's Boys National School Kilmacow for Schools' Scheme 1937–39, Irish Folklore Commission and Memoirs of Kilmacow*, ed. Jimmie Cooke (Naas, 2008), vi.

26 John Creedon, *An Irish Folklore Treasury: A Selection of Old Stories, Ways and Wisdom From the Schools' Collection* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2022).

Folklore and Identity

The collection of Irish folklore was contextualized within a wider European appetite to salvage a past way of being that scholars, artists, and writers feared would vanish with the rise of modernity.[27] Prominent Irish folklorist Séamus Ó Duilearga wrote of this concern and the need "to collect the huge body of tradition which has escaped the ravage of time, and the spiritual decay brought about by the materialism of the machine age."[28] Folklore, as such, was a window into the past. Ó Duilearga spent time in Northern Europe in 1928 where he met folklorists who viewed Ireland as a bastion of folklore in need of preservation, prompting him to write to his mentor Eoin MacNeill about the need to share this heritage with the world: "I also wonder if our Government will ever realize that they owe a duty to Ireland and to the civilized world to make the literature, history and folklore of our people known and respected everywhere."[29] In this, Ó Duilearga expresses his desire to find a public for folklore and history. On this same formative trip, Ó Duilearga met Professor Walter Anderson who had organized the San Marino folklore project which has been credited as the inspiration for the Schools' Collection.[30] Beyond the Schools' Collection, the I.F.C. had a wider folklore network in Europe, with Séamus Ó Súilleabháin dedicating his seminal text *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1942) "To the Swedish People whose scholars evolved the scheme for folklore classification outlined in these pages" and to the Irish people.[31] This dedication reveals the transnational dimensions to the Irish Folklore Commission's genesis, but also the discipline of folklore itself that moved beyond a purely nationalist Gaelic revival.

Up to that point, collectors of Irish folklore including Sir William Wilde, Jane Francesca Wilde ("Speranza"), W.B. Yeats, Maud Gonne, and others tended to come from elite socio-economic backgrounds. Others such as William Carleton, familiar with Irish oral traditions, engaged in collecting practices and disseminated their findings through texts that have become seminal in Irish studies. The popularity of Irish folklore emerged in part in the course of the Gaelic Revival movement

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27 Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*, 23; Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Exotic Dreams in the Science of the Volksgeist: Towards a Global History of European Folklore Studies* (The Kalevala Society, 2022).

28 *Irish Independent*, September 27, 1938. See Eoin Mac Carthaigh, "Seamus O'Duilearga," *Dictionary of Irish Biography online*, accessed April 24, 2023, https://www.dib.ie/biography/o-duilearga-seamus-james-hamilton-delargy-a6353.

29 Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*, 90; quoted in Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*, 90.

30 Ó Catháin, "It's us," 3.

31 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore,* 2nd edition (London, 1963), xv.

of the second half of the nineteenth century which was vital in moving towards a model of systematically preserving Irish folklore. Douglas Hyde's oft-cited lecture *The Necessity of De-Anglicising Ireland* (1892) encapsulates the drive for a Celtic character which would extend beyond the foundation of the Gaelic League and find a place later in the attitudes of the Free State government towards culture, heritage, and language. For Hyde, the pursuit of an Irish identity required the active promotion of all that was Gaelic in nature: "In a word, we must strive to cultivate everything that is most racial, most smacking of the soil, most Gaelic, most Irish, because in spite of the little admixture of Saxon blood in the north-east corner, this little island *is* and *will* ever remain Celtic at the core."[32] Folklore was understood as the epitome of this spirit. Anxiety concerning cultural loss through the presence of an outside force as well as traumatic events such as the Great Famine (1845 – 52) is evident in the impulse behind the preservation of the Irish language and Irish folklore. The emergence of Celtic Studies as well as "scholarly recognition of a scientific field of folklore" during the nineteenth century was equally important.[33] The work of Lady Augusta Gregory and W.B. Yeats in promoting Irish folk tales is just one example of the role of folklore in the foundation of a Gaelic identity, with the lasting legacy of their work seen today in reprints of collections compiled by the two authors.[34] In *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), Gregory speaks to the people of Kiltartan for whom the stories in the collection are dedicated, acknowledging that they "would not have to go far to get stories of Finn and Goll and Oisin from any old person in the place" but "there is very little of the history of Cuchulain and his friends left in the memory of the people."[35] The collection was compiled from manuscripts which were deemed to have inaccessible Irish, rather than oral collections, but Gregory notes that she presents the stories in "plain and simple words, in the same way my old nurse Mary Sheridan used to be telling stories from the Irish long ago, and I a child in Roxborough."[36] The implication is that folklore is both from and for the Irish people rather than for "the learned men that live in the college at Dublin" who lack respect for "Irish things."[37] A disparity is evident here between the attitudes of the public and elite institutions to such traditional knowledge.

