

Béaloideas-Folklore

Explanatory

Folklore and ethnology

The notion of folklore is of dual origin: enlightened enquiry into the populations of territories and pre Romantic and Romantic ideas of the specificity and singularity of peoples (in obvious contradistinction to the universalism preached by the Enlightenment.) Hence the word *Volkskunde* ('knowledge about the people', 'folklore') is first found in statistical enquiry, in a work from 1787, while Herder (1744-1803) above all is associated with the notion of the *Volksgeist*, the soul or genius specific to each nation and found in its purest state in those groups least affected by cosmopolitanism.

The word 'folk-lore' was coined by the English antiquary William John Thoms in 1846 and soon passed into other languages, helped by the prestige of the pioneering Folk-Lore Society, founded in London in 1878. The word 'folklife' (*folkliv*) was already used in Sweden in the first half of the nineteenth century. The term 'folklife research' (*folklivsforskning*) was coined early in the twentieth century and passed into other languages. *Ethnologie* was coined by the Swiss Chavannes in 1787 and referred to the history of the successive stages towards civilization. In the twentieth century it became synonymous in Central and Northern Europe with 'folklife research', 'regional ethnology' and later 'European ethnology', proposed as a new name in 1955.

The term *béaloideas* is already known in 17th century Irish, but it is only after 1893 and the foundation of the Gaelic League that it is identified with the English 'folklore'.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, folklore tended to be understood either in 'devolutionary' or evolutionary terms. The former was Romantic, seeing in folklore the fragments of a former unified national culture, and was most influential in countries where there was a divide between an indigenous majority and an exogenous ruling class. The evolutionary perspective was associated with the British anthropologist Edward Tylor's 'survivals', and saw folklore as the historical evidence of an earlier cultural state, analogous to primitive mentalities. This perspective was most influential in metropolitan countries with a long established state and high culture. It brought together the notions of 'peasant' and 'primitive' in contributions from the provinces as well as from the colonies in periodicals such as the English *Folk-lore Journal*, *The Revue du folklore Français et colonial* and the (post-unification) *Italian Lares*, as well as in the proposal in the 1890s that the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Folk-Lore Society be amalgamated. Until the early 1940s in the United States, folklore and anthropology were closely associated, in the American Folklore Society and in the *Journal of American Folklore*, edited for many years by Franz Boaz, the father of North American anthropology.

Folklorists pioneered the study of European peasant culture

Major research archives were a sort of by-product of cultural nationalist movements in Finland, Estonia and Ireland, where the largest such archives are situated (the Irish one, assembled from the 1920s, has up to two million pages of material). From the 1890s, university chairs and departments of folklore/ethnology in various universities in Central and Northern Europe were established and, along with North America, they are the strongholds of the discipline today. Séamus Ó Duillearga was lecturer in folklore in UCD from 1934 (but was on secondment to the Irish Folklore Commission from 1935) and held a chair of folklore from 1946 to 1969, though a Department of Folklore was not established there until the 1970s, taking over the staff, holdings and duties of the Folklore Commission. The Ulster Folk Museum was established outside Belfast in 1958. It is an important research center, but does not train folklorists/ethnologists. Folklore has been established here in UCC since 1977.

Repugnance at the exploitation of folklore by populist regimes on the Left and especially on the Right, the decline of agrarian society, the rise of youth culture and of new social movements and a growing engagement with the social sciences all helped to bring radical changes to the field of folklore study from the mid-twentieth century on. Emphasis shifted from a historical preoccupation with tradition to new key words such as context, communication and performance. The usual core area of folklore studies, narrative, was revitalized by Proppian and Levi-Straussian formalist and structuralist approaches, the development of theories of genre and the application of an 'ethnography of communication' approach to the study of performance. Studies on past agrarian culture continue to be made, from the rich archival holdings in many European countries, and on past and present material culture, but urbanization, migration, globalisation and youth culture are now mainstream subjects within the field, and much of this work closely resembles similar work carried out by anthropologists. The study of folk and popular culture, then, in urban and in rural, in local and global contexts, came to be seen as the research field of ethnology and folklore studies, and that is the perspective that informs the work that has been carried out in this field in UCC since 1977.

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