

Short Stories

This month's article has been written by Archie Brine, a student intern from Queen's University Belfast currently studying for an MA in Public History.

Before our focus on Michael J. Murphy's archive came to a close, as part of the 'Now We're Talking' project, we turned our attention to Murphy's short stories. Alongside his career as a folklore collector, Murphy was constantly writing short stories, many of which were published and supplemented his modest income from the Irish Folklore Commission. These have now all been catalogued and will be available at PRONI under the reference code D4642/8/2/ later in the year.

There are clear connections between Murphy's work as a folklore collector and his creative writing. Murphy's 1957 story *Old Lord Erin's Son* perfectly exemplifies this. The basic plot of the story is that a son of a blacksmith travels to England after a dispute with his father. Whilst in England, he meets a noble lady and tells her that he is the son of 'Lord Erin', a claim that wasn't technically false as this was his father's nickname back in Ireland. Following this, the lady and her father take in the man believing him to be a nobleman and eventually, despite inquiries into the accuracy of his claims which produce a false outcome, the blacksmiths son and nobleman's daughter are married. Whilst at first glance this appears to be a work of pure fiction, by reading Murphy's book *Tyrone Folk Quest* it becomes clear that this was originally a piece of folklore collected from Peter John Bradley and Francis McAleer in Glenhull, with only minor modifications allowing it to be written as a short story. Included in D4642/8/2/95 there is even a newspaper clipping attached to a copy of this story which mentions McAleer going onto the BBC to tell this tale.



M016.06.00080, Photograph of Michael J. Murphy (1982), Courtesy of the National Folklore Collection

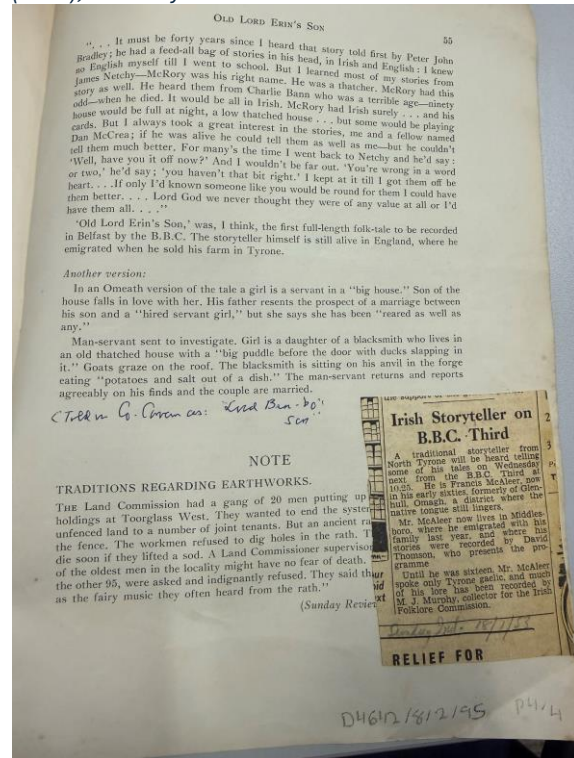
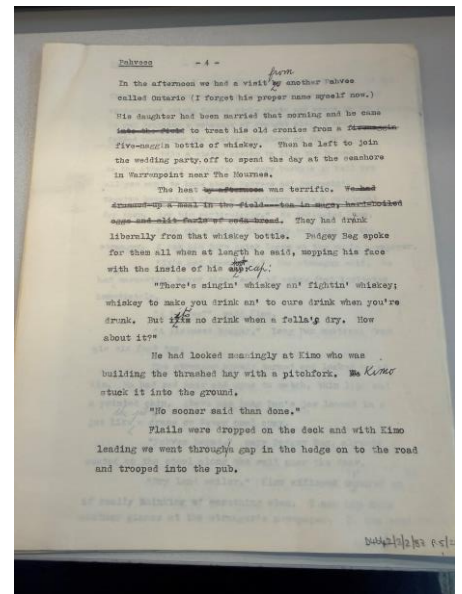


Photo of D4642/8/2/95 p.4, Ulster Folklife, 'Old Lord Erin's Son' by Michael J. Murphy including Newspaper clipping

