

Sound Recording of Folk Narrative in Ireland in the Late Nineteen Forties

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The making of sound recording by the Irish Folklore Commission in the late nineteen forties drew attention to certain difficulties and problems which confront any effort to preserve oral narrative in its original medium – the spoken word.

For about twenty years various phonograph machines, but especially the clockwork powered Ediphone wax-cylinder dictation apparatus had been used to record various forms of linguistic and folklore material, and, especially since the organisation of the Irish Folklore Commission in the middle of the nineteen thirties many thousands of folk-tales and other items of folk narrative had in this way been recorded with accuracy in writing. As sound recordings however, from which oral narrative could be absorbed in its natural form by the ear, they were, of course, utterly inadequate. Here we have not only the problem of the capabilities and limitations of apparatus, but also the necessity of distinguishing clearly between the apparatus which is an aid to dictation and that which is a true recorder of sound. This went deeper than the mere difference between a fairly portable wax-cylinder Ediphone and a complicated and cumbersome disc-cutting apparatus. Some of the folklore pundits of the time considered the written version to be sufficient, having little or no appreciation of the aesthetic quality of storytelling, or of the analysis of the purely oral transmission of tradition.



Figure 1: Séamus Ó Duilearga, Seosamh Ó Dálaigh and Mícheál Ó Domhnall collecting from Seán Daltún, Coolnasmear Upper, Co. Waterford (1948)

Years might have passed without progress were it not that in the late summer of 1947 two unrelated incidents came into contact. On the one hand two employees of the Irish Folklore Commission, Séamas Ennis and the present writer, experimented with disc recording in the field with apparatus partly borrowed and partly contrived from oddments of electrical apparatus. On a more exalted sphere, Mr. Eamonn de Valera, then Premier of Ireland, paid a visit to the Isle of Man and there met some elderly speakers of Manx, whose speech he promised to preserve on records. Returned to Ireland he was perturbed to find that the Folklore Commission, to which he turned for help, had no suitable apparatus for such obviously necessary work. Whereupon governmental wheels revolved and with a minimum of delay a sum of money was given for the acquisition of suitable gear.

Purchasing a disc cutter was easy enough. A double 16-inch turntable apparatus portable in three units was obtained from the Presto company of New York. Batteries, converters, rheostats, controls, microphone extensions and so on were assembled and installed in a motor-van with the enthusiastic help of volunteers from the Physics

Department of University College Dublin. Some of the operational expedients now sound laughable, but in effect gave excellent results, such as levelling the turntables by screws and wedges, sometimes even by pieces of driftwood or rock, check by a carpenter's spirit level, or ensuring accurate rate of turntable revolution by having a disc cut of one true note and monitoring this by use of a tuning fork.



Figure 2: Séamus Ennis working in the mobile recording unit, Cloonaghlin, county Kerry (1947)

Having first redeemed Mr. de Valera's promise to the Isle of Man, we turned our attention to Ireland, and, as time permitted – for other duties made sound recording an occasional, sporadic activity – took to the road in search of storytellers.

Another serious problem, discovering the tradition bearers and making contact with them was for us readily solved. Our field workers already knew many excellent storytellers and their repertoires, in many cases they had already recorded the material on the Ediphone. Hence easy contact, ready welcome, rapid selection of material. The storytellers already had some experience of "machines", and were not disturbed by the microphone, nor hesitant in giving of their best. Frequently, indeed, there was more difficulty in bringing the session to an end (often in the small hours of the morning) than in inducing the contributors to begin.

The problem of milieu also solved itself, the storyteller was in his own or a neighbour's home, and, moreover, had his traditional audience. Sometimes the whole recording apparatus was brought into the house and set up on a side table, more often only the microphone was brought in on a long lead – this was usually more satisfactory as it meant less distraction both for the storyteller and the recording operator.

