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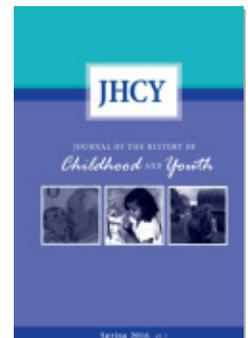
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“A work of National Importance”: Child–Adult Dynamics in Bailiúchán Na Scol/The Schools’ Collection, 1937–1939

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# Object Lesson

CAOIMHE NIC LOCHLAINN

## **“A WORK OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE”: CHILD-ADULT DYNAMICS IN BAILIÚCHÁN NA SCOL/THE SCHOOLS’ COLLECTION, 1937-1939**

Children are often seen as important agents in molding the culture of emerging nations, and children in Ireland are no exception in this regard.<sup>1</sup> In the early years of the Irish Free State (established in 1922), children were expected to play a significant role in the revitalization of the Irish language and in the preservation of Ireland’s folklore, both of which were vital components of the newly independent state’s identity and self-image. The study of the Irish language, for example, became compulsory in National Schools (primary schools) from St. Patrick’s Day 1922 onwards, and Irish-language publishing was very much concerned with reading material aimed specifically at children in the early decades of the new state.<sup>2</sup>

The early years of the Irish Free State also saw the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission, an organization which was set up in 1935 to document and study the folklore of Ireland. The Irish language was in decline (a decline that Gaelic Revivalists were trying to reverse), and an integral part of the culture (i.e., the folklore traditionally told in that language) was disappearing with it. As Mícheál Briody explains: “Ireland was believed to possess a folk tradition, particularly in the Irish language, incomparable to anywhere else in western Europe with the exception of Gaelic Scotland, and relatively little Irish folklore had been collected up to that time.”<sup>3</sup> To remedy this paucity of documented material, the commission employed a team of full-time and part-time collectors to collect folktales and traditions from all over Ireland, concentrating especially on the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas. The organization also distributed questionnaires on various subjects to a group of correspondents throughout the island, which proved to be another very successful method of gathering material.<sup>4</sup>

In 1937, the Irish Folklore Commission set up an ambitious new scheme through the National Schools, in which pupils collected folklore from older family members and neighbors. The pupils then documented this material in their

school copybooks instead of writing their usual weekly composition in class. The pupils' work was later sent to the Folklore Commission, where it became known as "Bailiúchán na Scol" or "The Schools' Collection." Over a period of eighteen months, well over half a million pages of folklore were collected by more than fifty thousand pupils in five thousand primary schools across the twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State.<sup>5</sup> While there were other attempts to encourage children's writing in the early twentieth century, these efforts are not comparable to the Schools' Collection in terms of the volume of writing it produced.<sup>6</sup>

The scheme was conceived by two folklorists, Séamus Ó Duilearga (also known as James Hamilton Delargy), the director of the commission, and archivist Seán Ó Súilleabháin, who both traveled the country giving advice to teachers on the scheme's implementation in the schools. While these two men were the driving force behind the initiative, they depended, to a large extent, on both the Department of Education (which funded the scheme and circulated information about it) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (which secured the cooperation of the teachers involved in the scheme). Ó Súilleabháin, an ex-schoolteacher himself, also compiled guidelines on the types of stories and material that should be collected, including a series of questions under fifty-five headings which were designed to elicit valuable material from the informants. These guidelines were arranged into a booklet entitled *Irish Folklore and Tradition*, which was issued to all the schools that were involved in the project. As Séamas Ó Catháin points out, the booklet demonstrates a "generous [i.e., wide-ranging] interpretation" of what folklore entailed. Headings include local lore and traditions such as "Hidden Treasure," "Local Heroes," "Local Cures," and "Festival Customs," as well as historical subjects such as "In the Penal Times" and "Famine Times." Religious material included "Stories of the Holy Family," "A Collection of Prayers," and "The Local Patron Saint."<sup>7</sup> The booklet also brings Ó Súilleabháin's assessment of the scheme's significance to light: he declared it "a work of national importance" in the preface and hoped that the senior pupils would "rescue from oblivion the traditions which, in spite of the vicissitudes of the historic Irish nation, have, century in, century out been preserved with loving care by their ancestors."<sup>8</sup>

