

## Collecting Folklore

In this month's blog we are going to focus on Michael J. Murphy's role as a folklore collector. Earlier this month Seán visited The National Folklore Collection in UCD to learn more about Murphy's career with The Irish Folklore Commission and The Department of Irish Folklore.

### Background

In the early years of Irish independence an effort was made to save the traditions, customs, language, songs and stories of the Irish people in a methodical way that would preserve them for generations to come. This was firstly consolidated in the Irish Folklore Institute (1930-1935) and then the Irish Folklore Commission which was established in 1935. Both were headed by Co. Antrim native, Professor Séamus Ó Duilearga (James Hamilton Delargy). Taking inspiration from his time studying in Northern Europe, particularly in Sweden, Ó Duilearga was determined to establish a national collection of folk tradition in Ireland. In fact, a notable Swedish folklorist, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (father of famous actor Max von Sydow) was involved in negotiations with the Irish government in the creation of the Irish Folklore Commission.



**M013.06.00018** - Seán Ó Súilleabháin (left), Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (centre) and Séamus Ó Duilearga on the occasion of Von Sydow's visit. Garden of S. Ó Duilearga's home, Kenilworth Square, Dublin. 1949 (Courtesy of the National Folklore Collection)

The Commission carried out its aims to systematically collect the disappearing folk tradition of the people of Ireland by hiring part time and full-time collectors across Ireland. By the 1940s the institution had amassed an archive of folklore on an unprecedented scale which was purported to be the largest

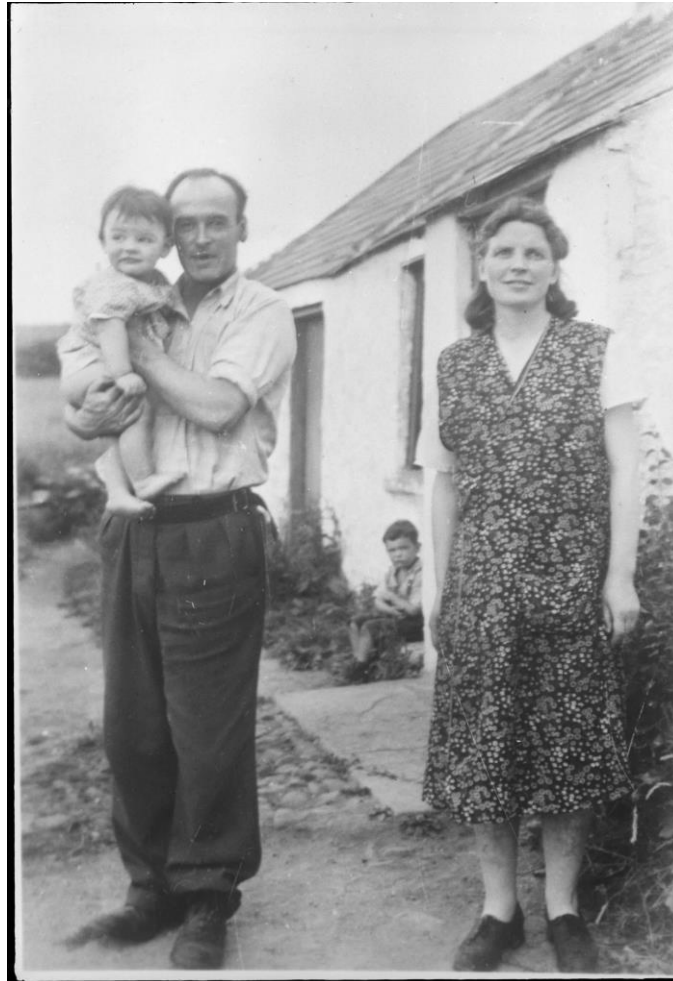
in the world. It was to this Commission that Michael J. Murphy was hired in late 1949 to collect the folklore of Ulster, a yet untapped well of tradition.

Initially, the Folklore Commission focused its collecting on rural Ireland and in particular native Irish-speaking communities where it was believed there was an unbroken link to ancient Irish customs. As a non-Irish speaker, Murphy bucked this trend as he did in so many other ways in his life. Ó Duilearga was familiar with Murphy's work from his 1941 book *At Slieve Gullion's Foot*. He hired Murphy in late 1949 to collect folklore in the Sperrin Mountains near Omagh, Co. Tyrone. He was the first collector for the Commission that worked exclusively through English, and he was the only collector working and living in Northern Ireland.



**M004.25.00014** - Informants: (L-R) Barney Shortt, M. J. Murphy, Frank 'Wings' Campbell. Outside Larkin's public-house in Forkhill. April 1969 (Courtesy of the National Folklore Collection)

After three years collecting folklore in Co. Tyrone, Murphy moved to the Glens of Antrim. He spent another three years collecting in Co. Antrim, including Rathlin Island. After this he took up residence near Warrenpoint, in Clontifleece, Co. Down. From here he was able to collect folklore in the Mourne region, South Armagh, and Co. Louth. He later moved back to his native Dromintee in the 1970's. Through these moves and regular expeditions to places in Co. Fermanagh and Co. Cavan Murphy eventually had collected from a broad swathe of what he called "Old Ulster" which included Co. Louth, Co. Sligo, Co. Leitrim, and Co. Monaghan. His family moved with him to each of these locations. His wife Alice was supportive of him and often she was able to speak with the women in these communities about subjects they did not feel comfortable speaking to Michael J. about.



