Seoda as Cnuasach
Bhéaloideas Éireann

Treasures of the National
Folklore Collection

Framing the Archive: the Photographs
Anne Burke

All photography is an exercise in framing. There is a literal sense in which this is so – in terms of decisions taken with regard to what to fit within or leave out of the frame. It is also the case, however, at a wider, metaphorical level, in terms of the photograph selectively directing or shaping our 'view' of the world: not aware of the intricacies of the selection process gone through, we are presented with the done deal, something which, at face value at least, tells us 'this is how it is'.

While the association of the photograph with 'reality' or with 'objective truth' is both a constitutive part and a product of its particular history, the problematic nature of this relationship is also now more widely understood. Questions concerning how images are read, to do with where and how they circulate and the contextual understanding that different viewers bring to images, have encouraged the idea of the photograph as something to think with, rather than as something which presents us with conclusive evidence. Bearing this in mind, the 'done deal' that I refer to above can actually become the starting point of an investigation which is not only concerned with what might be contained within the frame itself – what the photograph is of – but with framing as an active process concerned with the configuration and communication of particular meanings. In the case of the National Folklore Collection it is an approach that that can be extended to the configuration and function of the archive as a whole.

The collection itself contains over 80,000 photographic images, encompassing a period of over 100 years and organized in accordance with the fourteen categories of folklore defined by the Irish Folklore Commission and still in use today. That the earliest images date from the late ninteenth

Lough Tay, Co. Wicklow.
Photo: Maurice Curtin, 1930s

century, some forty years before the Commission was established, is the first clue we are given as to the rich and eclectic nature of the collection, comprising as it does both photographs made by professional folklore collectors in the course of their work and travels, as well as photographs supplied by informants and others, or found elsewhere. Thus, alongside photographs detailing particular features and facets of the material culture of Leinster or to accompany sound recordings of a known storyteller from Munster, sit the holiday snaps or portraits of loved ones more usually associated with the family album. On the one hand this reflects the inclusiveness of the folklore collection practices, given the enormity of the task with which the Commission itself was initially faced and which the National Folklore Collection has inherited. On the other, however, given the desire of the archive – all archives – to assign an equal use value to each entry within a coherent, functional system, it also highlights the way that original meanings or contexts of production become secondary to the relation of each photograph to all the others in the collection. Archives, as Sekula argues, 'establish a relation of *visual abstract equivalence* between pictures':[1] the use of content, in this case, to determine the allocation of each image to an

House at Valentia, Co. Kerry.
Photo: Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 1946

appropriate folklore category, necessarily involves a side-stepping of the wider social practices in which photography is enmeshed.

Rather than thinking purely in terms of content, or visual evidence, then, it is useful to step back and consider what the archive communicates, for example, in terms of the collectors themselves, or the wider practice of collecting. Indeed, although not necessarily catalogued as such, but as is evident from earlier photographic exhibitions,[2] it is possible to trace a thematic thread running through the Collection that relates to the Commission at work, allowing, by extension, for an exploration of what motivated and defined its interests.

One of the first things to emerge is a clear sense of the collectors intentionally leaving behind the urban centres to go out into and observe the world of rural Ireland. A direct consequence of this is the overlapping of the visual discourse of folklore with that of travel, so that the experience of collecting gets tied up with that of adventure or exploration. The framing of Lough Tay by Maurice Curtin in the 1930s speaks directly to this idea: the importance given in the foreground to both the figures viewing the landscape and to the car – their means of access to it – transforms the subject of the image to being about 'looking at Lough Tay', rather than about the lough itself. Significantly, the images in the collection generally picture the land as benign, with a focus on either productive farmland or the landscape rendered, as here, in the picturesque tradition. What is desired, perhaps, is a sense of the landscape as being in harmony with the rest of Irish life. The dynamics of the image of the house at Valentia, with the two collectors very clearly included within the frame, establish the house as the direct object of the collectors' gaze, making their investment in Irish culture visually explicit. Set within an otherwise bleak landscape, the status of this lone and typically humble cottage is, in the process, transformed.

This arrival of men in suits is suggestive also of how clothing, as well as ownership or the use of a car, serves to visually differentiate the educated collector from the rural informant, conferring on the former a certain authority and marking out the profession as an area of distinct expertise. Photography's function in this regard, giving visual definition to institutional or academic disciplines, as well as to the relative subject positions within them, is well established. A detail of this distinction in this case is that collecting is very much seen to have been an activity carried out by men; even if women were recognized as the bearers of folklore, being interviewed or recorded, this same recognition did not initially extend to the professional tasks of collecting. This visual detail, or lack of it, sets up a lead for further exploration, including of the consequences of collecting as a gendered practice.

