

7. *The Notion and Process of Collecting, Recording and Representing Irish Traditional Music, Song and Dance:*

THE MUCKROSS HOUSE COLLECTION

Catherine Foley

This paper looks at the notion and process of collecting, recording and representing Irish traditional music, song and dance for archival purposes. It examines the role of the archive in the Western world and focuses on the Muckross House Collection and my experience as a collector for Muckross House. In addition, it provides an overview of the different research methods and techniques I applied in the field. The Muckross House Collection is examined within the broader context of the nineteenth-century European movement of collecting music, song and dance, and I suggest that these projects and processes were significant to the formation of Western identity.

The Notion of Collections

Since 1990 inclusive collections of 'Mankind' have become institutionalized in academic disciplines like anthropology and in museums of art or ethnology. A restrictive 'art-culture-system' has come to control the authenticity, value and circulation of artefacts and data. Analysing this system I propose that any collection implies a temporal vision generating rarity and worth, a metahistory. This history defines which groups or things will be redeemed from a disintegrating human past and which will be defined as the dynamic, or tragic, agents of a common destiny. (James Clifford.¹ 12-13)

The institutionalised collections to which James Clifford makes reference above are those that are associated with disciplines such as anthropology and museums of art or ethnology. He dates these collections from the 1990s. However, collections in the broader sense in the Western world – i.e. publications – date back to the eighteenth century and the Age of Enlightenment (Royce²), while institutionalised collections of sound and audio-visual recordings of traditional music and dance for archival purposes may be dated from the beginning of the twentieth century.

The notion of collections implies a worth, that which deserves to be collected, remembered and possibly treasured. Collecting is also concerned with choice: that is, what specific individuals, groups or institutions choose to select, preserve or value from the material and cultural world. For example, many anthropologists, folklorists and others have concerned themselves with selecting and collecting ethnographic data, including artistic products, from marginalised as well as more mainstream societies to shed light on human culture. Although this process of selecting, collecting, classifying and valuing is not restricted to the West: elsewhere 'these activities need not be associated with accumulation (rather than redistribution) or with preservation (rather than natural or historical decay)' (Clifford, *op. cit.*: 232).

The Role of the Archive

Clifford suggests that in the West 'collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture, and authenticity' (*ibid.*: 218). Therefore, what has been collected, where one has collected and from whom one has collected has frequently conferred an authenticity based on the oldest, the purest or the most representative. It may therefore be safe to say that collections in the West gather what is selected to be of value or worth to an individual, group or institution. These collections assist in shaping, articulating and reinforcing self, group and cultural identity. Made in the name of education, research, interest value, history, heritage or tourism, they give structure and continuity to communities and are significant for the formation of Western identity.

The invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison in 1877 initiated technological developments of sound recordings. Ethnomusicological recordings were made on phonographs in the United States as early as 1889. By 1900, Carl Stumpf made his first phonograph recordings, which laid the foundation for the Berlin Phonogramm-Archive, one of the oldest music archives in existence. The institutionalised collection of audio recordings in this archive assisted in defining and promoting cultural and national boundaries and their diversity; indeed, the field of comparative musicology emerged within this 'Berlin School'.

As part of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European romanticism and the construction of nation states, Ireland, together with other European countries, collected its traditional music, song and dance practices for cultural nationalist purposes. Printed collections of indigenous music emerged in Ireland during the eighteenth century (Neale and Neale³), while institutional and archival audio collecting of music and song commenced in the 1940s. Séamus Ennis (1919–1982), the well-known uilleann piper and singer, was

