

Abstracts for Panel Sessions

Kilkenny, Friday 12th and Saturday 13th Sept 2014

Friday, September 12:

Session 1

Panel 1a: Oral history, community, performance

Nora Shovelin: Interlinking Communities – Transmission and Promotion of Culture between the Community of Political and Trade Union Activists and the Community of Song and Music

Alternative Visions 2014 Oral History Project

It is well recognised that a rich cultural context is a powerful promoter of ideas and values.

Churches and military institutions have long made effective use of music and song.

Traditional songs and music come from the people and are nurtured and transmitted through tightly knit communities whose values, history and political ideas are closely intertwined with these songs and music. It is no coincidence that many activists come from such communities and remain active in them.

In Dublin there is a strong overlap between these two communities of activists and of singer/musicians. My work has been on the importance of song and music on the activism of two stalwarts of the trade union movement – Des Geraghty, formerly of SIPTU and Fergus Whelan of ICTU, both of whom come from a strong family and community tradition of music and song and of political and trade union activism. This presentation, which will include audio-excerpts from interviews, will explore the significance of music and song in promoting and supporting their activism.

Michael Fortune: ‘That’s what I was told anyway...’

Michael completed a BA in Fine Art, specialising in video and performance at Limerick School of Art and Design and his MA in Film at Dún Laoghaire School of Film. He currently works as a part-time Assistant Lecturer in Limerick School of Art and continues to conduct long and short-term project work in communities and institutions. He is currently working with the National Library of Ireland in Dublin on a Child Ballad Project with the support of the Arts Council and The World Music Academy in Limerick, while he has just completed

‘MEET – The Mobile Pub’, a project commissioned as part of Limerick City of Culture 2014 and ‘About This Place’ which was commissioned by Wexford County Council.

This paper will offer an overview of the different strands of practice involved in the above projects and draw on some material which is being compiled for a new publication, ‘My Tara’ which has been commissioned by Meath County Council. Much of this work borrows from the popular conventions of film, home video, snap photography and the printed media and this work can be seen as growing out of a tradition of social documentary and anthropological film. Working predominantly in film and photography, much of this practice revolves around the collection of material - material which is generated from the relationships and experiences that develop between the collector and the people they encounter. The intimate nature of these relationships, the circumstances in which they occur, and the subsequent reflective treatment of the material at hand, is a key feature of this work. The audience will see and hear first-hand accounts of a sample of these different approaches including: the use of folklore collection in film; domestic themed projects; community mapping projects; and work with traditional song and story. Examples from each of these areas will be shown and the discussion will also cover some aspects of how funds for these types of projects may be secured.

Further information on these projects may be found at www.folklore.ie, www.manwomanchild.ie, www.thewildbeesnest.ie, www.aboutthisplace.ie and www.homespun.ie.

Thérèse McIntyre: ‘Hitting the Airwaves – An Oral History Project’s Path to Broadcasting

Thérèse McIntyre, MA (Irish Studies), BA (English/History) is a member of OHNI’s Steering Committee, a former Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Science’s (IRCHSS now IRC) Government of Ireland Scholar and is in the final phase of her PhD at NUI Galway. Thérèse, along with Dublin-based production company AthenaMedia, was awarded funding by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland’s (BAI’s) *Sound and Vision* scheme in order to produce ‘Herosongs: Where History and Song Meet’. The series was shortlisted for the Celtic Media Festival Awards (April 2014) and was awarded ‘World’s Best Radio Programme – Educational’ at the 2014 New York Festival.

One of the issues that emerges in the aftermath of many oral history projects is, what does one do with the collection afterwards? Usually, the first response is to create an archive and, while the preservation of materials of this type is a definite concern, the dissemination of such resources should be a priority as well. Archival resources often are restricted to individuals with academic credentials, particularly those that are housed within academic institutions, yet the general public, from whom the collection may have been obtained, frequently is excluded from accessing these same materials. ‘Hitting the Airwaves: An Oral History Project’s Path to Broadcasting’ discusses just one of the ways, in this case, a radio series, an oral history or folklore collection may be used not only to ‘spread the word’ to the community-at-large, but also to ‘give back’ to that same community without whose contributions oral history would not exist.

Panel 1b: Documenting hidden stories

Alan Noonan: Bringing up past hurts: The difficulties of conducting oral sports history in Ireland

Dr. Alan J. M. Noonan holds a M.Phil. in History and recently completed his Ph.D. dissertation in University College Cork titled ‘Wandering Labourers: The Irish and Mining throughout the United States, 1845-1920’. He was the Glucksman Ireland Fellow to New York University 2009-2010 and Research Fellow at the University of Montana, 2005-06. He is currently completing a manuscript on Irish miners in the American West and is the recipient of the Eoin O’Mahony Bursary and an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship in 2014.