**M004.25.00068** - Taken when we lived in Mick Dinny's (Murphy) by Ellen Ettlinger, February 1947. Patrick sitting on stone to one side of door, a common feature in houses then. I [Michael J. Murphy] am holding Michael. February 1947 (Courtesy of the National Folklore Collection)

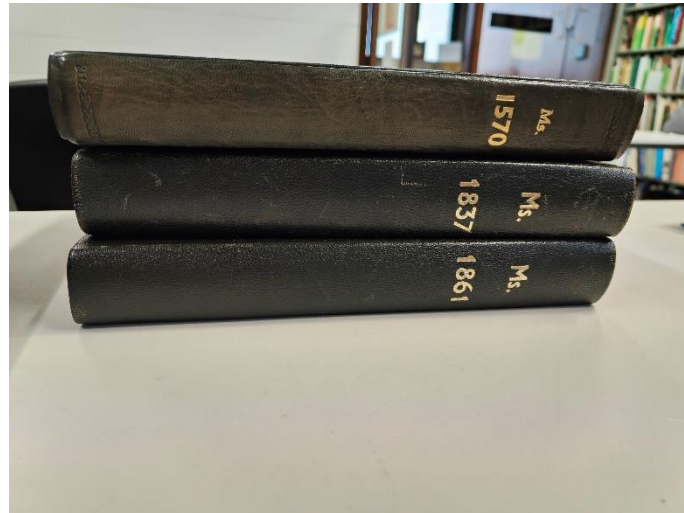
## The Folklore Collector

The role of a folklore collector is to live as one of the community building relationships mostly with older members of the community to record their memories, stories, songs or any other customs. The folklore collector was instructed on where to collect by the Dublin-based head office and would be guided in the field by *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* created by the archivist of the Folklore Commission, Seán Ó Súilleabháin. The handbook provides the structure for the organisation of the folklore archive as well as giving questions to the collectors. By using the handbook, the collector could investigate each area of folklore in depth.

The handbook and archive are organised into the following sections:

A – Settlement and Dwellings; B – Livelihood and Household Support; C – Communications and Trade; D – The Community; E – Human Life; F – Nature; G – Folk Medicine; H – Time; I – Principles and Rules of Popular Belief and Practices; J – Mythological Traditions; K – Historical Tradition; L – Religious Tradition; M – Popular Oral Literature; N – Sports and Pastimes.

In the early years of the Folklore Commission, collectors would either transcribe conversations in notebooks or they would have Ediphone machines which used wax cylinders to record conversations to be transcribed later. These transcriptions and wax cylinders were sent to the head office in Dublin along with diaries recording their experience surrounding the collecting of folklore. The transcriptions were bound into volumes to be stored and catalogued by the Folklore Commission archivist and the wax cylinders were pared down to be used again. In the early 1960s, some collectors were provided with tape recording equipment. Michael J. was an early adopter of tape machines. As the tapes were not wiped to be used again much of what he recorded is still available to listen to in the National Folklore Collection and online via [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie).



A small selection of the 250 bound volumes of Michael J. Murphy's contribution to the Irish Folklore Commission.

Most folklore collectors wrote their transcriptions and diaries down by hand in copy books to be sent to Dublin. This meant that often they were sending the only record of their field work and in most cases they never saw the transcriptions or diaries again. Once again, Michael J. did things differently. He preferred to type his material meaning that he was able to make carbon copies of everything he submitted to the Folklore Commission. Much of this material can be viewed in D4642/3 and D4642/4 in the PRONI Catalogue. Keeping copies of his field work meant that Murphy had his own record of his work giving him the freedom to continue publishing his own books on folklore. Material related to these books is available under PRONI reference D4642/6.

## Michael J. Murphy – The Folklore Collector

Michael J. stands out amongst his colleagues as being a unique collector of folklore. As is reflected in his diaries he had the ability to capture the humanity of his experiences and the people he was speaking to. His diaries are honest and show his thoughts and feelings as he moved from place to place attempting to capture memories on the brink of vanishing. He paints a vivid picture of his time in the various communities he collected in naming individuals, recounting funny anecdotes about difficulties he encountered, and all told with his characteristic sense of humour. Although it was hard taxing work that could consume his life at times, the passion he has for folklore and saving these memories really shines through.



**M004.24.00003** - Folklore Collector Michael J. Murphy (left), with narrator and native Irish speaker Robert McCormack (right), Rathlin. (Courtesy of the National Folklore Collection)

Murphy's career with the Irish Folklore Commission and then the Department of Irish Folklore spanned from 1949 to 1983. He accrued possibly one of the largest collections of oral tradition in English amounting to 250 bound manuscript books or approximately 30,000 typed pages all held by the National Folklore Collection. In the image below we can see index cards in the National Folklore Collection which help researchers find material based on names of collectors, all index cards highlighted in the photograph list material collected by Michael J. Murphy. His contribution to the collection and preservation of Irish and Ulster folklore is undeniably important.



Selection of index cards identifying material in the National Folklore Collection deposited by Michael J. Murphy.

We would like to thank Jonny Dillon and all the staff in the National Folklore Collection for their hospitality and generosity in accommodating this visit to UCD. Thanks also to the Archives Revealed consortium grant for making this possible. Much of the material related to Michael J. Murphy's folklore collecting will be available to view on the PRONI eCatalogue and in Tí Chulainn Mullaghbane, Co. Armagh as well as [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie) and in person at the National Folklore Collection.