While Ó Súilleabháin clearly envisioned that a wide range of lore and information would be collected, there seems to have been an effort to exclude material that might have been considered unsuitable for children. At a conference in Tipperary in 1938, he noted that "the children in Tipperary could gather material about the Famine without going into any gruesome details," while in 1950 he said of the booklet: "We didn't cover superstitions, because we thought that in some cases the parents might object to their children getting acquainted with these superstitions."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, many superstitions and grisly stories made their way into the collection, including this page of "Death-Lore":

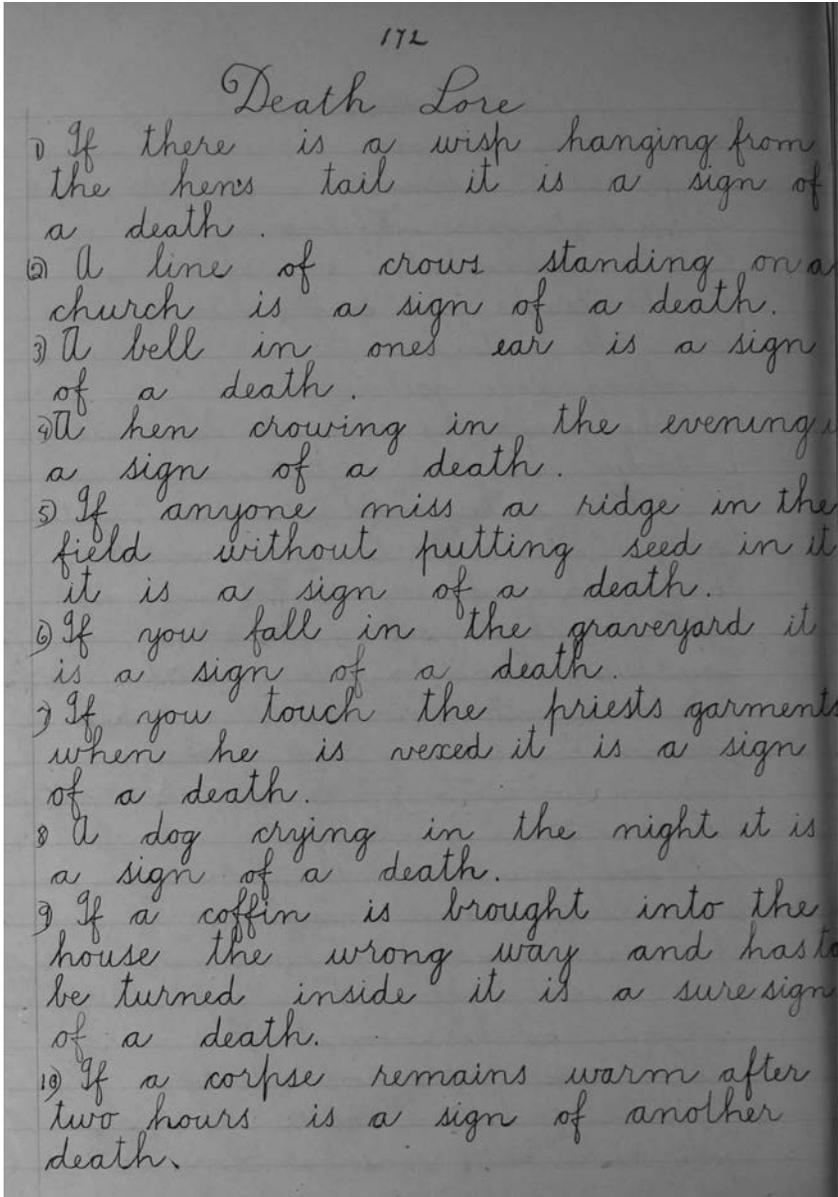


Figure 1. "Death Lore," National Folklore Collection Schools (NFCS) 0116: 172.