In 1955 Aghabullogue won the mid-Cork division of the Junior Hurling Championship, one of the most competitive divisions of hurling in Ireland. Also victorious in the quarter-finals against Banteer, some watching the match noticed that several of the players did not live locally and were in fact from Tipperary. Aghabullogue Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club received an informal warning from the Cork County Board not to use these players in the semi-final against Castlelyons. They did, and the club and members of the team were subsequently banned from organisation for a year. The incident spawned a local song teasing the managers and players, and many of the players, lifelong hurlers and footballers, never again played Gaelic sports. The local club had ceased to exist by the 1960s. The story of what

happened is often recalled locally, especially the ‘Glamour’ Walsh, one of the Tipperary hurlers famed for wearing white boots to matches, and the attention this attracted is commonly blamed as the reason Aghabullogue were suspended.

Upon hearing this story last year I decided to collect oral histories of the incident. The reaction of some of the surviving participants revealed the importance of Gaelic sports and local reputation in these Cork communities. Some refused to speak to me, stating that it was ‘bringing up past hurts’, others claimed they remembered nothing but spoke freely to another person who they had met (off the record). Other spoke freely, less bothered about being recorded, detailing the complex position of Gaelic sports in Irish society and the often hidden, contradictory inner-workings of the GAA. The story of trying to collect the oral history of the 1955 Aghabullogue suspension reveals as much about social status in Irish society as the incident itself.

Ultan Cowley: Who Fears to Speak? The Irish in Britain and the Irish at Home: Hard Truths Unspoken

Ultan Cowley, MSc (Econ.) is an independent historian and author of *The Men Who Built Britain: A History of the Irish Navy* (2001); *McAlpine’s Men: Irish Stories From The Sites* (2010); *Voices Of The Men Who Built Britain* (Audio Documentary, 2013)

Since Independence each of these communities has carefully constructed myths about the other to avoid confronting unpalatable truths concerning their relationship. Using extracts from key recorded interviews spanning two decades I will tease out the conflicting attitudes which underpin this complex and often uncomfortable historic interaction.

Caroline Smiddy: She Kept the Place- The Lives of Farming Widows in Ireland 1922-1973

University College Cork

Many people from both urban and rural backgrounds when speaking about their connection to farming will tell of a widowed granny or great grandmother who farmed and reared their families alone. Often these farming widows were relatively young when they were widowed. The common theme is how hard they worked to survive in the predominantly male world of farming. The phrase ‘they kept the place’ crops up regularly. It is a source of pride even if the person telling the tale has virtually no connection to farming today.

But who were these almost mythical women who ‘kept the place’? Were there really a significant number across Ireland and across all levels of Irish farming in the mid twentieth century? Why was it so important to ‘keep the place’? What is their story? We may ponder if they have left a legacy in Irish society. If they have it, it has not achieved much by way of formal recognition. This may possibly be because little remains in recorded evidence beyond the baldest of records of land ownership, births, deaths and marriages.

The majority of these women are no longer with us. Time in recording their contribution to Irish farming is of the essence as not only are opportunities limited for firsthand accounts are limited, but their children are now quite elderly as well. It is time to turn these vaguely mythical women in to real people by listening and recording their stories.

Saturday, September 14:

Session 4

Panel 4a: Oral history and folklore in a digital world

Mícheál Ó Domhnaill: The Donegal Gaeltacht Folklore Collection Project

The Donegal Gaeltacht Folklore Collection website contains hundreds of oral recordings involving interviews with 230 people from the Donegal Gaeltacht. This collection, which was carried out between 2006 and 2011, has captured a snapshot of times past and the reminiscences, remembrances, stories and anecdotes of an older generation who experienced and lived through the significant (and sometimes turbulent) societal changes of the twentieth century. From the working life of native Irish speakers on the farm or the bog or the island, to issues of emigration and American wakes, Sainly prophesies, stories about fairies, superstitions and ancient cures – virtually all aspects of life in a different era are discussed.