employed as a professional collector by the Folklore Commission (1942–46)[†] and later by both Radio Éireann (the Irish national radio station: 1947–51) and the BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation: 1951–58). The Irish Folklore Commission was responsible for all folklore collections and their preservation until 1971, when it was replaced by the Department of Folklore and incorporated into University College Dublin. The Irish Folklore Commission did not undertake audio-visual recordings of traditional dance, but Radio Telefís Éireann (the Irish television station) recorded traditional dance as part of its traditional music programming from the 1960s, some of which is still held in its Traditional Music Archive. In 1987, the Irish Traditional Music Archive was established in Dublin and is funded year-on-year as a Regularly Funded Organisation by the Arts Council in Dublin, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in Belfast, individual donors, and Friends of the Archive. It is the biggest archive of Irish traditional music in existence. In 2010, the traditional music, song and dance archive of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (the association of Irish traditional musicians) was made available on-line. This paper, however, focuses on a smaller archive and its collection of Irish traditional music, song and dance. The collection is the Muckross House Collection, which was initiated in 1979 as a regional collection of Irish traditional music, song and dance.

The Muckross House Collection

Muckross House is a Victorian mansion situated in Killarney National Park in County Kerry. The house, together with its farms and gardens, is open to the public. Built in 1845, the house was owned by the Herbert family, followed by the Ardilaun family and finally the Bourne Vincent family. In 1932 Muckross House was handed over by the Bourne Vincent family to the Irish state; it is managed by a board of trustees. Integral to the house is the Muckross Research Library, and housed in this library is the Muckross House Collection of Irish Traditional Music, Song and Dance. In 2001 the library received the prestigious Museum of the Year Award for Best Collections Care.

As part of the broader European tradition of collecting and recording in the modern era, Muckross House initiated a regional collection of Irish traditional music, song and dance in 1979. The collection was instigated by Edmond Myers, manager of Muckross House, and Ian O’Leary, a trustee of Muckross House and a local journalist with *The Kerryman* newspaper. The objective of the collection was to document, record and preserve for posterity the traditional music, song and dance practices of the elderly population of the county of Kerry; the collection would be housed in Muckross House.

The Muckross House Collection received much support including: assistance from Tom Munnely, the full-time collector with the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin; Dr Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, the Music Department, University College Cork; Tony Perrott, the AudioVisual Department, University College Cork; and Fr Pat Ahern, Artistic Director of *Siamsa Tíre*, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland based in Tralee, County Kerry. Financial support was received from the Trustees of Muckross House, the Irish-American Foundation and the Kerry Federation of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.

The collection was to focus on elderly performers, due to the rarity, value and worth of the repertoire of these performers and also for historical, educational, research and heritage purposes. It was not the intention of Muckross House at the time to document all aspects of these indigenous practices and, consequently, younger performers were not included in the collection.⁵ To initiate the project, two collectors were employed to work for ten weeks each summer. I was one of these two collectors and work on the collection commenced in the summer of 1980.

The other collector was Geraldine Cotter. Both of us had done our undergraduate degrees in Music under Professor Aloys Fleischmann at University College Cork. As part of our predominantly Western, classical music degree, we also studied ethnomusicology and Irish traditional music. Both of us also came from traditional music backgrounds and played traditional music; in effect we were *bi-musical* (Hood 1960)⁶, being both classical and traditional musicians. I had also trained as an Irish step-dancer from the age of seven with Peggy McTeggart, Cork, and had completed a TCRG (teaching qualification) with the step-dance organisation *An Comhdháil*. Other *alumni* of the music department also worked on the Muckross House Collection. In 1983, Mary Mitchell took over collecting traditional music and song in north Kerry as Geraldine Cotter had finished collecting for Muckross House. Since I was now (1983) collecting traditional dance in north Kerry, Patricia Connery and later Mary O'Flynn took over from me in collecting traditional music and songs in south Kerry.

