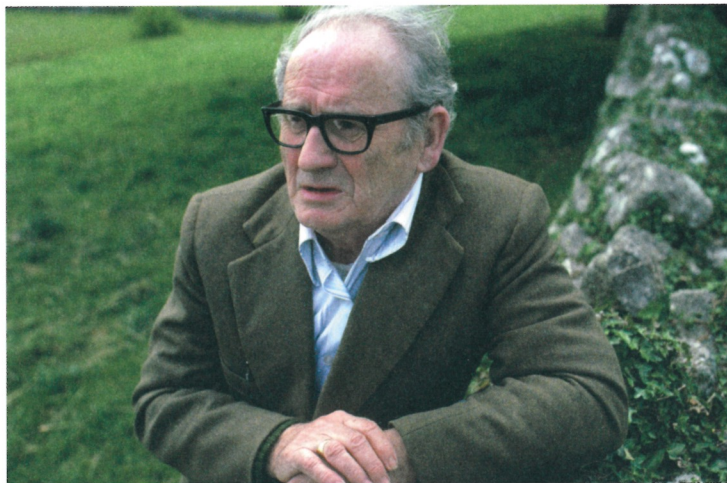


'A well-discoursed man': Jim Delaney
Bairbre Ní Fhloinn

Jim Delaney was one of a small and select group of men who were recruited by the Irish Folklore Commission to act as full-time collectors of the oral literature and popular traditions of the people of the island of Ireland. Jim spent thirty-two years of his life engaged in this highly specialised occupation, and he left us a legacy of some 20,000 pages of manuscript material, as well as several hundred hours of sound recordings, which today form part of the holdings of the National Folklore Collection. Jim was a dedicated and meticulous chronicler of what has been termed ‘the history of the ordinary people’, helping to ensure that their voice, too, would be documented and heard.

The Commission employed a total of twenty-one full-time collectors at various periods throughout the duration of its existence from 1935 until 1971, most of whom were based in Gaeltacht areas. Jim’s collections, however, were compiled predominantly in the English-speaking midlands of Ireland, and as such stand as evidence of the inclusive attitude of the Irish Folklore Commission and Department of Irish Folklore to the collective inheritance of Irish tradition, and represent a clear recognition on their part of the rich tapestry of threads, linguistic and otherwise, which go to make up that inheritance.