The project covers a vast and varied geographic area (from Fánaid to Gleann Cholm Cille and from An Clochán and Baile na Finne to Cloich Cheann Fhaola, Gaoth Dobhair and Na Rosa) which contains a rich cultural and linguistic heritage. Oral collections such as this project not only help to preserve the wealth of traditions, knowledge and histories of these areas but also their distinctive and unique language aspects and dialects. Occupational activities and changes – and the language used to describe them – are also documented and show us how

the lives and livelihoods of the likes of the farmer and the fisherman have changed or even disappeared over the last 80 to 100 years. In its entirety, the collection holds around 380 hours of interviews. Most of the interviews are in Irish but there are also a few interviews that were carried out in English.

The second phase of the project – the process of digitising, cataloguing and archiving the interviews – has enabled the fruits of the project to become widely accessible to all members of the community. All interviews were digitally recorded onto computer and categorised according to the topics spoken about by the interviewees. This resulted in almost 3,500 separate pieces of interview, each of which were slotted into one of the 14 folklore categories as defined by the eminent Irish folklorist Seán Ó Súilleabháin in the 1940s.

Now those with an interest in folklore or history for example and with access to a computer and the internet can listen to and read about each of the 3,500 pieces of collected material. This digital archive is available on the specially constructed website www.bealoideas.com and it is searchable by topic, geographic area, interviewee name, or keyword enabling researchers to focus in on specific areas of interest to them.

Penny Johnston: Can digital outreach help oral history groups to build communities?

Beáloideas/Department of Folklore and Ethnology, UCC and Cork Folklore Project

Much of the rhetoric that surrounded the first widespread uptake of social media was about its ability to reach wide audiences, about growing possibilities for building networks using digital platforms. Many oral history groups now use such tools in their efforts to communicate with their public. For younger audience members, using digital outlets (such as websites, blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts) will be taken for granted.

But does use of these platforms really help build and extend the networks that oral history groups engage with (and within)? This paper will present some preliminary results that looks at the digital outreach of the Cork Folklore Project. This will include results from preliminary quantitative and qualitative research. While metrics (website hit counts and Facebook “likes”) may be used by some as a measure of the success of a project, comparative qualitative interviews suggest that this is a crude and misleading way of measuring value and impact for cultural heritage projects.

The initial results from the Cork Folklore Project suggest that the boundaries between “real world” and online engagement are blurred, which in turn suggests that the really important aspect of any work that surrounds building social networks is the concentration on building relationships, and not necessarily on the use of digital tools.

Brendan Smith: From another planet.

Insight Centre for Data Analytics, NUI Galway

I am Education and Outreach Officer of the Insight Centre for Data Analytics at NUI Galway, recognised as a world leader in web science research. In my professional capacity I have worked extensively with a wide range of communities and educational groups to engage and empower them in exploiting the potential of digital technologies for learning, cultural, heritage, social and economic purposes.

As part of the schools-based BEO digital heritage archive project, I have helped children record interviews of older people as they reminisce about their lives in days gone by. What fascinated me most about these stories was that so much of ordinary everyday daily life in Ireland has changed beyond recognition in such a short period of time. Thanks to ongoing development of technologies, we are experiencing the greatest change of lifestyles in the history of humanity. The tales told seemed to come from a different planet, bearing little relationship to the experiences of today’s children. In just a few decades, Ireland has gone from the Age of the Candle to the Age of the Internet. My presentation will comprise extracts from these BEO podcasts.

Panel 4b: Theories and approaches to oral history collection

Margaret Steele, Constituting knowledge communities: a phenomenological look at oral history practice

Researcher, Cork Folklore Project

In this paper, I reflect on my experience as a newcomer to oral history, working as a researcher at the Cork Folklore Project. Implicit in the practices of the Project, and in oral history more broadly, I find a deep commitment to a concept of knowledge as shared and community-based. I consider this commitment in light of phenomenology in the Husserlian tradition, and I suggest that many oral historians are, practically if not avowedly,

phenomenologists. I argue that, by working in this way, oral historians not only observe but strengthen the communities in which and with which they work, because they encourage both insiders and outsiders to understand diverse communities as, precisely, communities of knowers.

In working with interviews, an oral historian takes seriously the content without unduly privileging what she takes to be the fact of the matter. Crucially, however, she does not assume that there are no facts of the matter. Rather she considers both what is said and how it is said in the particular interview, treating this as one legitimate account among many possible and actual accounts. In doing so, oral history practitioners make possible an understanding of fact, truth and reality that is multi-faceted, shared and intersubjective and, correspondingly, an understanding of knowledge as communal. Reflection on such practice reveals just how valuable the practice of oral history is, not only for the knowledge it documents, but for the way it helps us to understand that knowledge and the communities who share it.

