

MICHAEL J. MURPHY

(1913-1996)

Writer, Collector, Photographer



*Mountain of Mystery;
Of Fionn the brave;
Of Saint-scholared Gael;
Of legend and tale –
I am your slave.*

‘Sieve Gullion’ (*At Slieve Gullion’s Foot, 1940*)



*An Roinn
Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta
Department of
Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht*



Michael Joseph Murphy was born in Liverpool in 1913, the son of Michael and Mary Murphy, both natives of Drumintee, south Armagh. It was from their lips that he learnt his first stories. His father Michael - 'Micky Buck' - had himself inherited his store of tales from his grandfather, William Jordan of Tievecrom in the same district, a Gaelic writer and minor poet. Michael lived his first eight years in Liverpool before the family returned to Ireland. As a consequence much of Michael J.'s nurturing took place in Drumintee, in the shadow of Slieve Gullion. His upbringing and his days working as a farm labourer, and the mountain itself, profoundly shaped his world view. This much is evident in his first published work, *At Slieve Gullion's Foot* (1940). In his introduction he writes:

For it is essentially a simple life in the valleys among the hills of Slieve Gullion. It carries a heritage; mountains give one a certain standard which governs one's whole outlook. They take a grip on the heart as one grows and always leave one with what the people say, "a gragh" for it for ever. And now come with me to a house on the eastern slope of Slieve Gullion ... it was in this house that these chapters really began; and it was at this house that I really became a man of the mountains. (Murphy 1940)

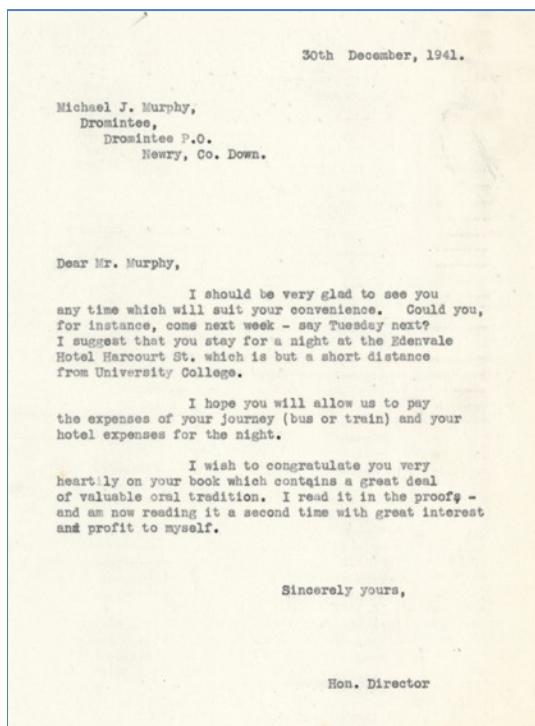


Michael J. Murphy sitting atop the Daaikilmore with Slieve Gullion in background (1963).

CBÉG [F008.25.00003](#)

The book preserves a detailed account of the customs and traditions associated with the community that formed at the base of the mountain. The cover itself is illustrated with a

photograph of children in the company of a reaper holding the 'cailleach', the last sheaf of the harvest to be cut, with Slieve Gullion looming in the background. Murphy's book quickly attracted the attention of Séamus Ó Duilearga, Honorary Director of the Irish Folklore Commission, who invited him to work part-time on behalf of the Commission initially, and full-time from 1949.



From then until his retirement in 1983, Michael was engaged in collecting folklore throughout 'old Ulster' – as he himself terms it in his introduction to *Now You're Talking* (1975) – an area extending from Rathlin Island to Co. Louth. But while east Ulster and north Leinster was the focus of much of his collecting, his field work also extended to parts of west Ulster (with the exception of Donegal) and the border counties of north Connaught. His chosen profession presented its own challenges:

The quest itself and the occupation of folklore collecting were strange, and suspicions had to be allayed: people tended to suspect the collector of all kinds of secret missions – a Government agent keeping an eye on valid and invalid subsidies of one kind or another, a clerk who had absconded with the till, a schoolmaster hounded from his school, even a revolutionary on the run! (Murphy 1975: vii)

In his time with the Commission (and from 1971, the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin), he collected 250 bound volumes – in excess of 30,000 typescript pages – of material, which now forms part of the National Folklore Collection. The material consists primarily of interview transcripts, as well as notes and diary entries. From 1962, when he began using a tape recorder in the field, audio recordings of his interviews have been preserved, amounting to some 340 five-inch and seven-inch reels.