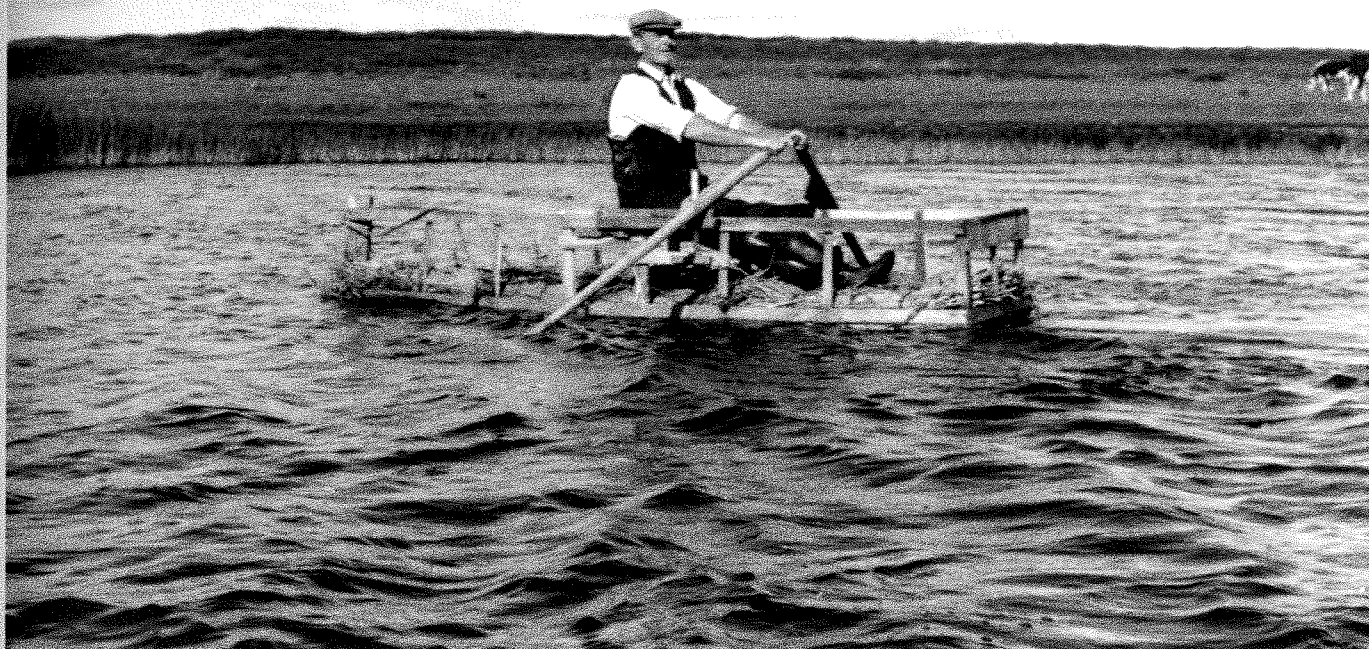
James G. Delaney, or Séamus Ó Dúshláine as he was also known, was born in Wexford in the momentous month of April 1916. He came from a long and proud line of seafarers, a legacy which he described in great detail in articles published in the Wexford historical journal, *The Past*. Jim’s own path in life led not out to sea, however, but rather in the opposite direction, as he eventually settled in Co. Roscommon – the only landlocked county in the province of



Connaught – near the town of Athlone, almost within sight of the Hill of Berries, said in local tradition to be the exact centre of Ireland.

Jim Delaney. Photo:
Alen MacWeeney, 1985

Wexford remained always in Jim’s blood, and – *en route* to the midlands – he wrote an MA thesis at University College Dublin on fellow Wexford man and nineteenth-century folklore collector, Patrick Kennedy, author of a number of popular books on the oral traditions of his native place.¹ Through his work on Kennedy, Jim became involved with the Irish Folklore Commission, under the directorship of Séamus Ó Duilearga. Ó Duilearga was possessed of a special talent for identifying potential collectors of popular tradition and oral history, and he persuaded Jim to join the ranks of the Commission’s full-time collectors in 1954. Jim’s initial work in this capacity was carried out in his native county, but he moved to Longford in 1955, having by then met and married Longford woman May Ní Bhrádaigh – ‘a highly intelligent and gifted woman’,² as she has been described, who always took a great interest in Jim’s work, and was of invaluable help to him in his collecting and in transcribing his recordings, especially in Jim’s later years.



Patrick Gately, of Dysart, Co. Roscommon, rowing the *cliath thulca*, a rush raft, on the River Suck. Photo: National Museum of Ireland, 1962

Jim and May moved to Roscommon in 1958, eventually settling near Hodson Bay on Lough Ree, on the Roscommon side of Athlone town, a location which enabled Jim to reach many parts of the midlands with ease in his travels as a collector. Throughout his long career, he worked in counties Carlow, Cavan, Galway, Kildare, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Tipperary, Westmeath and, as mentioned, his native Wexford. In his work, Jim provided a great service to these sometimes unsung parts of Ireland by demonstrating the existence there of rich veins of tradition and remarkable continuity of custom and usage. He documented virtually every aspect of traditional popular culture in these areas, including many examples of international narratives, in the form of both folktales and legends, as well as accounts of work practices, crafts, skills, and other aspects

of material culture and ethnology. In this context, Jim's very fruitful collaboration with the Folklife Division of the National Museum (now the Museum of Country Life, Turlough Park, Co. Mayo) should be mentioned.³ In some of his work, Jim was also aided and abetted by his long-time friend and colleague in the Irish Folklore Commission, Leo Corduff. As well as being a talented photographer, Leo would take occasional trips with the Commission's full-time collectors in order to make high-quality sound-recordings of their informants. In this capacity, he accompanied Jim on his travels on more than one occasion, and made a number of valuable recordings.