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32 Douglas Hyde, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland (1892)," *Handbook of the Irish Revival: An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writing, 1891 – 1922,* ed. Declan Kiberd and P.J. Matthews (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 13.

33 Ó Giolláin, *Exotic Dreams*, 286 – 8.

34 Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Complete Irish Mythology*, 9th edition (London, 2015).

35 Augusta Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, 4th edition (London, 1911), v.

36 Ibid., vi.

37 Ibid., vi.

Similarly, Hyde has been credited for increasing public access to folklore by producing the "first book of popular oral tales in Irish" in 1889.[38] This harmonious interest in the Irish language and oral traditions by the Gaelic League was central to a "new period" for folklore preservation.[39] In 1927, members of the League played a significant role in the founding of Folklore of Ireland Society.[40] In the first issue of the society's journal, *Béaloideas*, the group's aim is expressed as "a humble one – to collect what still remains of the folklore of our country."[41] The introduction to the journal emphasizes the need to preserve folklore as a valuable aspect of Irish heritage on the precipice of extinction.[42] The value of folklore within Irish culture was formally recognized by the Cumann na nGaedheal government who, in 1930, provided a grant for the founding of the Irish Folklore Institute as the task of collecting was deemed too great a responsibility to fall to a voluntary body.[43] The public funding of the I.F.C. sees folklore positioned within another type of public history project – one utilized by the state for purposes of nation building and statecraft. While folklore and the state may often appear binary opposites, this state sponsored folklore project in Ireland and elsewhere demonstrates the blurred lines between traditional folk culture and the organs of the state – in the twentieth century, at least, a symbiotic relationship.

The Institute was preceded by another pre-public history endeavor with the Irish Folklife Division of the National Museum of Ireland tracing its origins to the same impulse of state-building through heritage. In 1927, a report by Nils Lithberg, advisor to the Northern Museum in Stockholm, recommended the collection of "ethnological" material as a focus for the museum's mission.[44] Some historians have noted that the National Museum received little political support beyond its role as a symbol of the nation, but it is indicative of how proto-public history methodology was used in the Free State.[45] In 1935, the government further funded folk-

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38 *Irish Independent*, September 27, 1938.

39 Ibid.

40 Anne Markey, "The Discovery of Irish Folklore," *New Hibernia Review/ Iris Éireannach Nua* 10, no. 4 (2006): 23.

41 Séamus Ó Duilearga, "Ó'n bhFear Eagair," *Béaloideas* 1 (1927), accessed August 20, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20521411, 5

42 Ó Duilearga, "Ó'n bhFear Eagair," 3 – 4.

43 Markey, "The Discovery," 23, Bo Almqvist, "The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy," *Béaloideas*, 45/47 (1979): 9.

44 National Museum of Ireland, *Collections Acquisitions Strategy – Irish Folklife Division* (2021), accessed September 2, 2023, https://www.museum.ie/getmedia/385f33f3-d554-4b41-b702-e55641 dd5974/IFD-Acquisition-Strategy-2021-2026-FINAL.pdf, 2.