Research Methods and Techniques in Collecting and Recording in the Field

The collecting and recording of traditional music, song and dance for Muckross House was undertaken during the summer months. Prior to entering the field, a session in research methods and techniques for undertaking fieldwork was supplied by Tom Munnely, the well-known song

collector, at Muckcross House in Killarney. We were each supplied with an Uher reel-to-reel tape recorder and boxes of full-track magnetic tapes of 5.25". Tom instructed us on the technological use of the Uher machine and he spoke briefly about field methods. He also gave friendly advice, such as the following:

When trying to locate singers, musicians and dancers, drive quickly through a village and then look back through the rear mirror of your car. The person who emerges on the street looking after you should be your first contact. That is the person who knows everybody in the area. (Tom Munnely: June 1980)

We were also supplied with folders with sheets for music and song transcriptions; some of these sheets included sections for performers' details, such as name, address, age and where and when the recording was carried out. A section for comments was also included.

With Uher machine and folders in hand, we commenced fieldwork. No specific location was prescribed; it was left to the discretion of the collector. My initial locus of fieldwork was Kilgarvan, County Kerry. This is situated some 20 miles from Killarney and some 15 miles from Baile Mhúirne, where I was a teacher at the time. However, I decided to have my base in Kenmare, some 6 miles from Kilgarvan, since it was a bigger centre and was good for access to the 'collection' area in general. From this base I sourced and located elderly traditional musicians and singers, but only one traditional elderly solo step-dancer. Sources for information included people working in shops, pubs, supermarkets, post-offices, etc. and, once a few sources were located, the rest was word of mouth. During the following years, I extended my fieldwork to include Kenmare, Sneem and the surrounding areas.

Most of the elderly population of musicians and singers lived in rural areas, so with my Uher reel-to-reel tape recorder I generally drove out to my sources daily, hoping to record. However, I did not record every day, as sometimes it took time to gain a performer's confidence and trust. Also, since it was summer time and many of these musicians and singers were farming people, they were not always available. Consequently, I might record at 10 in the morning or at 12 midnight; and if the repertoire was extensive I would return on other occasions. When recording, we were instructed to eliminate noise interference when possible and to aim for clear-sounding recordings. Clocks were therefore stopped and dogs had to be kept outside. After each recording session I took relevant notes and, on my return to my bedsit, I transcribed the material. At the end of the summer, I ended up with some twenty reel-to-reel tapes of recorded and transcribed music and song.

The instrumental pieces collected included local dance tunes – reels, jigs, hornpipes, and polkas – played on fiddles, accordions or melodeons. The dance tunes would generally have been played for the local set dances (quadrilles) or step-dances. Jig tunes included ‘Chase Me Charlie’ and ‘Saddle the Pony’; reel tunes included ‘The Salmon on the Shore’ and ‘McLeod’s Reel’; and hornpipe tunes included ‘The Harvest Home’ and ‘The Friendly Visit’. Slow airs included ‘The Banks of Sullane’. Songs collected were either ballads found also in other locations around Ireland or local songs written by local poets about place, historical events, local happenings, past-times, etc. An example of one of these local songs was ‘The Beauty Spot Glanlea’ written by Patsy Cronin and Jerry Dineen of Kilgarvan. I collected this song from Jerry Dineen’s niece, Nora Dineen.

Although we were provided with an audio tape recorder, we were not provided with a video camera. Since I only collected dance from one traditional solo step-dancer in the Kilgarvan area, this was not such an issue. I learned the step-dance myself and wrote it down mnemonically. This mnemonic system consisted of a rhythmical kinetic vocabulary associated with step-dance which I had learned in Cork from Peggy McTeggart, my step-dance teacher. This vocabulary included step-dance terms such as batter, cut, stamp, toe, heel, etc. However, in 1983 I was asked to collect traditional step-dances from a group of elderly traditional step-dancers in north Kerry, but I had no personal video camera, as these were not widely available at the time. However, Muckross House had made an arrangement with Fr Pat Ahern, Founding Director of *Siamsa Tíre*, that at the end of each summer the dancers would be video recorded. I therefore devised my own methods of collecting during the summers which included locating the dancers, learning the dances from each of the dancers in their homes and also documenting the dances in the mnemonic system mentioned above. Labanotation, the movement documentation system, was not a tool I had at my disposal at that time; this came later. Without the use of a video camera, my body stored the dances. Some steps I picked up easily; steps that were more rhythmically or kinesthetically complicated took longer to learn. Also, the demanding nature of dance meant that these elderly dancers were not always physically able to continue performing one dance after the next; this allowed time for conversation and stories in between the dances. In these moments the dancers retraced memorable moments and times in their lives, and step-dancing facilitated this journey into their cultural pasts.

