

**A VIRTUAL TRADITION ARCHIVE:
THE EXPERIENCE FOR IRISH FOLKLORE**

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The purpose of this article is to provide a general overview of the digitisation of folklore material from the National Folklore Archive at University College Dublin. The study is based on the experience of the author as archivist to the collection and also in consultation with other archivists, digitisers, IT experts and project managers.

Key words: folklore collection Dublin, digitisation, funding, timescale, ethical issues, access, quantity, questionnaire, advantages, disadvantages.

To begin, this paper will address some significant changes in the structure of Irish Folklore within University College Dublin that have taken place in the course of the last year or so. The Department of Irish Folklore, or *Roinn Bhéaloideas Éireann* in the Irish language, at University College Dublin has been in existence for the thirty-four years from 1971 until 2005 but that Department no longer exists. Major changes have been introduced throughout the structure of University College Dublin and these have effected key developments in the subject of Irish Folklore. What was until earlier in 2005 the Department of Irish Folklore, is now a subject area within the School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Irish Folklore and Linguistics.

This re-organization and renaming has had a number of implications for our folklore archive, which was part of the Department of Irish Folklore. The archive has now become a Centre within the School and is under the auspices of what is called in Irish *Lárionad Uí Dhuilearga do Bhéaloideas na hÉireann agus Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann* or, in English, the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection. Although, in physical terms the archive and subject area will continue for the moment to be housed in the same unit, the change may be welcomed for a number of reasons. The Collections will have fiscal independence and will over the course of time receive independent recognition, which was not always the case since the Irish Folklore Commission became part of University College Dublin in 1971¹.

This paper will update the Irish experience and comment on the current situation regarding digitisation and the creation of a virtual archive of folklore. It will address

some of the implications of a virtual archive for the archive in general and for its collections, also commenting on some of the advantages and disadvantages of such an archive. Initial guidelines are being established and these will be addressed. The question will be asked whether it is possible to predict what the future holds for folklore studies in a virtual archive situation. Issues such as publishing, copyright and sensitivity are core questions.

While not providing definite answers to all these problems, the paper will share some of the relevant Irish experience in this area and will identify some of the difficulties that have been encountered in the digitisation of folklore material. Of course, digitisation of a small amount of archival material has been taking place in the folklore archive in the course of the last decade. Manuscript pages, still and moving images from the image archive, sound recordings and other items have been digitised as required. In some instances this work was undertaken for members of the public or for the media. In other instances digitisation took place, as it was most suited to the archiving process of the items in question or it may have taken place as part of an ongoing e-learning project for the teaching of Irish Folklore through the medium of the Irish language. In other words, a virtual archive has already been created to some extent. This kind of digitisation is ongoing at the same time as the IVRLA² project.

The Background

Originally, it was proposed to establish an archives institute comprising all the archives housed in University College Dublin, including the Folklore archive. This institute would also include the manuscript and special collections in the main UCD library, the dialect archive of Modern Irish and material from college archives. However, the establishment of such a vast unit was seen to be unrealistic and was rejected for a number of reasons, not least, lack of economic viability and physical space. After much reflection, given the growth of digital technology, the idea of a digital archive was proposed. It was thought a digital archive would both improve research opportunities and increase the numbers of researchers accessing digitally archived material.

As a prelude to these activities, The Humanities Institute of Ireland was established within University College Dublin in the year 2002. One of its primary aims is to create a new environment for research in the humanities, including Folklore Studies. University College Dublin applied for funding for a virtual archive from the PRTL Cycle 3 (Programme for research in 3rd level institutes). Funding of two million euro was received which was to be spent in the course of a five-year period.

As a direct result of this funding, the Humanities Institute established The Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive (IVRLA) Project in January 2005 to promote a policy towards preserving collections in digital form³ and creating both increased access and a wider research net. The National Folklore Collection has been identified as one of the major contributors to this virtual archive; the virtual archive presents

particular challenges to folklore archivists, researchers, collectors and to teachers of folklore and folkloristics. As the scheme is due to run for five years a large body of folklore material will be brought into the area of public availability in an unprecedented way at the end of this time. The Project Manager John McDonough⁴ was appointed and digitisers were recruited in September 2005. Cataloguers were recruited in November 2005 and Information Technology specialist interviews are scheduled for early 2006.

The project is a Library-led initiative to realise the potential of a number of archival collections within UCD through their digitisation, and will also witness the creation of an on-line repository. It will utilise material from the School of History and Archives, the School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Irish Folklore and Linguistics, and the Main UCD Library's Special Collections. These repositories collectively contain a broad spectrum of primary sources held in a number of media types, from sound recordings, to video tape, from early printed books to manuscript collections on both paper and parchment. Other media types such as early journals and pamphlets are also represented.