45 Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935 – 1970*, 2.

lore preservation in Ireland with the establishment of the I.F.C.[46] The Commission's raison d'être was the "collection, collation and cataloguing of oral and written folklore materials" along with the "editing and publication" of these stories.[47] Its foundation was testament to the position of folklore in Irish society among those keen to foster an Irish identity post-independence with both the museum and Commission combining to collect the tangible and intangible heritage of Ireland. Significantly, each folklore endeavour contained elements of preserving both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. In addition, by sending school children out to interview local people, the Folklore Commission deployed a methodology that contained elements of shared authority, a key element of contemporary public history practice.[48]

Folklore, Education and the Schools' Collection

Traditionally, history had been taught to children as one "true" and definitive story, with the job of the historian being to unearth "the past "as it was"".[49] This approach was compatible with a "Romantic" view of history as a model for the present, or a source of identity.[50] Prior to the foundation of the Free State in 1922, the leading minds of the Gaelic Revival preached the doctrine of an Irish spirit which was Gaelic and rural, and primarily Catholic post-independence.[51] History was employed in Irish classrooms to promote an "imagined community" founded on a nationalist mythologizing of the past.[52] Textbooks produced by the Christian Brothers serve as just one example of the intersection between

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46 Almqvist, "The Irish Folklore Commission," 9.

47 *Irish Folklore Commission constitution*, March 1933–December 1934 (National Archives of Ireland, Department of Education, ED/25/1).

48 Bill Adair, Stephen Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds., *Letting Go? Sharing Authority in a User-generated World* (Routledge, 2017).

49 Joanna Wojdon, "Between Public History and History Education," in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Hoboken, NJ, 2018), 95, 455; Gerald Herman, "Creating the Twenty-First-Century "Historian For All Seasons"", *The Public Historian* 25, no. 3 (2003): 95.

50 Robert J. Parkes, "Public History in the Classroom," *Public History and School: International Perspectives*, ed. Marko Demantowsky (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 122–23.

51 Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission*, 45.

52 John O'Callaghan, "Politics, Policy and History: History Teaching in Irish Secondary Schools 1922–1970," *Histoire et Culture: Mémoire et Commemoration* 36, no. 1, (2011): 25–27; Alan McCully and Fionnuala Waldron, "A Question of Identity? Purpose, Policy and Practice in the Teaching of History in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland," in *Identity, Trauma, Sensitive and Controversial Issues in the Teaching of History*, ed. Hilary Cooper and Jon Nicho (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press 2015), 11.

history education and national pride. In one such textbook, the introductory note stated the educator "should dwell with pride, and in glowing words on Ireland's glorious past, her great men and their great deeds."[53] This shaping of historical consciousness through education speaks to the importance of considering the classroom as a site of public history. However, history is only one facet utilized by groups to cultivate a national culture with another avenue being folklore.[54] History and folklore were bound together, with the latter considered a window into a selective Gaelic past which was promoted through Irish education. Despite nationalist overtones, the Schools' Collection embodies a number key public history ideas such as collaborative practice, a requirement in folklore fieldwork as the collectors must work with the public to learn about their traditions.[55] Although the term public history was not coined until the 1970s, public engagement with the past and historians' interactions with the public have existed long before the formulation of the sub-field.[56] As such, the Schools' Collection is a proto-public history example of effective crowdsourcing by collecting the traditions of the people through schoolchildren.

The Irish Folklore Commission's Schools' Collection helped to resolve a problem that had been evident in historical pedagogy since the foundation of the new state. The connection between education and nation-building in the Irish Free State emerges clearly from the way that the education system was used to encourage the use of the language with a policy of Gaelicization implemented in National Schools.[57] Similarly, the potential of history to encourage patriotism was recognized in the *Programme of Primary Instruction* (1922):

> One of the chief aims of the teaching of history should be to develop the best traits of the national character and to inculcate national pride and self-respect. This will not be attained by the cramming of dates and details but rather by showing that the Irish race has fulfilled a great mission in the advancement of civilisation.[58]

In early Dáil debates concerning suitable textbooks for Irish primary classrooms, the issue of such works omitting local history and folklore was raised to MacNeill,

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53 Christian Brothers, *Irish History Reader* (Dublin: 1916), 1–2.

54 John Coakley, "Mobilizing the Past: Nationalist Images of History," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10, no. 4 (2004), accessed October 10, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110490900340, 534.

55 Robert Baron, "Public Folklore," *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook* (2019), accessed October 14, 2021, https://inclusivehistorian.com/public-folklore/.

56 Thomas Cauvin, "The Rise of Public History: An International Perspective," *Historia Crítica* 68 (2018): 5.

57 Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*, 48.