It is interesting to note that in the same decade, Irish-language publishers had rather conservative views of the type of folklore that they considered suitable for children. The treatment of changeling stories perhaps best illustrates this conservatism (stories in which the fairies replace a comely, good-humored human child with a fairy child, known as a changeling, who is ugly and bad

tempered). For example, all the changeling stories were omitted from an Irish-language translation of Thomas Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* that was aimed at children, presumably because the abuse given to the fairy child was considered unsuitable reading material for children.<sup>10</sup> However, these stories abound in the Schools' Collection: in one story from Donegal, a wise woman advises "to not give it [the changeling] enough to eat and to beat and pinch it without mercy."<sup>11</sup> Although there is no specific instruction to collect changeling stories in Ó Súilleabháin's booklet, "Fairy Forts" and the stories connected to them do feature in it, a topic which may have prompted the narration of changeling stories. While the exigencies of the Schools' Collection perhaps created a somewhat artificial environment for storytelling, it seems that these sometimes violent and gruesome traditional stories were indeed told to children.

Some of the other titles in Ó Súilleabháin's booklet gave the children scope for their own stories and customs, such as "Games I Play," "Home-made Toys," and "A Collection of Riddles," which provided pupils with the opportunity to describe their own games, rhymes, and toys. This information provides us with a valuable insight into the pastimes of the era, and occasional examples of children's reading material, including the following riddle:

[Q.] Why is a dusty carpet like Mrs. Hippo's annual?

[Ans.] Because they both take a lot of beating.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the children's own role as tradition-bearers seems to have been marginalized to a large extent. For the Folklore Commission, the main value of the Schools' Collection was the identification of storytellers and tradition-bearers across the country, and it was intended that professional collectors would collect the material "properly" from the informants at a later date.<sup>13</sup> To this end, pupils were asked to supply the informants' names, addresses, and ages. Interestingly, there is often no informant mentioned in the collections of riddles, in the descriptions of churning butter, and in the care of the farm animals, suggesting that this information may, in fact, have come from the children themselves. This is supported by the use of the first person in many examples: "When I am calling the hens to their meat, I say 'Chooky' 'Chooky,'" as well as in statements like the following from County Kildare: "This information is my own observation."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the agency and skill of the children was minimized, Ó Duilearga saying in 1957: "It is clear that to rely entirely on the material collected in this way would be a cardinal error. Children, as a rule, give the main points of a story or tradition, and it is but rarely one finds a tale recorded by them *verbatim*."<sup>15</sup>

The existence of Ó Súilleabháin's booklet attests to considerable input from the Folklore Commission, but they were not the only adults to influence the collection. The National School teachers also had a huge impact on the collection, often including material that they had collected themselves in the copybooks. Indeed, in some cases it is only the teachers' material that has been sent into the commission with no input from pupils. There are also instances of teachers instructing students to include certain material, as seen clearly in this example from County Sligo: "The master told us to write here that upwards of thirty years ago elf shot in cows was very prevalent in this district."<sup>16</sup>

The teachers often edited and corrected the material that the pupils wrote in their copybooks as well, and in some cases gave marks for the folklore compositions. There had been some debate about how much editing would be desirable in the case of the folklore compositions, and at a lecture in Fermoy, County Cork, on April 30, 1938, Schools' Inspector Mr. P. O'Donnell advised that

whilst not interfering with the accurate recording of the dialect of English as spoken by semi-educated individuals, it would, however, be necessary to correct what was evidently bad spelling or faulty grammar and to warn them against the imitation of vulgar expressions.<sup>17</sup>

A 1937 Department of Education circular further elucidates the role of the teacher in the Schools' Collection, instructing that the compositions from the children's own copybooks "or as much of them as is not unduly repeated . . . should be transcribed by selected pupils into the official Manuscript Books which were issued to all National Schools."<sup>18</sup> While the children's personal copybooks (or a selection of them) were also sent to the commission by many schools, it was the larger "official" notebooks which were later bound, paginated, and catalogued by the commission. This methodology created two collections and, as Ó Catháin observes, "had the unfortunate effect of relegating the work of some participants to relative obscurity by minimizing the chances of its being represented in the official notebook."<sup>19</sup> The teacher, then, was the ultimate regulator of any selection process deemed necessary before sending material to the commission.