At the end of the summer of 1983, a number of evenings were organised when small groups of step-dancers were video recorded for Muckross

House. I generally coordinated this event and Fr Pat Ahern assisted by making Teach Siamsa, in Finuge, north Kerry, available for the recording. Also, Fr Pat and Phil Mulally, Dublin, assisted with the recording. I generally sat with the step-dancers for these recordings since it was felt that my knowing them might put them at ease and also that I might be able to remind them of steps that they might not remember on the video-recording occasion. Some of the step-dancers were shy or nervous in front of the camera; others enjoyed the experience.

During the summers of 1984 and 1985, I continued collecting the step-dances for Muckcross House and at the end of each summer the dancers were recorded. In 1985 I completed my work as a collector for Muckcross House as I had commenced my doctorate research in ethnochoreology in London. I bought my own video camera and this gave me the opportunity to record other dancers and other dance events the following year for my own ethnographic research. I was now recording younger as well as older dancers and my research became broader in scope. Also, with the camera, I no longer needed to learn all the dances with my own body, since the camera was able to record the dancers and their dances, which would be stored on videotapes and housed in Muckcross House.

Doing fieldwork with and without a video camera placed me in a position where I could consider and compare both methodologies. Without the video camera, my body was a primary research tool and consequently I was both personally and physically engaged in the collecting process. I had the opportunity to learn the step-dances directly from the dancers and to talk about their dance and their cultural memories of it. They also had the opportunity to learn about me as a dancer and as a fellow human being. We stopped in the middle of sections, we talked, we discussed the aesthetic, and we took breaks for cups of tea. It was intimate.

Although I was also personally engaged in the research process with the video camera, the camera became a primary research tool, which I came to rely upon for recording the step-dance material: it took time to set up and it became a focal point in the dance arena. The dancers were conscious of it, since they were aware that they would be recorded for posterity and their behaviour changed to accommodate the formality of this situation. The camera, and the unknown future audience, thus became the focus. I did not tend to stop recording in the middle of a performance; I always continued recording to the end, not wanting to interfere or to intrude on their performances. I was a camera-woman, an ethnochoreologist, and the camera represented my professional self. It was an important research tool for documenting the dancers and their dances but it also had the potential

to cause excitement, nervousness or agitation, depending on the personalities of the performers.

Although we rely on, and benefit from, the appropriate technical equipment for collecting projects, we equally benefit from the time we spend participating and engaging directly with those we research in the field. At these times, we have the opportunity to learn directly from them. Indeed, it was when I had no video camera and was physically learning from the dancers in the field that I came to realise how important personal and interpersonal variations of step-dances were to these step-dancers. Had a video camera been available to me, I may have recorded one performance of the step-dance and not asked the dancers to repeat the same step-dances in order to see whether they might have done it the same way or differently. Therefore, whether we have the use of a video camera or not, learning with one's own body is an important method in dance research, since it informs any dialogue or discourse in relation to dance as practice. Thus, a combination of research methods used appropriately can provide a more comprehensive understanding of our research inquiries in the field.

Representing Irish Traditional Music, Song and Dance: The Muckross House Collection

Collecting and recording the traditional music, song and dance repertoire of the elderly population of Kerry was the motivation behind the Muckross House Collection. The collection commenced in 1980 and concluded in 1990 and in that ten-year period almost 3,000 items were collected, recorded and transcribed by five female collectors. Apart from myself, these included Geraldine Cotter, Mary Mitchell, Patricia Connery and Mary O'Flynn. The fact that all the collectors for Muckross House at this time were female is in itself interesting since historically collectors in Ireland had been male; for example, see Lillis Ó Laoire.⁷ This may reflect gendered roles in traditional societies where males worked in public spaces and females worked within private and domestic spaces (see also Cowan et al.⁸).