58 Quoted in Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*, 49.

the then Minister for Education. The Minister indicated a need to investigate how to bring the local and traditional into the classroom as no significant educational material existed: "we are really making a new beginning, and the provision, for the most part, will have to be anew."[59] By 1931 it appears little had been done to incorporate local history into the primary classroom. Fianna Fáil's Patrick J. Little outlined the failure evident in a report from the DE of teachers' insufficient attempts to connect the classroom to "local history, folk-lore, antiquities, and the general life of the district."[60] The education of Irish teachers in a way that was "divorced from all traditional culture" by British controlled classrooms in their youth was blamed as one of the major obstacles to integrating folklore into Irish history lessons, in addition to the lack of supporting textbooks.[61] Little considered this as a missed opportunity as history and the Irish language were intrinsically bound, and the learning of the former would boost passion for the latter: "if history is taught in such a way as to give the children a real enthusiasm for the traditions of their country they will learn the language like drinking milk."[62]

Local history, language, and folklore were repeatedly perceived as tributaries to a bottom-up national pride where the local could inspire a broader Irish patriotism. In 1934, a solution to Little's educational concerns appeared to have been found when the Department of Education introduced an ambitious local project for schools to collect the traditions and folklore of their district. The handbook for teachers echoed many of the sentiments raised by Little, in addition to reflecting wider discourse surrounding Irish culture at this time. A simple lack of knowledge about folklore and the "denationalizing of education" prior to independence were used to account for the lack of engagement with local life in national schools.[63] This project stated its aim as encouraging a love of the local as it was considered the "germ of national patriotism": "the best way to make our young people take an interest in Ireland, as a whole, is by awakening in them an intelligent interest in the neighborhood."[64] This goal was to be supported by teachers collecting folklore from "the people, and preferably from the older and more illiterate, whose knowledge is less likely to be acquired from printed sources" and transcribing the material into manuscripts provided by the Department.[65] The ra-

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59 *Dáil Éireann Debate*, November 17, 1925.

60 *Dáil Éireann Debate*, May 22, 1931.

61 Ibid.

62 *Dáil Éireann Debate*, May 22, 1931.

63 An Roinn Oideachais, *National Tradition and Folklore* (Dublin, 1934) (National Library of Ireland, 8 A 2183), 1.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 1–2.

tionale behind this project was the creation of material which would supplement the lack of local history books for use in schools. The role of students in this project was rather limited according to the handbook; it advised that collecting be undertaken by teachers, with students acting "as members of an intelligence department."[66]

The Schools' Collection reveals a keen awareness of the value of folk culture to inspire a particular identity but, while some teachers were enthusiastic about folklore, the project failed to generate a notable return. This was in part due to a planned evaluation of the project by school inspectors, to which the Irish National Teachers' Organisation objected.[67] This suggests an absence of shared authority in the initial iteration of the project which provides an early example, if one is needed, of the value of sharing authority in order to ensure effective participation by the envisaged public.

In 1937, Ó Duilearga and Ó Súilleabháin of the I.F.C. revisited the concept of a primary school project for collecting folklore. The 1934 and 1937 projects were similar in many ways, with both adhering to the basic aim of collecting folklore and traditions in the locality. However, the role of the child was more prominent in the later project as the students, not their teachers, were the primary collectors. This focus on greater participation aligns the Schools' Collection with common public history endeavors like crowdsourcing by "harnessing" local community knowledge through students.[68] In the 1937 plan the teacher was to speak to the class about a topic and the students then collected related stories and information after school. Once finished collecting, students wrote their information into copybooks as part of the composition element of the curriculum with the stories later collated in a larger manuscript.[69] The accompanying project handbook was more accessible than the 1934 guidance, providing prompt questions under headings, "At what period of the year do marriages most frequently take place locally? During Shrove? On Shrove Tuesday?," and details which should be included, "Is there any ruined castle in the school district?... (Give name of townland, parish, barony, county)."[70]

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66 Ibid., 2.

67 Séamas Ó Catháin, "It's us they're talking about," in *Proceedings from the McGlinchey Summer School*, ed. Margaret Farren and Hary Harkin (1998), accessed July 3, 2021, https://www.duchas.ie/download/schools-scheme-ocathain.pdf, 9–10.