Sarah Covington: “The Scandalous Bolt from the Abyss”: oral histories and the reconstitution of Irish communities in the wake of Oliver Cromwell

Professor of History at Queens College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York

Through his conquest and policies of confiscation and deportation, Oliver Cromwell contributed enormously to the disruption of communities in Ireland in the centuries after 1650. Yet historians, often bound to elite textual sources, have neglected to fully address the evidence of the popular oral history (or histories) of Cromwell in Ireland, and the manner in which remembrance of him assumed often surprising narrative and folkloric forms.

This paper will explore the various oral traces that recalled Cromwell, in different communities’ memories and across centuries; more important, it will argue that oral histories of Cromwell, in the form of anecdotes, jokes, curses, place names, or tall tales, served to positively reconstitute and strengthen different communities’ religious or regional identities in the wake of the ruptures he effected. In this sense, oral history was essential in transmitting memory across time, as it forged new frameworks of meaning for communities struggling to assimilate the loss, dispossessions, and violence of the past.

Sam Manning: Recording cinema memory in Belfast

History PhD student at Queen's University, Belfast

This paper reflects on the experience of recording oral history interviews in Belfast as part of an ongoing PhD project on post-war cinemas and cinema-going in the United Kingdom (c.1945–60). It focuses on the challenges in gathering oral history testimony in Belfast and discusses the themes that have emerged from the initial stages of research.

Sensitivity to local circumstances is vital. Even in the study of a seemingly uncontroversial subject such as cinema-going, there are issues in gathering oral history interviews in a historically divided society such as Northern Ireland. This paper looks at the ways that memories of cinema-going are linked to other aspects of participant's lives and the ways in which pre-Troubles memories are often filtered through the prism of the Troubles. Other challenges include utilising oral history testimony alongside traditional archival sources as part of a multi-method approach and linking memories of cinema-going to wider social, cultural and political developments.

This paper discusses the idea of shared leisure spaces, the links between cinema and the topography of the city and the difficulties in assessing audience preferences and reception through the use oral testimony. It looks also at the ways that oral testimony can be utilised best to investigate wider topics such as work, leisure and housing. It then considers my interaction with local community groups and the benefits and shortcomings of outsider status when carrying out research in local communities.

Session 5

Panel 5a: Inclusive Communities

Martin Rafter: The Kilkenny City Oral Histories Project

The Kilkenny City Oral Histories Project was initiated by Kilkenny LEADER Partnership as a means of engaging with older people in some of the older community's in the city. KLP initiated a discussion with the Community Education section of the then VEC and the Heritage Officer where by a project could be established that would explore some of the less formal names attached to particular areas of the city. Names such as the Continent, The Riochs, The Village and the Butts where layered over the formal parish and area names and

Panel Session Abstracts

used by particular communities to identify themselves and define in some cases how they organised themselves.

Groups were established in Loughboy – with members from the Riochs and the Village, Newpark Close – The Continent, The Butts and in St Marys – the Riochs. Each group met weekly for 14 weeks sharing stories and making recordings. The process culminated in Summer School held at the Heritage Council of Ireland HQ in the city where the groups could further share experiences and look at how the stories could be invested in the local heritage resource.

The project had the ambition of gathering the stories of older working class communities, of bringing people who are sometimes very distant from local cultural resources closer to these and to make them contributor to the bigger local cultural and heritage experience.

Zoe Hughes: After the research is over – experiences of storytellers with intellectual disability

Disability Federation Ireland

From a sociological and historical point of view, the benefits of oral history and life story work are well established. However, less is known about the effects of oral history on the individual “story tellers”, both in the immediate wake of taking part in the endeavour, and in later months and years. Less again is known about how people with intellectual disabilities experience the activity. This paper presentation will discuss a research project which investigated these topics, following a national oral history project entitled “A Story to Tell”, which took place in the National Institute for Intellectual Disabilities, based in Trinity College Dublin.

Outlined in the presentation is how the creation of individual story books (with people with intellectual disabilities who told their life stories) facilitated the acknowledgement of valuable roles of historians and storytellers within the community for those individuals. These roles were celebrated within the community of their services, their families, and the broader public. Further partnerships developed between residential and day service staff supporters and the storytellers, which in some cases have developed into further oral history and genealogical research projects. This research is being conducted by people with and without intellectual disabilities in tandem- highlighting the ability of oral history to create

new communities of researchers who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to work together.