The traditional music and songs were transcribed from the recorded tapes using Western music notation. This was considered normal practice, as most collections of Irish traditional music and song had previously used Western music notation (e.g. Bunting^{9,10}); Petrie¹¹, O'Neill¹², Breathnach¹³). Although it has been argued that this does not accurately represent Irish traditional music (see, for example, Breathnach¹⁴), it does succeed in acting as an *aide memoire* for transmission and documentation purposes. Similarly, in the case of collecting and transcribing step-dances in north Kerry, I made the ethnographic decision to document the dances initially using the mnemonic system

discussed earlier. However, finding this system inadequate for preservation purposes, I went to London in 1984 to study labanotation, the movement documentation system, and this I later applied to step-dances in north Kerry (see Transcription 1).

The recordings, and their transcriptions, represented the traditional music, song and dance repertoire of elderly musicians, singers and step-dancers practising in Kerry from the 1930s until the 1980s. The tunes, songs and step-dances were cultural products, or artifacts, representative of

Transcription 1: Jig Step.

Danced with natural upright posture and hands held loosely by the sides. Hard shoes are worn to sound out the rhythmic movements of the step in dialogue with the accompanying jig tune (see Transcription 2).

The transcription consists of two vertical columns of notation, numbered 1 through 8. Each column contains floor diagrams (stick figures) and musical symbols. The notation is as follows:

- Column 1 (Left):**
 - 1: n, b (b26) M1P1PH1
 - 2: d, g2, g, b1 (b7), b2, b (b4) M2
 - 3: c, g2, g, d8 (c4), g1, g, (c1), (b26) M1< P2
 - 4: g, g1, g, b1 (b7), b2, b (b4) M2
- Column 2 (Right):**
 - 5: d7 (c6), g
 - 6: d, g15 (c5), g, d7 (c7) M4
 - 7: d8 (c8), g1, g6, g9, d (c4) M5P4
 - 8: b1, b2, b1 (b7), b2, d (c1), (b26), g, g2, c

Transcription 2: Jig 'Father O'Flynn'.

♩. = 80

the social and cultural life of agricultural communities in Kerry at that time. No ethnomusicological, ethnochoreological, historical or contextual examinations were required, since it was believed that these cultural 'products' could stand alone in their representation. Also, since the collection would be archived in Muckross House for the people of Kerry and those interested in the culture of Kerry, it was understood that the culture of Kerry would already be familiar to those who were interested in the collection. I completed my PhD in ethnochoreology in London in 1988¹⁵ and donated a copy of my thesis to the Muckross House Library. In doing so, I hoped that a more comprehensive representation and understanding of step-dance and the elderly step-dancers of north Kerry would be provided within the context of the Muckross House Collection of Irish traditional music, song and dance.

Currently, the Muckross House Collection is housed in the Muckross Research Library. All sound and audio-visual materials of the Muckross House Collection have now been fully digitised and catalogued. Discussions are currently under way to make the Muckross House Collection accessible to the public.

Conclusion

The Muckross House Collection is a regional collection of Irish traditional music, song and dance. It was instigated as part of the cultural and historical

heritage of the people of Kerry and is therefore of value to the people of Kerry, and by extension to others interested in traditional music, song and dance in Ireland. This paper discussed some of the methods and techniques employed by me as a collector for Muckross House. Drawing from this experience, I looked at some of these techniques when collecting, recording and representing traditional music, song and dance. I conclude that, as an employed collector, the process of collecting, recording and representing this material is not only dependent upon our own personal interests as musicians and dancers, it is also dependent upon the responsibilities we have as collectors to those from whom we collect and to those for whom we collect. In addition, the methods and techniques that we use in the field are determined not only by our abilities and intuitions as collectors, but also by the resources, or the lack of resources, that we have at our disposal.