Creating the IVRLA

To realise this goal it will be necessary to create a critical mass of digital content with corresponding catalogue information, in addition to developing a web-compliant interface, enabling researchers to identify, locate and retrieve digital objects of relevance to their areas of interest or study, regardless of media type or collection provenance.

Such a development will make the material available to researchers at their laptops and desktops, within and beyond the university, broadening the appeal and accessibility of collections, and facilitating collaborative research. It will also provide a personalised and customisable user interface, which will support sophisticated operating services. The new electronic research model will facilitate new forms of scholarship allowing for data mining, and for material to be drawn into virtual collections depending upon user research interest or requirements.

When fully implemented, the IVRLA will be one of the first comprehensive digital primary source repositories in Ireland, and will advance the research agenda into the use and challenges affecting this new method of research, and of digital curatorship over the coming years. The IVRLA is a research project and will be a repository providing a service.

So, it has been decided to preserve elements of UCD's main repositories and increase and facilitate access to this material through the adoption of digitisation technologies and dedicated research into the area of publishing while at the same time enhancing the use of digital objects in a research environment.

Since the idea of new physical location for archives has been shelved, we can start by looking at some of the advantages of a virtual archive. By its very nature, a

virtual archive clearly needs only a small amount of physical space despite the fact that numerous collections from several different sources are included. The digitised material would not suffer any loss in quality and may in fact be enhanced. Functionality may be enhanced and in addition to increased accessibility simultaneous accessibility is also a possibility.

The question of degradation over time in digitised items needs to be addressed, although it should be remembered that the digital world is still in its infancy. Digital storage formats may be problematic. Digitised material might be stored in a number of formats such as compact disc and Digital Linear Tape (DLT), for example. Problems may also develop over time and some media may differ in the nature, quantity and rate of degradation. It is conceivable that, for example, photographs and sound recordings might differ in their rate of degradation.

Matters related to metadata are also of significance and issues of classification, cataloguing and referencing are core elements in the process.

Folklore and the IVRLA

Before work on the digitisation of folklore material could commence, several meetings and discussions took place in order to discuss general policy and to set the selection process in motion. A dedicated project manager was appointed at this juncture to oversee the entire scheme, who brought a wealth of archival and digitisation experience to the table.

Some of the major concerns regarding the folklore collection included the following questions: Were there funding restrictions and if so, what were they? Who dictated the folklore budget: people working in the folklore archive, or the larger scheme?

As much of the Irish Folklore Collection is in the Irish Language, translation issues and possible language difficulties were foreseen. Should English-language translations be provided or would this mean a departure from the entire notion of a virtual archive? Inevitably there are time and money constraints.

So, the main questions raised include: What should be chosen? Should it be the oldest, the most delicate or possibly the most frequently used manuscripts?

Another major issue is the presentation of the digitised material. What should be done with the digitised archive when the work was completed? Should it be put on the World Wide Web? Another suggestion was made that it could be made available as part of a restricted local network. Other possibilities were also mentioned such as marketing the digitised material and making it commercially available. This could be undertaken in a number of ways, for example on CD-ROM or by means of a 'purchased' password system.

As a result of these preparatory meetings and after much debate and discussion, some initial proposals were made for the Irish Folklore contribution to a Virtual Archive. Among the suggestions made at these initial brainstorming sessions was the

proposal that a database should be created for the index of collectors that is a card index of which many are typed and are therefore more easily digitised as suggested by the project manager. Another possibility was the digitisation of the index of informants, another typed card index containing thousands of names. Also suggested was the digitisation of an index to what is referred to as the Schools' Collection Provenance Index. This index is among those most frequently used. The Schools Collection took place from 1936–1938 and involved the Department of Education, school managers, inspectors and teachers and the pupils in the senior classes. The children were asked to write essays on a folklore-related topic as part of their homework each week. The results consist of essays and accounts and are bound in 1128 volumes of handwritten notebooks along with thousands of unbound original copy-books. The provenance index to this collection is handwritten and would require a great deal of time and familiarity with the collection to transfer to digital format⁵.