Jennifer Yeager: The St. Mary's (Waterford Institute of Technology) Oral History Project

Waterford Institute of Technology

The powerful role of oral history in creating and deepening a sense of community is highly salient to the W.I.T. Oral History Project. The overall aim of this project is to facilitate an oral and archival history of the St. Mary's Magdalene Laundry and St. Dominic's Industrial School. These institutions were housed on the current site of the College Street Campus of the Waterford Institute of Technology and represent a highly significant part of Irish history. The W.I.T. Oral History Project will provide scholars with an archive to explore central issues in understanding 20th Century Ireland. Our goal for this project is dual in nature; we are both custodians of the former Waterford Laundry and we are academics committed to furthering the education of the wider community in the South-East of Ireland. In order to truly understand the community where we live and work we created the project to provide a voice to this previously silenced and powerless group in our community.

The project further aims to make these oral histories available to scholars and members of the public who are interested in the topic. The histories will be shared as podcasts on a virtual museum housed by W.I.T. in order to provide a voice to the survivors; make these interviews accessible to the people and communities they reflect; as well as to form a crucial part of any further academic work on the subject.

Panel 5b: Working class communities, trade unions and politics

Mary Muldowney: Community of ideas and ideals: left-wing political activists in 20th century Ireland

Alternative Visions Oral History Group

Since the earliest days of the independent Irish state there has been a relatively small number of left-wing political activists who believed that the future of the Irish people would be best secured by a Socialist revolution. They worked in quite difficult and frequently hostile conditions to bring about economic, political and social change and despite very little

concrete success, they persisted in their efforts. This paper will present extracts from interviews with a number of Left activists who spoke about their experiences as part of a community that continues to be separated by their ideology from the mainstream of Irish belief systems.

The interviews are part of a series exploring the stories of left-wing political activists and attempting to answer some questions pertaining to Irish political and social history. These include our definition of the working class and how it has evolved in changing economic and social conditions; whether the working class exists in rural as well as urban areas; and how working life and workplace organisation has interacted with political activity. One of the most common issues considered by the interviewees is the extent to which trade union activity can be seen as an expression of working class solidarity and whether trade unions in Ireland are part of the Left.

Liam Cullinane, ‘They couldn’t survive alone’: working-class community in Cork, 1930-80

School of History, University College Cork

This paper, based on a sample of twenty working-class narrators from Cork and its environs, examines the relationship between class, space and community in the oral testimony of respondents. The paper begins with a historical examination of the relationship between class and space in Cork City itself over the course of the twentieth century, focusing on the long-established working class communities in the old inner-city slums, the construction of mass social housing projects and the continuing existence of social inequality in the city. For most of the post-independence period, working class Corkonians lived in homogenous, spatially distinct communities until the 1970s when suburbanisation and residualisation began to alter traditional communities significantly. Most narrators grew up in such communities between the 1940s and 1960s.

The paper then examines how these social realities manifested in interviews. The oral testimony demonstrates that urban narrators articulated social divisions by means of a class-based social map, with class awareness being intimately tied up with relationships to space. The oral testimony identified spatially-defined and socially homogenous urban working class communities possessing distinctive traditions of mutual aid and solidarity, with women playing a particularly important role in such networks. By contrast, narrators from rural

backgrounds were more dispersed and atomised with much different social relations prevailing.

The paper concludes by arguing that the available evidence would suggest that patterns of working class community life in Ireland were broadly similar to those observed by studies in Britain, with the distinctive traditions of working class community life following broadly comparable patterns.

John Gibbons, ‘We really got the full blast’: remembering 100 years of the importance of trade union activism in Wexford town

Last year, the 100th anniversary of the 1913 lockout was the subject of many history books and articles, radio and television documentaries and other commemorative events. The 100th anniversary of the 1911-12 Wexford lock out was commemorated in 2011-12 and the strong connection between the local community and their trade union representatives was remembered.

The former Lord Mayor, David Hynes was chairman of the commemoration committee. He spoke about the meaning of the Lockout for himself, his family and for Wexford town in an oral interview conducted in 2013. Like many others, the resonance of the lockout has influenced his trade union and political activism all through his life. He remembers the importance of the Pearce Brothers Foundry (one of the companies centrally involved in the Lockout) and how the foundry horn calling in the workers, regulated the day for many members of the Wexford community. Other interviewees who were also active trade unionists recall how the memory of the Lockout influenced them throughout their lives in Wexford, although not all agree that it ended well for the townspeople.

This paper will examine the interconnectedness of the two communities, using extracts from the recorded interviews to illustrate how shared experience can also be remembered differently within a community. The nature of the town community and the trade union community will also be considered.