As well as documenting folklore, the Schools' Collection gives us other insights into life in the 1930s. Some of the copybooks also include other schoolwork such as mathematical calculations, dictations, and compositions, which certainly provide a glimpse of school life and teaching methods at this time. Many of the descriptions of farm implements and toys include sketches. Interspersed throughout the collection, we find maps, photographs, newspaper cuttings, leaves from local trees, and musical notation for traditional songs, all

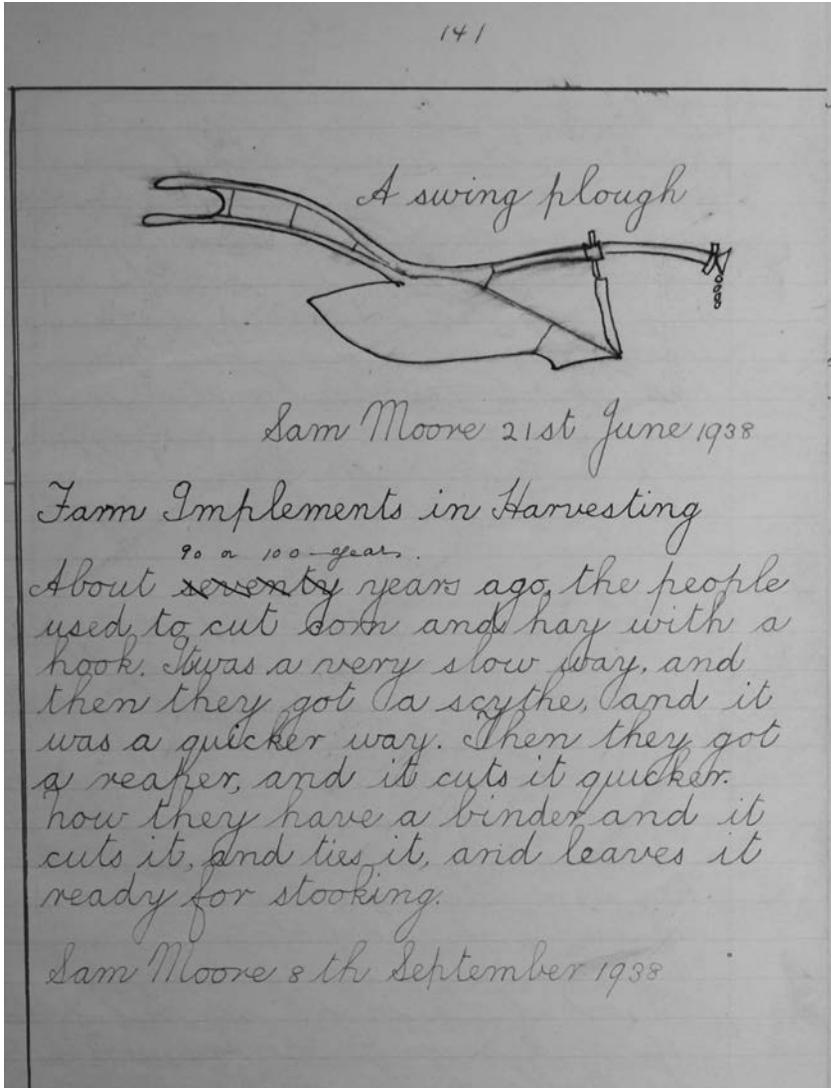


Figure 2: "Farm Implements in Harvesting," NFCS 1109: 141.

of which enhance the collection's value and interest. The collection contains material in both Irish and English, with the Gaeltacht areas supplying most of the Irish-language material (written in Gaelic script). Some schools in English-speaking areas also submitted material in Irish, which gives us an interesting insight into the progress of the Irish-language policy in schools fifteen years after its implementation.