Also proposed was the creation of a general database of questionnaires already prepared in typed list form. This list is in constant use at the moment. The question arose as to whether it would be possible to focus on a single questionnaire instead of digitising the list of questionnaires. The thrust of the IVRLA, however, is the digitisation of primary rather than secondary sources. After much consultation and deliberation regarding the questionnaires it was suggested that what is generally called 'The Famine Questionnaire' could be digitised as an initial experiment for the IVRLA. This questionnaire was sent out in 1945, 100 years after the great famine, which almost halved the population of Ireland through starvation, emigration and disease. The famine has arguably shaped the collective consciousness of the Ireland of today at home and particularly in the Irish diaspora abroad. The questionnaire consisted of some 25 questions pertaining to folk memory and experience of the famine and related emigration. The replies to the questionnaire amount to between 3 and 4 thousand pages. Researchers of all kinds consult these volumes frequently. The replies are in Irish and English and come from each one of the 32 counties of Ireland, thus providing an even geographic distribution. They contain both handwritten and typed accounts. The year 1995 commemorated the 150th anniversary of the great famine and saw numerous researchers consulting the famine questionnaire. Many books and articles were published based on this archive source. The questionnaire replies are bound in seven volumes and are therefore easily contained and managed.

A further step to the digitisation of the questionnaire replies could, it is hoped, include relevant images from the photographic archive such as those portraying famine graves along with photographs of those informants who contributed the material. Other archive formats documenting the famine could be included, such as sound and film recordings and related music items. So the famine questionnaire replies seem to fulfil many of the desired criteria for digitisation.

A discussion took place on the benefits of digitising a particular song index. This is already in the form of an electronic database using the Filemaker Pro programme.

This database concentrates on English-language songs in the archive's Main Manuscripts Collection which was researched and compiled by the only remaining full-time collector, Tom Munnely, who lives in County Clare in the west of Ireland.

Music manuscripts were also mentioned in relation to digitisation. Many of these date from the 19th century and as such are highly valuable and fragile. Others are of a later date reflecting the work of music collecting by the Irish Folklore Commission particularly in the 1940s and are frequently consulted. The 1945 questionnaire on vernacular house types was mentioned as one that could present material culture in a new form. Other items for consideration in the digitisation process include the Thatch Questionnaire circulated in 1946, and amounting to some 1200 manuscript pages in Irish and English. Other possibilities for digitisation might include the Schools' manuscript volumes for a complete county or simply to select a tranche of manuscript volumes from the folklore collection. One proposal was the digitisation of diaspora material recorded in the USA. Still in the area of sound recordings it was suggested that part of the audio quarter inch collections might be digitised.

Among the most aesthetically appealing material in the Collection are the photographic collections. Their appeal was especially underlined following the photographic exhibition *I gCuimhne na nDaoine*⁶, which was compiled from the collections in 1985. The exhibition contained some of the most frequently requested photographs. The 177 photographs in *I gCuimhne na nDaoine* have already been digitised under a special scheme but further digitisation and availability of the photographic material and indexes would greatly reduce the demands on the archivists' time.

Sample pages from special collections could also be digitised to give a sense of the breadth, chronology and appearance of manuscript pages. These might include the handwriting of such well-known scholars as Dubhghlas de hÍde, first president of Ireland and erstwhile Professor of Irish at University College Dublin, or the British scholar, Robin Flower whose work in relation to storytelling on the Blasket Islands in the south-west of Ireland has been well documented.

Perhaps examples should be selected from the harvest of full-time collectors, which would indicate the range of the collection both in terms of language, subject matter, interests, style and general appearance apart entirely from making it fully available. Of course, it might also be worthwhile to digitise examples of the particular genres such as story, song, or piece of music from the sound archive, which have been collected and preserved on different formats. This might also include a history of sound recording as it relates to folklore collecting in Ireland with examples from the Ediphone machine and also embracing present-day recordings on DAT or mini discs.

The Urban Folklore Project is a single identifiable collection scheme, which took place in Dublin from 1979–1981. It is almost entirely in the English language and is easily identifiable as a unit. Thus, it would lend itself to the creation of a user-friendly digital resource, which would be self-contained. It would not involve language barriers.

Of course, digitisation might not be restricted to original archive material and it was also proposed that an electronic index of the library catalogue could be created. This is a card catalogue most of which is handwritten and would involve considerable data entry time.

Following these initial discussions, some self-evident advantages to digitisation were identified. Of primary importance is the fact that digitisation is of itself a form of preservation so crucial to the survival of the collections. Digitisation also means that the material will be made accessible – either to archivists, researchers and others or to all three. Speed of access would be greatly improved with the creation of a digital archive. People will no longer have to physically come to the Archive. A digital archive will of its nature create new forms of “information units” and will allow for integration research from many sources. It will increase collaboration, and scholarly communication. It is also envisaged that it will identify and integrate relationships between and among information banks and sources. At a later stage in its development the digitised material will allow for text searching and will also allow for the integration of folklore material into a geographic system.