As far as possible we tried to keep to the storyteller's traditional environment, seated by the hearth fire after nightfall, among a group of listeners. The presence of an audience seldom caused a problem, the listeners were bound, not only like most country people by a sophisticated code of good manners, but also by the age old conventions of the storytellers hearers. The story was meant to be heard, it needed an audience. The listeners' enjoyment and appreciation of the story was conveyed to the teller not only by rapt attention but also by a murmur of applause or comment at appropriate moments; there was praise for the skill of the telling and exclamations of wonder, delight or dismay at the prowess or perils of the hero or heroine. These can be heard in many of the recordings; the storyteller's response to them can often be sensed.

Some contributors were quite happy to tell their stories alone, or even out of doors, in sheltered corners by hedge or haystack or fishing boat. Here, as well as by the hearth fire, arose the question of background noises. These in the main we discounted; they were the natural environmental sounds. Thus we can hear the murmur of wind and wave or the splash of rain, the call of animals or the song of birds, barking dogs or trotting horses. One record has the piping of a clutch of ducklings, another the clatter of a cart across farmyard cobbles, another the fading yelps of a small dog sniffing around the microphone stand and impelled therefrom by a fisherman's boot. Indoors one can hear clocks ticking and fires crackling, the subdued greeting and the scrape of a chair as a late comer takes his place, the clink and rustle of a housewife making tea. All of these natural sounds improved and heightened, rather than otherwise, the effectiveness of the recordings.

In accordance with the Irish maxim *is túsce deoch ná scéal* (a drink before a story) we usually provided appropriate refreshment. Usually, too, we must partake of the hospitality of the house, strong tea, bread, butter, home made fruit cake, boiled eggs, cold meat, to refuse which would be an affront. Thus there often was a festive air about the occasion.



Figure 3: Tadhg Ó Murchú recording Liam Stac, Cloonaghlin, Co. Kerry (1947)

There was no direct remuneration of the storytellers. We were investigating our own traditions among our own people. Our storytellers gave of their best from goodness of heart. In any case, how could one offer money to an old lady or gentleman whose brother was a missionary bishop, or whose son was a headmaster or a high official, and who, moreover, was one's intellectual peer? There were of course, opportunities for repayment not to be neglected, the visit to a grandchild at boarding school, meeting an elderly person at the railway station and reassuring them on the way to hospital, explaining the old countryman's point of view to officialdom. And, all too frequently, swelling the throng of mourners at the funeral of a seanchaí.

The very cumbersomeness of the recording apparatus had useful effect. The difficulty of hauling heavy loads, or of driving across fields or along a river bed to reach some remote house must, we thought, be justified by as perfect as possible results.

We paid great care to testing, monitoring, placing microphones, in consequence of all which the recording quality was usually high, often as good as any studio recording on similar apparatus.

During the period 1948-1952 about 280 hours of speech were recorded from 187 individuals. Most of this material consisted of folk-tales, many of them long stories, some of them very splendid examples of the verbal art.

They include many kinds of tale. There are animal tales, märchen, novelle, exempla, jokes, verse tales, formula, as well as hero tales, fenian lays, place-name stories, local legends – indeed every genre of folk narrative to be found in Ireland.

And after the original recording is made, what next? Problems, of course, arise regarding preservation, storage, indexing, copying and so on; these are solved as a matter of course. But as regards the wider purpose? Where lies the future of the folktale? Is it merely a statistic, as a point on a distribution map. What of its original function of entertainment and instruction? What of its aesthetic value?

The material which I recorded in the years 1948-1952 is mainly in the Irish language. The folktale audience in that language is, of necessity, very small, not more than some hundreds. How do we spread the material – some of the finest examples of folk narrative ever recorded in Europe – farther? Transcribe into writing? Translate? Edit? Publish? And at each stage take a step further from the original?

And further – how should we use such a voice record in our teaching? This material was handed down orally – how far do we pass it orally to our students? And where are the means of comparison with other tales, other tellers, other regions, other languages and cultures?

Would it not be nice to see a system evolved for the study of oral narrative and the verbal art in its original form? Backed up by an international archive of voice recordings, or better still voice plus visual recordings of the world's best oral narrative?