68 Jason A. Heppler and Gabriel K. Wolfenstein, "Crowdsourcing Digital Public History," in *The American Historian* (2015), accessed September 28, 2021, https://tah.oah.org/content/crowdsourcing-digital-public-history/.

69 Séamas Ó Catháin, "Súil siar ar Scéim na Scol 1937–1938," *Sinsear* 5 (1988), accessed July 12, 2021, https://www.duchas.ie/download/duchas.ie-suil-siar-ar-sceim-na-scol-2014.pdf, 5.

70 An Roinn Oideachais, *Irish Folklore and Tradition* (Dublin, 1937), 11, 33.

Séamas Ó Catháin has suggested this guide was influenced by Ó Súilleabháin's own experience as a primary school teacher, drawing together the art of collecting with pedagogical experience.[71] The "bane" of the school inspector was recognized by issuing teachers with this clear guidance, along with an agreement from the Department to recognize the limits of a teacher concerning the quality of material collected.[72] Further support was given by project organizers who offered to meet with teaching groups. In addition, a folklore series was broadcast on Radió Éireann in 1936 involving teachers familiar with collecting. The project achieved further publicity when Ó Duilearga himself spoke on air in October 1937.[73] This project supported teachers and validated children as cultural collectors, improving on the 1934 project. Simply put, the 1937 collection understood its public, a key factor for successful crowdsourcing.[74]

It is important to distinguish carefully between the impetus behind the 1934 and 1937 projects. The two schemes originated in a society receptive to folklore, fostered by the fetishization of the rural, Gaelic ideal. However, while the aim of the earlier project was in the creation of material for instruction on the local with the intention to inspire patriotism, the I.F.C.'s project was an extension of the organization's dedication to collecting the intangible heritage of Ireland. The introduction to the 1937 handbook emphasized that schools partaking in this scheme would be assisting the national endeavor to preserve oral traditions of Ireland: "When this urgent task of collecting is over a vast store of immensely important material will be available to research. We appeal to the children of the Primary Schools and to their teachers to help in this great work."[75] This same patriotic impulse to preserve a former way of life that motivated the collections of folklore by Gregory, or the foundation of the I.F.C., informed the genesis of the 1937 project, but the overt ideological intention for children was absent when compared to the 1934 project. As such, the Schools' Collection can be considered a proto-public history project which featured participatory engagement with the public through methods such as crowdsourcing, rather than being merely a vehicle for a nationalist narrative.

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71 Ó Catháin, "Súil siar," 4.

72 Quoted in Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*, 263; Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*, 263.

73 Ibid.

74 Heppler et al., "Crowdsourcing."

75 An Roinn Oideachais, *Irish Folklore*, 4.

A New Schools Collection for the Twenty-First century?

Replicating such an enormous crowd-sourced project today is certainly worth exploring. The state and its national cultural institutions have proven capacity to run similar projects as we can see from the National Treasures project (known as the "People's Archive") run in conjunction with RTÉ, the National Museum of Ireland and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.[76] The project focuses on material culture, producing a "digital archive of historical objects."[77] At a fundamental level, a new Folklore Schools' Collection would have to fit in with the existing curriculum. At present, this curriculum is undergoing review but in a consultative draft for Social and Environmental Education (which includes history), in third and fourth classes (ages 9 and 10 approximately) children are encouraged to "collect, record, and share samples of local and national folklore."[78] The *"seanchas"* of the original 1930s project was considered by the I.F.C. to verbally communicate the social history of the Irish people, which fits in with "samples of local and national folklore" mentioned in the new draft curriculum. Digital tools and skills now available and in use in the classroom mean that the methodologies for collecting and recording would likely be different to the original copybook records made in the 1930s.[79] The draft curriculum, as currently proposed, encourages students to engage in something akin to the Schools Collection.[80] Deploying the original collection in twenty-first century classrooms would encourage student reflection on continuity and change over time in terms of both content gathered and methods used.

There is obvious potential then for an updated Schools' Collection project to advance historical thinking skills in Irish primary students in line with their curriculum. This mirrors the aspirations of those involved in establishing the Folklore Society of Ireland in 1926, when it was hoped that the study of folklore would improve knowledge in both Irish folklore and the Irish language.[81] A twenty-first cen-

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76 https://nationaltreasures.ie/, accessed August 30, 2024.