If this marking out of the trade has been a common function of photography, what distinguishes the Commission's activities from earlier related collecting practices in Ireland, such as in the area of anthropology, antiquarian studies or natural history, is the visual representation of the relationship between collector and informant. Specifically, in an intentional avoidance of the objectification of either the informant or of rural life in general, collector and informant are shown to come together on an equal footing, with mutual respect. The interdependence between the two, the idea that the recording of Irish culture depends on the respective skills and knowledge of each, is given perfect expression in the symmetry of the photograph of the Munster informant Tomás Mac Gearailt and the collector Seosamh Ó Dálaigh in which collector and informant are assigned an equal position either side of the fireplace. Beyond this, however, the looks within the image – from collector to informant and from informant to the camera – further establish a certain deference on the part

Seosamh Ó Dálaigh and Tomás Mac Gearailt, Márthain Thoir, Dún Chaoin, Co. Kerry. Photo: Tomás Ó Muircheartaigh, 1930s

Tomás Ó Fiannachta and his wife,
Baile an Sceilg, Co. Kerry.
Photo: Caoimhín Ó Danachair, 1948

of Seosamh towards Tomás whose home
it clearly is, after all, but who, none the
less, through directly returning the look of
the camera, retains the stronger presence.
There is something pleasing about this: it
has to do with the gentle attentiveness of
the collector, but also with the particular
configuration that visually privileges not
the collector's but the informant's expertise.

In some way this becomes, in turn, a
measure of the Commission's success:
its ability to elevate ordinary people as
the principal characters in the narration
of Irish culture. The extent to which
this depended on a level of trust being
established and of relationships being
formed that extended beyond the
professional to the personal is similarly
testified to; the tenderness of Caoimhín
Ó Danachair's image, for example, of
Tomas Ó Fiannachta and his wife at Baile
an Sceilg would seem suggestive of a very
real connection, the product, even, of the
long-standing value of (Irish) hospitality.
Welcomed into informants' homes, working

and relaxing together, there is something
optimistic about this as a shared project,
a redemptive investment in Irish culture
which was very specifically of its time
and which was concerned ultimately with
a reinvigoration of Irish identity. In this
context, the visualization of the relationship
between collector and informant plays a
crucial role. Cutting across social (if not
gender) and urban/rural divides, there
is also an accompanying shrinking of
historical time, whereby the modern –
the motor car, the magic of the ediphone
recorder – is literally put to the service of
the traditional, visually establishing the
agenda of the Commission as inclusively
nationalist and progressive.

Veronica Rowe's image of Cill Rónáin pier, one of the Collection's most recent acquisitions, is suggestive of the extent to which the Commission's interests resonated with society as a whole, being incorporated, as here, within the tourist gaze. With its wealth of detail in the activities portrayed, it is also an image that gives no straightforward answers: almost a parody of looking, the compositional effect of everyone looking in different directions seems to repeatedly take the eye back to the only figure who is not waiting for something to happen – the man walking away. The photographer, on holiday on Árainn at the time, is looking, unobserved, at everyone else looking. Something of this is echoed in Maurice Curtin's photograph of the road mender, where again, the incidental detail of the girl caught mid-track, aware of walking into and potentially disturbing a picture, is what makes the image, reminding us not only that this, after all, is what the photograph is – a picture – but testifying at the same time to the effect that the camera has on the constitution of the self, to the idea of identity as something we project. Conversely, then, un-guardedness – the absence of a pose activated for the camera – is often taken as a signifier of authenticity, confirming a fly-on-the-wall illusion of *being there* for the viewer; as in the case of the road mender, unaware that he is being photographed, or of the men and women at work on the pier in Cill Rónáin (unless it is the camera itself that has scattered their looks).

A road mender, Co. Louth.
Photo: Maurice Curtin, 1940s

In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes talks of precisely this effect of the photograph on the self as representing 'that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object, but a subject who feels he is becoming an object'.[3] We can trace something of this in Caoimhín Ó Danachair's photograph of the St. John's fire celebration at Athea, where even the trees appear to line themselves up for the camera and where the children display a range of responses to it, from the refusal of its gaze of the small boy covering his two eyes with his hands, to either confidently meeting it full on or uneasily diverting the eyes. The fire, in this case the reference to a particular tradition or to the outward manifestation of a given belief system, becomes a hook for a family study and it remains clear that this particular line up was a moment that existed entirely *for* the camera. In that sense it communicates as much about the social practices of photography as it does about the celebration of St. John's fire.

Similarly, a much earlier portrait of Caoimhín's own mother and brother, taken by his father William in 1905, clearly carries information regarding social status or dress at the time. It is most powerful however, in its production of a certain kind of *affect*, which comes from the configuration of the selves in the portrait – including, most potently, the mother propping up the child's doll behind his back in a way that echoes the formality of their own poses. It's easy to see how an image such as this would be treasured within the family but there is something about the gesture itself – concerned as it is with projecting an idea of familial completeness – that also transcends the family setting. Indeed, if we think of this gesture as a metaphor for the collection as a whole, we could accept its invitation to read the archive in two ways: in pursuit of our interest in the details of Irish folklore practices; but also, as suggested here, to direct our gaze towards the ideas of Irishness that this archive helps to project.

Madge Danaher and child,
Rathkeale, Co. Limerick.
Photo: William Danaher, 1905

Notes

1   Sekula, A., 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital', in Liz Wells (ed.) *The Photography Reader*, London, 1982, 445.

2   *I gCuimhne Na nDaoine* (1985) showcased images from the Collection to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Irish Folklore Commission and *Céad ón gClár* (1987) exhibited one hundred images from County Clare.

3   Barthes, R., *Camera Lucida,* London, 2000, 14.

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