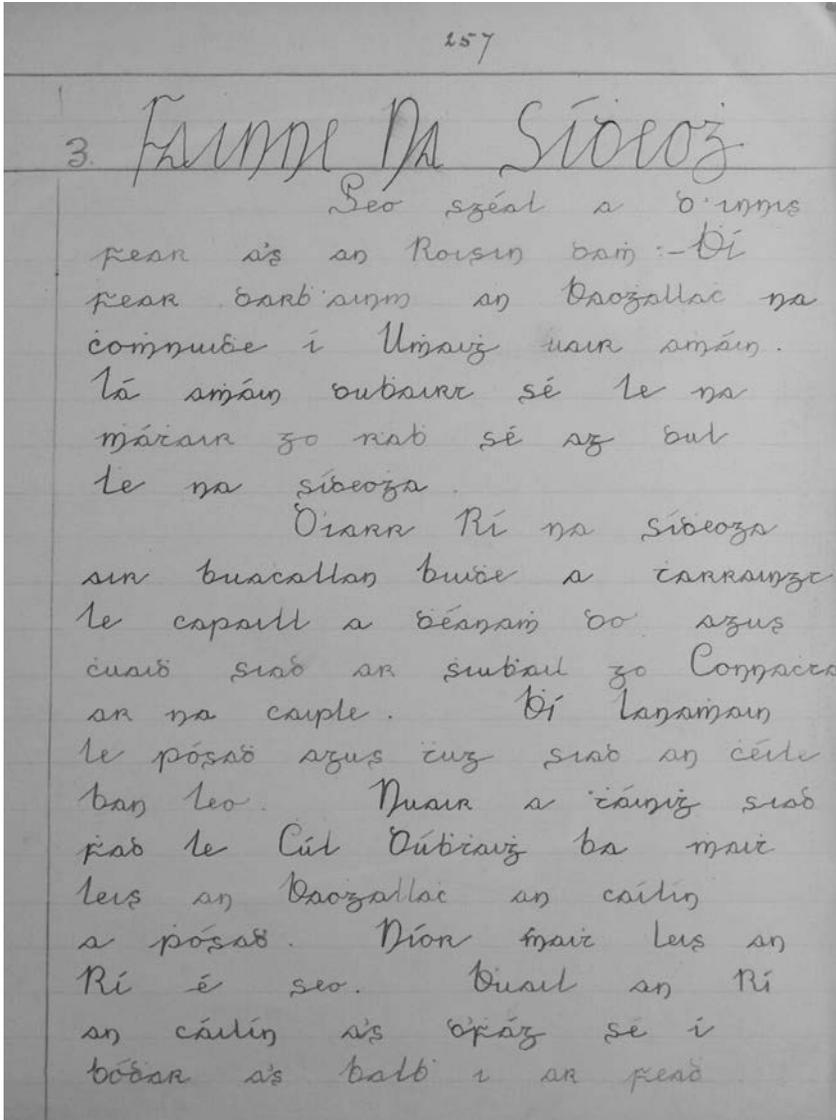


Figure 3: "Fainne na Sídeogh" / "Fairy Ring," NFCS 1060: 257.

The extent to which the children's own folklore and voices are heard is debatable, given that so much of the work was directed and edited by adults. Nonetheless, the stories, songs, traditions, and proverbs collected have added much to our understanding of folklore in Ireland. For scholars, the material itself and its geographical distribution is highly valued, but the collection is also

of great interest to the communities and families of the pupils and informants involved, by virtue of its localized content and the personal connections that can be drawn from it. A retrospective analysis of the scheme, however, must view the Schools' Collection in the context of the larger nation-building project in the early years of the Irish Free State, in which traditional life and customs were idealized, and in which the child was seen as a vessel for language revitalization and the preservation of traditional stories and customs. The execution of the project was also an extraordinary feat in itself, encompassing thousands of individuals, from Ó Duilearga and Ó Súilleabháin to the teachers, informants, and pupils who invested time and effort to create an impressive corpus of folklore which would be studied for years to come.