77 https://nationaltreasures.ie/about-us, accessed August 30, 2024.

78 National CCA, "Draft Social and Environmental Education Curriculum Specification: For all Primary and Special Schools. For Consultation," March 2024, accessed August 30, 2024, https://ncca.ie/media/353c0fa0/primary_draft_see_2024.pdf.

79 Eemer Eivers, "Left to Their Own Devices: Trends in ICT at Primary School Level" (2019), accessed August 30, 2024, https://doras.dcu.ie/29882/1/Left%20To%20Their%20Own%20Devices.pdf, 1–56.

80 Government, *History*, 28–30.

81 Ó Giolláin, *Exotic Dreams*, 321–22.

tury project could develop historical thinking through enquiry-based learning, an approach which gives children greater control over their own learning through exploration and collaboration, rather than teacher-centered lessons.[82] In such a project students would analyze primary material but would also conduct fieldwork to create new, unique sources. However, depending on how the project was structured, gaining access to the primary school system and the children who acted as the main "collectors" in the Schools Collection would mean a detailed ethics process be undertaken at the outset. In line with European Union requirements for all organizations, the research material would have to be gathered and stored with reference to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements. A new project would require several elements additional to the original, but fundamental to it all would be the political and financial investment of major institutional bodies including national cultural institutions, the Department of Education, and academic researchers. Alongside such structural support, the active involvement of primary school teachers and their unions, the parents of children attending, to say nothing of the children themselves, would all be required to replicate the success of the original project. A public history project of this magnitude is possible but in the new research and educational landscape of the European Union, it would inevitably take on a very different form than the original.

Conclusion

The success of the project as a folklore and education endeavor resulted in an inquiry from the Scottish Education Department in 1939. The Irish Department of Education responded by sending material which outlined how the project had been achieved, including copies of the circulars sent to schools and the booklet prepared by the I.F.C.[83] Similarly, the Committee on Ulster Folklife and Traditions emulated the project in Northern Ireland in 1955.[84] A number of all-island anniversary projects were also held such as the Irish Life Folklore Competition (1976 – 79) and the "Newspaper in the Classroom" Folklore Competition (1985). However, by this time, the I.F.C. had been replaced by the Department of Irish Folklore, UCD, and it was no

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82 Helena Hill, *A Practical Guide to Enquiry-Based Primary Teaching: A Reflective Journey* (Abingdon, 2019), 3.

83 *Scottish Education Department London Enquire re. Collection of Folklore and Oral Tradition by Pupils of National Schools in Ireland* (1939) (National Archives of Ireland, Department of Foreign Affairs, DFA/4/238/52).

84 Patricia Lysaght, "Collecting the Folklore of Ireland: The Schoolchildren's Contribution," *Folklore* 132, no. 1 (2021): 16.

longer a nationally important institution.[85] While the N.F.C. continues to preserve and promote Irish traditions with projects such as *dúchas.ie*, the urgency to use folklore in the construction of a particular historical narrative has dissipated. One modern practitioner of Irish folklore notes the people of Ireland today "hardly at all" engage with folklore, adding that "storytelling has always been the poor relation of all the arts."[86] The launch of *dúchas.ie* does not reflect the same nationalist impulses of the Free State, but rather contributes to the establishment of a global heritage brand for Ireland with the digitization enabling "Irish heritage and culture to be disseminated to a global audience."[87] The success in reaching this international audience can be seen during crowdsourcing for the project's transcription which lecturers at Indiana University incorporated into their classes.[88] Folklore and history education do not connote nationalism to the same degree in Ireland today but the innovative format of the Schools' Collection can be adjusted to complement a different structure of history education with divergent aims to the origins of this collection. The introduction of the Schools' Collection to the Commission's work provided the means of both generating that local historical knowledge as well as fostering an awareness of historical thinking.

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85 Almqvist, "The Irish Folklore Commission," 9.
86 Eddie Lenihan, *Private Correspondence*, September 11, 2021.
87 Lysagth, "Collecting the Folklore of Ireland," 19–23.
88 Joelle Jackson, "How the Homework of 1930s Irish Schoolchildren Invites Folklore Studies Participation Today," *Folklife* (2021), accessed September 15, 2023, https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/1930s-irish-folklore-duchas-project.