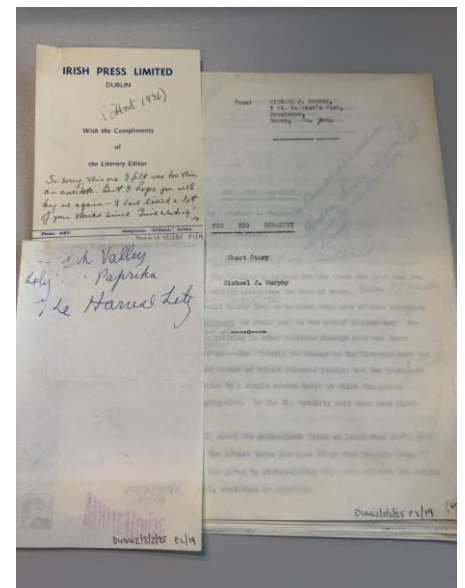
Beyond tales of lying sons and trips to England, Murphy also wrote stories featuring a supernatural element, also drawn from folklore. His 1947 story *Canned Lightning*, for example, follows the story of a family who are cursed by their neighbor to die. One by one they are each struck down by lightning implying that this curse may be real. Another example is *Fairy Fiddle* (1942) which follows the story of a man and his blind son when they meet a leprechaun. It turns out that the 'leprechaun' in question is in rather a malnourished Austrian fiddler, explaining his odd complexion, language, and strange affinity for his fiddle, but the inclusion of a story such as this with reference to leprechauns and fairies demonstrate how Murphy's supernatural stories are rooted in Irish folklore.

Alongside folk traditions and the supernatural, recurrent themes in the short stories include emigration, the experience of returning emigrants, joblessness and homelessness. By consistently returning to the same themes, Murphy creates a clear idea of what he deemed to be important, and how his mindset and thought process evolved throughout the course of his life. Furthermore, having read through all the short stories held in this collection, it is clear that Murphy sometimes returned to the same stories, altering them slightly, and putting them back out for republication.

These short stories not only give the reader an insight into Murphy's folklore collecting but also provide a glimpse into his thought process. Many of his draft stories have alterations or handwritten notes on the pages, showing the evolution of the story. This demonstrates how Murphy originally wrote a story versus the final product and can be a fascinating way of showing both how the stories he wrote were formed, and how closely they link back to the original folktales. Looking at these draft stories is an amazing way of humanising them and their writer, showing how some publishers wished to alter or omit certain drafts or portions of text for one reason or another. Seeing how the stories evolve through different drafts, especially when paired with the communications between Murphy and potential publishers, the influence that publishers have is clear and the changes made make complete sense.

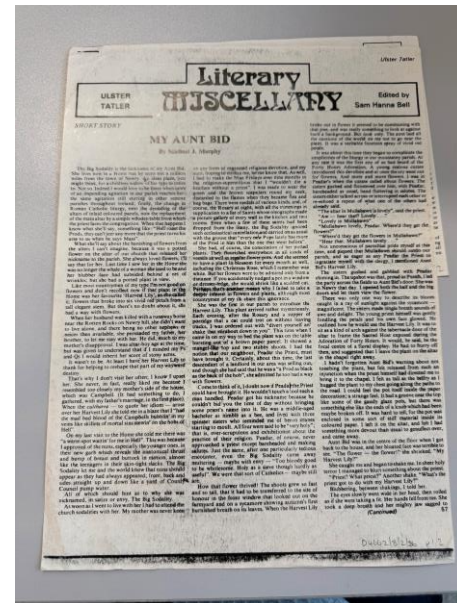


D4642/8/2/83 (page 5), Michael J. Murphy, Draft Story of Pahvees, July 1971



D4642/8/2/85 (pages 1-3), Michael J. Murphy Draft Story of The Big Sodality, c.1976

The time Murphy spent developing his craft is clear from the ninety-nine short stories which have now been catalogued within this section of his archive. These range from early drafts with his handwritten notes, to the published articles in newspapers and magazines. The stories, whilst each having their own value, also show how Murphy honed his craft over the decades, getting more detailed and concise whilst always remaining entertaining. The contribution made by Murphy to the literary world of Ireland is clear, and beyond the writing the way that he used his stories to share folklore and tales from across Northern Ireland show an indisputable value to this collection, that we have been privileged to read and catalogue.



D4642/8/2/86 (page 1), Ulster Tatler, 'My Aunt Bid' by Michael J. Murphy, c.1976



Archie Brine reviewing documents.

The 'Now We're Talking' project has now moved into its second phase, with the focus shifting to Sam Hanna Bell's archive. The project has enabled us to catalogue a significant amount of Michael J Murphy's archive. We look forward to making this material available to the public for the first time in the coming months.

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