The material from the Schools' Collection (both the pupils' copybooks and larger bound volumes) is housed in the National Folklore Collection in University College Dublin and is currently being digitized at [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie).

## NOTES

1. See Mary Shine Thompson, "Introduction," *Young Irelands: Studies in Children's Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 12–13.
2. Adrian Kelly, *Compulsory Irish: Language and Education in Ireland, 1870s–1970s* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002), 18.
3. Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007), 19. The commission also collected a substantial amount of material in Scotland.
4. For further information on the role and structure of the Irish Folklore Commission, see Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935–1970*.
5. This material is currently being digitized at [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie). This digitization project will soon provide more accurate information concerning the numbers of pages and pupils involved.
6. For some of the other schemes which encouraged children's writing, see Ríona Nic Congáil, "Gaelic Culture from the Child's Perspective: The Diaries of Kerry Schoolgirls (1916–1918)," accessed November 1, 2015, [http://www.ucd.ie/scholarcast/transcripts/Diaries\\_of\\_Kerry\\_schoolgirls.pdf](http://www.ucd.ie/scholarcast/transcripts/Diaries_of_Kerry_schoolgirls.pdf).
7. Séamas Ó Catháin, "Súil Siar ar Scéim na Scol," *Sinsear* 5 (1988), accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.duchas.ie/download/duchas.ie-suil-siar-ar-sceim-na-scol-2014.pdf>. "Léamh móraigeanta" in the original; "generous [i.e., wide-ranging] interpretation" is my translation. This broad understanding of folklore can also be seen in Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Folklore of Ireland Society, 1942).
8. Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folklore and Tradition* (Dublin: Department of Education, 1937), 3.
9. "Tipperary Folklore Conferences," *Irish School Weekly*, April 2, 1938, 332; Stith Thompson, ed., *Four Symposia on Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1953), 28.

10. Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (London: Murray, 1828); Thomas Crofton Croker, *Siobhraí na mBeann agus na nGleann*, trans. Brigid Ní Loingsigh (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1939).
11. NFCS 0103: 343.
12. NFCS 0719: 17. My thanks to Ian Ó Caoimh who brought this riddle to my attention.
13. Seán Ó Súilleabháin noted in 1950: "The main value of the school collections [*sic*] for us was that they covered different parts of the country, to which we would never send our full-time collectors or even our part-time collectors. . . . We have been able to use these school books as preliminary introduction." *Four Symposia on Folklore*, 28.
14. NFCS 1124: 39. It is worth noting that the use of the first person should not always be ascribed to the pupil's own voice, as it sometimes denotes an attempt to transcribe the material verbatim; NFCS 0775: 482.
15. J. H. Delargy, "Local Traditions: Folklore," in *A View of Ireland: Twelve Essays on Different Aspects of Irish Life and the Irish Countryside*, eds. James Meenan and David A. Weir (Dublin: British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1957), 184. Bo Almqvist also discovered one instance of a story from Cork that had been copied from the newspaper *An Claidheamh Soluis*. See "The Uglier Foot," *Béaloidéas* 27–28 (1969–70): 13.
16. NFCS 0169: 167.
17. "Within the Branches," *Irish School Weekly*, May 21, 1938, 502.
18. Cited in Séamas Ó Catháin, "Scéim na Scol," *It's Us They're Talking About: Proceedings from the McGlinchey Summer School* (1998), accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.clonmany.com/mcglinchey/magazines/1998/cathain.shtml>.
19. Ó Catháin, "Scéim na Scol," *It's Us They're Talking About*.