'Wrenboys', at Hodson Bay, Athlone, St. Stephen's Day. Photo: Jim Delaney, 1964

Jim was a meticulous collector not only of the people's traditions but also of the people themselves, their communities, their ways of life and the places in which they lived. He kept a detailed account of his collecting work and of the people he met in the form of a diary which all full-time collectors with the Irish Folklore Commission and Department of Irish Folklore were required to keep. Jim was a natural diarist, with his unfailing attention to detail, impressive writing skills and eloquent powers of expression. His collections therefore have the important advantage, in academic terms, of being highly contextualised, thus adding greatly to their value. Jim's fondness for his 'sources' comes across often in his diaries, and this is certainly the case with his description of Patrick Reilly (1881–1970), of Enaghan, Moyne, Co. Longford, written in about 1970 and illustrated here. The entry is headed 'A well-discoursed man', and it is worth quoting part of it:

Patrick Reilly of Enaghan, Co. Longford, is one of the best shanachies I have met since I started collecting folklore for the Irish Folklore Commission in the summer of '54. He has a wonderful memory and seems never to have forgotten anything he ever heard.... Although he lives so near the Cavan border, he is a fierce Longford man and looks askance at anyone from Cavan. He told me one time that he got into an argument with a Cavan man over the rival merits of their respective counties, and when the Cavan man was giving hard blows against the 'Longfords', and very nearly vanquishing Reilly, Reilly's finishing blow was to accuse the Cavan man of poisoning Eoghan Rua Ó Néill.⁴ 'That finished him!' says Reilly. 'He had ne'er a word after that!'

... He [Patrick Reilly] has no time for taciturnity nor has he any respect for those afflicted with it. I remember his telling me one time that he went into a pub in Drumlish on one occasion, and there met a local character known as B... M... Patrick tried to get into conversation with him and got no answer except 'yes' and 'no' and other laconic expressions of the same kind. So Patrick says about B... M... , 'He is not a well-discoursed man!'⁵

Patrick Reilly. A well-discoursed man.

Patrick Reilly of Enaghan, Co. Longford is one of the best Seanachies I have met since I started collecting folklore for the Irish Folklore Commission in the Summer of ¹⁹⁵⁴1950. He has a wonderful memory and seems never to have forgotten anything he ever heard. Two men that he often quotes from were his uncle, a brother of his mother who came from near Ballinamuck, and the other was an old man named Pat Mulstay, a neighbour.

It was from old Mulstay that he got the "cure of the strain", i.e. a prayer for curing a sprained ankle or wrist or any other limb.

Enaghan, which he always pronounces as if it were in Irish thus: Sanachan or Aonachan, is a townland just at the Cavan border. Reilly always pronounces the "c buailte (i.e. ch) very clearly. Although he lives so near the Cavan border he is a fierce Longford man and looks askance at anyone from Cavan.

He told me one time that he got into an argument with a Cavan man over the rival merits of their respective Counties & when the Cavan man was giving hard blows against the Longfords and very nearly vanquishing Reilly, Reilly's finishing blow was to accuse the Cavan ^{men} ~~man~~ of poisoning Eoghan Ruadh O'Neill.

"That finished him!" says Reilly. He had never a word after that!"

Reilly himself, is an inveterate talker and often tells how, when he visits his daughter in Berrinagh, near Moyne Cross roads, he frequently has talked till four in the morning

1
The King's Son Seeks His Father. Folktale.

120
Two thousand years before the birth of Christ there was a war around Babel and all the kings and princes went to war. But this king, he was a very good livin' man in them auld days, and a very kind and good man. He went to war, too. But he had a little chap (i.e. a son so.) of about five years auld, and he goin' to war. And the war was five years goin' on, and when the war was over, the King never returned.