Possible Disadvantages

However, some disadvantages to the creation of a virtual archive have also come to light.

The task of digitising a large archive is daunting to say the least. Due to the vast size of the archive, for the foreseeable future only a section or sections can be selected for digitisation. So, in practical terms no matter what is chosen for digitisation, the reality is that our digital archive can only be a sampler of aspects of the collections. Some material will be excluded due to the nature of the project restrictions but perhaps it is worth bearing in mind that no one can ever experience the full archive. However, it should be remembered that the physical archive experience allows the researcher to see the archive as a whole, although they may only consult a single manuscript for example during a visit. Our proposed virtual archive will only provide a limited visual frame for consultation.

A drawback to digitisation lies in the danger of possible abuse of archive material. At the moment, anyone wishing to publish archive material is required to apply for appropriate permission. If archive data is made available on the World Wide Web then it immediately enters a more public and more readily available sphere. Issues of access and ownership need to be addressed. It is intended, that the user could make the use of the digital repository available only on presentation of certain credentials. Furthermore, safeguards will be put in place regarding use of digitised items and copyright and the granting of publication permissions will remain with the primary repository or archive.

A further disadvantage lies in the fact that the archivists may lose track of what work is being done in terms of new research on the material, which in turn could

cause difficulties at a later point in time with regard to theses and publications. In that light it might be said that digitised material takes on a new life of its own as it enters the public arena.

No virtual experience can communicate the reality of the actual source. Computer driven information is of its nature impersonal and lacks the intimacy of the original. The pages transcribed by one particular collector in collection of County Clare include the dripped candle wax on the pages, which communicates the writing situation in the 1930s in a very vivid manner. Another example is the fire in Dublin in the 1940s, which took place at the Sign of the Three Candles, a printing firm that was responsible for binding the manuscripts. Fortunately, the manuscripts survived, but the charred edges and smell of smoke still remain in relation to a few volumes of the collection.

A few other areas requiring caution in a virtual archive might be noted. The question of hardware and software obsolescence is important and safeguards must be in place to prevent the occurrence of such obsolescence. Many developments in technology will take place in the course of a five-year period and a unity of methods and approach is essential. A split between the access and preservation medium might occur that needs to be avoided.

Although the area of the public domain has already been mentioned, this needs to be underlined and questions of procedure for permission to publish need to be addressed. Issues of copyright and the observance of copyright are crucial in this regard. A certain proportion of the data in the National Folklore Collection is sensitive or confidential in nature and needs to be protected somehow. The answer may lie in the exclusion of this material from digitisation. In many instances, family members are still alive and are aware that material contributed by family members is housed in the Archive. These people may well express concern that the data is being made more generally available or that it is being adapted to suit the digital world. But we should also consider those who gave the original material in the course of the last century. When the folklore collectors in the 1930s and 40s were interviewing people, for example, no one could foresee the Digital Age and that their spoken words could potentially be travelling around the world and made available for all and sundry. Ethical questions arise here and moral rights and protection of contributors are important matters. Do we have the right to reconstruct and redistribute their words?

Choosing the Most Suitable Material

After much consultation and deliberation a decision was reached that what we call the Emigration Questionnaire should be digitised as an initial experiment for the IVRLA. This questionnaire was sent out in 1955⁷. The questionnaire consisted of some 13 questions pertaining to folk memory and experience of emigration. The replies to the questionnaire amount to between 1500 and 2000 pages. Researchers of all kinds consult these volumes frequently. The replies are in Irish and English and

the remainder of his life. Before leaving Blúain Eachlainn she cut off a lock of ^{one of} her little sister's hair - Mrs Murphy's mother - Julia Cúrnáin - taking it with her to Australia and treasuring it as a memento of home while she lived. Both she and her husband lived to a very ripe old age, and their family got on very well in the land of their adoption. Mrs Murphy has a photograph of the couple still in her possession which was taken when they were very old.

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An Old Woman's Account of An Emigration Which She Witnessed.

⌈ The following account was written down by me on the 17/2/1955, from Mrs Annil ^{nee Sullivan} Curran, 92., who was born in Goulanes in the parish of Cahirdaniel, and who now lives in Muirtoch, near Waterville. She is a farmer's wife ⌋.

"I was about twenty years at the time. I remember to be in the top of Gort¹, myself and a crowd of boys and girls, and we saw the boat ⌈ sailing ship ⌋ going back the Bay ⌈ Kenmare Bay ⌋ and a crowd of emigrants on deck and they shaking ⌈ waving ⌋ their handker-

1, a high field in her home farm at Goulanes

come from each one of the 32 counties of Ireland thus providing an even geographic distribution. They contain both handwritten and typed accounts. The questionnaire replies are bound in volumes and are therefore easily contained and managed⁸.

