

The Department of Irish Folklore

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The Department of Irish Folklore is the national repository of our richly varied culture

The collections in the Department of Irish Folklore are *'the title deeds of the Irish people'* according to Professor Bo Almqvist, head of the department. With more than 1.5 million pages of material and many thousands of hours of recordings, as well as over 40,000 photographs, the collections are a treasure house of many types of folklore which are now defunct in other parts of Europe but still alive here.

The department was established to succeed the Irish Folklore Commission, which carried out invaluable work between 1935 and 1971 under the direction of James Hamilton Delargy. The sheer breadth is illustrated by the fourteen main topics on which information has been gathered: Settlement and Dwelling; Livelihood and Household Support; Communications and Trade; The Community; Human Life; Nature; Folk Medicine; Time; Principles and Rules of Popular Belief and Practice; Mythological Tradition; Historical Tradition; Religious Tradition; Popular 'Oral Literature'; and Sports and Pastimes.

"Everything that is done comes under our brief," says Professor Almqvist, who came from Sweden to work in the fledgling department in 1972, following an interest in the Irish language and culture sparked by his attendance at a session of the UCD International Summer School. Today the department's work is done by four academic staff, three collector/archivists, two technical assistants and two administrative staff.

Every room in the relatively small quarters of the department is a crammed library of books and other bound volumes, indices, audio recordings on both gramophone discs and tape, an ever-increasing number of video-tapes, and, of course, publications by members of the department's own staff. There is a constant flow of visitors.

"We are the national resource, and open to the public five days a week," says Professor Almqvist. *"More than 1,200 people come in during the year, and since January of this year alone we have had visitors from Scotland, France, Finland, Italy, Norway, the US, Austria, England, Japan and Sweden. We are also constantly answering queries from the news media, television and radio, private individuals and scholars from other countries."*

Along with that work, there is a constant collecting activity. In this there is a degree of urgency to gather the material available in an older generation, but there is also the requirement to gather the things of today that will be the folklore of tomorrow.

"We are not working for the present, but very much for the future. In all aspects of life there is so much that cannot be answered except by knowing what people thought and said before, their attitudes and their beliefs and hopes."

Much of the early folklore in the department's resources is in the Irish language, but later material is in both Irish and English for historical reasons. And because Ireland was a place visited by many other peoples throughout its history, the Department of Irish Folklore has many connections with its equivalent organisations in other countries.

"We have wide connections with the Scandinavian countries, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, for instance," says Bo Almqvist. "About a year ago we were presented with a complete collection of folk stories and legends in the Icelandic language. One of our activities is the classification of legends, and in this respect we are cooperating with the School of Scottish Studies and I'm shortly hoping to establish contacts in the Shetlands, which are quite crucial in these connections between the islands of the Atlantic."

His colleague Professor Seamas O Cathain is a fluent speaker of Lappish, and has translated Lappish folk stories into English, while Professor Almqvist himself has translated stories from Iceland into Irish. Other staff members have particular interests in German, French and Italian folklore.

From the academic point of view, Irish Folklore is available as part of both BA and MA, and also on a doctoral level. *"Because of the need for a fluency in Irish, those who study folklore are highly motivated and we get very good student. We have, I think, an unusually high percentage who go on for MAs and doctoral studies . . . since 1975 we have produced 11 doctorates in the department."*

Although there are not that many openings for folklorists, graduates in the discipline can go into many other areas, including news media, radio and TV, museums and teaching. *"We have also had students who have gone into diplomatic service,"* Professor Almqvist notes with some humour. *"It is the kind of training that seems to qualify people for many different kinds of jobs."*

The department publishes books and tapes based on material in its archives and on the research interests of staff members and other people in the folklore area. Various members are also active on *Béaloideas*, the Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society.

The Folk Music section is particularly extensive, and located in Earlsfort Terrace. In addition, the folk medicine material is regularly consulted by a wide variety of people, including members of the medical profession. *"We have many individuals who come seeking old remedies that they have heard might be a cure for their own ailments,"* Bo Almqvist smiles. *"We do not, of course, take any responsibility for the results."*

Among the many collections in the department, the 500,000-page Schools Collection is one pride and joy. They came about from a scheme in 1937-38 when pupils of Primary schools aged between 11-14 collected stories and lore under specially-prepared guidelines. The results, in many hundreds of school copy-books, cover 26 of Ireland's 32 counties, and are today often consulted by people who actually did the collecting as children.

"One woman recently queried if a poem she had written during the scheme was still available," says Professor Seamas O Cathain. "I was able to write back to her and say it was. In some respects, that's an illustration of the raison d'etre for us being here, for the ordinary people where all of what we have come from."

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Béaloideas na hÉireann
An Coláiste Ollscoile, Baile Átha Cliath
Suíomh Idirlíne

Irish Folklore
University College Dublin
Website
<http://www.ucd.ie/irishfolklore/>

The Archive and Library are open to the general public, Monday - Friday from 2.30pm until 5.30pm. Archival and Library facilities are not available during the month of August.

Business may be conducted through Irish or English.

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