But the young son, the prince, when he grew to be a ripe age, he always bemoaned his father; if he could only see him or know where he was. And he was about eighteen or nineteen at this time. And this day he took a walk out in the forest and he came on a barren valley, and with the twinklin' of an eye he was landed down through it. The ground opened out and down he went. And he came out on a big wide road. And there was people, men and women, runnin' as fast as they could along that road. And he walked along that road until he came to a canal. And there was four fellows on a lumber (sic) boat and they rowin' souls across the canal.

And the young prince got in and he was ferried across. And when he got to the other side, there was a king and a crown on his head, and four fellows with iron flails and they beltin' him like buggery. And the young lad walked up to the king and he says:

"What has you here?"

And the king says: "When I was on earth, these men were my slaves, and I made them obey me, and I made

Jim himself would surely have been described by Patrick Reilly as a very 'well-discoursed man', as he was the best and most entertaining of company, with an extensive knowledge of Irish and international literature. Oral historian George Ewart Evans has written about Jim as collector in one of his books:

His was a natural, unobtrusive approach which stemmed from his individual treatment of his respondent, not so much as a purveyor of information but as a long-standing acquaintance or friend...⁶

Over the course of his career, Jim published a number of articles on his work as a full-time folklore collector.⁷ These publications are of particular interest for the first-hand accounts they give us of a collector's *modus operandi*, and of the relationship he had with the people and communities with whom he worked. Jim retired as a full-time collector with the Department of Irish Folklore in 1986, but remained in regular contact with staff and students there until his death in 2000, as friend and as valued mentor.

Notes

- 1 Jim's study remains today the principal publication on this influential figure in Irish nineteenth-century literary history.
- 2 Almqvist, B., 'In memoriam: James G. Delaney, 1916–2000', in *Béaloideas* 69 (2001), 184.
- 3 Jim worked in close collaboration with Anthony Lucas, who was eventually to become Director of the Museum, and with Anne O'Dowd, Brendan Doyle and other members of the Folklife Division in recording and filming a number of traditional practices and artefacts.
- 4 Eoghan Rua Ó Néill (c. 1590–1649), a member of the celebrated O'Neill family and famous Irish soldier and leader. There was a tradition that he was poisoned by the English at Cloughoughter Castle in Co. Cavan, although this is no longer generally accepted. See <http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/biog/oneill.htm>, accessed 20.09.09.
- 5 NFC 1781: 287–88.
- 6 Evans, 1987, 81, quoted also in Almqvist 2001, 186. Jim collaborated with Evans and with David Thomson, author of *Woodbrook* and other classics, in several of their publications.
- 7 For a select bibliography of Jim's published work, see Almqvist 2001, 188–9.

Further reading

Delaney, J., 'Patrick Kennedy', in *The Past* 7 (1964), 9–88.

Ó Dúshláine, S.G., 'Wexford Sea Traditions', in *The Past* 10 (1973–74), 58–72.

Delaney, J., 'Three Midland Storytellers', in *Béaloideas* 50 (1982), 44–53.

'Collecting folklore in Ireland', in *Lore and Language* 9:2 (1990), 15–37.

Evans, G.E., *Spoken History*, London 1987.

Extracts from this article, along with further information on Jim Delaney's work as a folklore collector in Co. Longford, will be published in Ní Fhloinn, B., 'Documenting oral history and tradition in a midland county: some Longford collectors and their work', in the forthcoming volume, *Longford: History and Society*, O'Ferrall, Fergus and Morris, Martin, eds.

Bairbre Ní Fhloinn lectures in Irish Folklore in University College Dublin. Her research interests include occupational lore, folk belief and associated narratives, and aspects of the work and history of the National Folklore Collection, including Travellers and their traditions. She has also been active in the field of vernacular architecture and had a particular involvement with the Heritage Council's Mayglass Project in Co. Wexford. She has contributed to many radio and television programmes over the years, and has also studied folklore abroad, in Helsinki and in Sardinia.