A further step to the digitisation of the questionnaire replies will, it is hoped, include relevant images from the photographic archive such as those portraying famine graves along with photographs of those informants who contributed the material. Other archive formats documenting the famine could be included such as sound and film recordings and related music items. So the emigration questionnaire replies seem to fulfil many of the criteria mentioned previously. However, a few difficulties in the digitisation process may be foreseen. These include the fact that the spelling in the manuscript texts in Irish may need to be normalised and possibly something has to be translated, which greatly reduces the impact of the original.

And so it appears that the first step towards a virtual existence has been taken. The schedule for the digitisation of the famine questionnaire and other folklore material has yet to be defined, as priority has been given to historical archive material for the moment. However, two positions have been created and filled and the work of scanning historical manuscripts has begun. This means that the Virtual Archive has begun and that it is only a matter of months before Irish folklore becomes an integral part of it. At this point once the material has been selected and scanned, appropriate design and layout will be created to maximise its impact. To date the IVRLA currently (March 2006) holds 1300 digital objects comprised of c.8600 digitised images and the pilot is due to be launched in 2006.

Concluding Remarks

So what is the philosophy of a virtual archive? Personally speaking, having worked tangibly for almost thirty years for the most part with handwritten manuscripts, the inheritance of hundreds of years of a manuscript tradition has had a lasting effect. Therefore, the notion of a virtual archive first suggested as recently as five years ago is still quite novel and it has taken some time to adjust. It is difficult to start thinking, imagining and creating according to computer's speech, layout and design. On a positive and hopeful note, however, it should be stated that the future of folklore archives lies in the digital world. Folklore archivists face a future, which presents new ways of undertaking research and new ways of collaboration not least through the formation of new learning communities in digitised archives. Although the initial stages and pilot projects will present new challenges, their ultimate goal will be the creation of an improved research and collecting environment.

¹ The legacy of the Irish Folklore Commission, which predated the Department of Irish Folklore, may be seen in: *Bo Almqvist*. The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy. Dublin, 1979.

² Details and information about this scheme are available at <http://www.ucd.ie/ivrla/about.html>

³ As stated on the IVRLA website, digitisation is a conversion process by which we move from discrete self contained items to a series of binary numbers which require interpretation for intelligi-

bility. Other material may be electronic or ‘born digital’ material, such as e-mail, datasets etc. Once in the digital domain both types may be handled in a similar manner, and require similar combinations of hardware and software to ensure accessibility.

⁴ The author wishes to thank Noreen Barron IT Project Officer, UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection and John McDonough, Project Manager IVRLA, for assistance with the preparation of this article.

⁵ For details regarding the Schools’ Manuscripts Collection see: *Séamas Ó Catháin. It’s Us They’re Talking About.* – Proceedings from the McGlinchey Summer School 1998. Donegal, 1999.

⁶ *I gCuimhne na nDaoine* means both *Within Living Memory* and *In Memory of the People*. The photographic exhibition was created in commemoration of fifty years since the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935.

⁷ The questionnaire replies are contained in volumes 1407–1411 of the National Folklore Collection.

⁸ For details of the “Questionnaire System” see: *Bairbre Ní Fhloinn. In Correspondence with Tradition: The Role of the Postal Questionnaire in the Collection of Irish Folklore.* – Northern Lights: Following Folklore in North-Western Europe. Essays in honour of Bo Almqvist. Aistí in Adhnó do Bho Almqvist. Ed. Séamas Ó Catháin. Dublin 2001, 215–218.

VIRTUALUSIS TRADICIJOS ARCHYVAS: AIRIŲ FOLKLORO PATIRTIS

RÍONACH UÍ ÓGÁIN

Santrauka

Straipsnyje apžvelgiama Dublino universiteto kolegijos Nacionalinio folkloro archyvo duomenų skaitmeninimo priešistorė, apibūdinama dabartinė padėtis ir brėžiamos būsimos šio proceso gairės (smulkesnę informaciją šiais klausimais galima rasti <http://www.ucd.ie/ivrla/about.html>). Be to, išsamiai aptariami kai kurie pastebėti šio darbo privalumai bei trūkumai, iškeliamos tam tikros etinės ir organizacinės problemos. Vis dėlto straipsnis baigiamas pozityvia gaida, pabrėžiant, kad kelias į ateitį veda skaitmeninio pasaulio link, nors juo žengti reikėtų labai atsargiai.

Gauta 2006-03-17