Murphy was exceptional among his fellow collectors for his extensive use of the camera in his field work. With it he documented images of his informants and the material culture of their lives, capturing a valuable visual record that complements his writing. Not everybody that came his way was agreeable for their picture to be taken – one Co. Down informant refused to have his picture taken on the grounds that the image might be used in sorcery to cause injury to him (CBÉ 1975: 151).

Most were, however, happy for their photograph to be taken, something which adds to the value of Michael J.'s efforts. He was at ease in their company, '*It is a treat and a delight to converse with*

the old people. Their sincerity is genuine and infectious and does one good' (CBÉ 1940: 9). In the notes accompanying his transcripts he records important biographical details of people he has interviewed. Although Irish was no longer spoken in south Armagh at the time he worked, there



Mary Nugent and her granddaughter, Aghadavoyle,
Co. Armagh (c.1948). CBÉG [M004.25.00033](#)

remained an occasional person capable of speaking it, and Murphy's special interest in them is evident. Writing in 1948 of Mary Nugent, from Aghadavoyle, Co. Armagh, one of the last native speakers of Irish in the district, he says:

Here I would like to record my regret that I do not know Irish because Mary Nugent broke into Gaelic and spoke it for about five minutes. I sat truly entranced, listening to it sing off her lips, not knowing a word, but feeling moved in a new and even proud way. She often and very naturally breaks into a word or phrase or two of Irish, not aware that she has done so. This happens usually when her emotions are stirred, either humorously or otherwise. (CBÉ 1113: 42)

Full-time collectors working for the Irish Folklore Commission were required to keep a journal of their activities, including contextual information of their recording sessions, their informants, and more general remarks. Many of Murphy's entries are exceptional for what they reveal of his relationship with his informants and their personal qualities. One man frequently mentioned is Frank 'Wings' Campbell (Fig. 16). In a diary entry dated 26 May, 1969 Murphy notes:

Poor Frank Campbell (he was 75 on Saturday last he says) visibly wizening. He is a genial old fellow, loves the crack, loves to "get stuck into an argument" and drinks bottles of stout. He wanted to tell me about donkeys, a tradition he had remembered. From this we went on to other items I'd heard him mention; and in addition got some anecdotal tales, earthy as cow-dung.... (CBÉ 1749: 112)

The following month (29 June, 1969) Murphy entered Larkin's pub in Forkill, casually noting in his diary, 'No pubs officially or legally open here on Sunday, but that doesn't seem to matter'. There he met Frank and the two men happily conversed with one another. He writes:

So Frank was there, and at once:

"I say, Mickey: there's a thing come into my head the other day..."

And we're off again. And after twenty minutes or half an hour Frank will lean back, erect while holding his stick on the floor, and laugh:

"The devil took the house since you come in. How the hell is it you always rise some great crack between us."

More often Frank rises it himself! (CBÉ 1749: 126-7)

When the conversation ended and Murphy was about to leave, Frank appealed to him to not delay so long till their next meeting.

Michael J. Murphy died on the 18th May, 1996. At his wake, Bo Almqvist, Professor of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin, recalled a comment Murphy once made about the people from whom he collected folklore: "*It is a pity that people like them will ever have to die. But still,*" he continued, "*they will not die – their tales and traditions are preserved and will live on to the pleasure and profit of future generations*" (Almqvist 1996–7: 365). It is thanks to Michael J. Murphy, the man from the mountain, that a portion at least of this invaluable heritage has been preserved.

This exhibition serves to highlight and to celebrate the collector's efforts to preserve a visual record of the people and traditions he encountered, to stand alongside his vast written collection of folklore. Murphy compiled some 1,300 medium- and large-format negatives in the course of his field work, of which more than a third were taken in his native county of Armagh, a substantial portion of which have now been digitized and are now accessible at www.duchas.ie.

References

CBÉ = Main Manuscript Collection, National Folklore Collection UCD. (www.duchas.ie)

CBÉG = National Folklore Collection UCD. (www.duchas.ie)

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Fig. 1. View of Drumintee towards the southeast (May 1966). CBÉG [A001.25.00007](#)



Fig. 2. Michael J. Murphy pictured outside 'Ketty Bucks' house on Drumintee Mountain Road (or Slieve Gullion Mountain Road), where he lived for the years 1946-1948 (July 1963). CBÉG [A015.25.00057](#)



Fig. 3. Baling hay at Patrick O'Hare's, Annahaia (1966). CBÉG [B028.25.00015](#)



Fig. 4. Stephen Corney of Dernaroy, Drumintee spraying potatoes. Slieve Gullion in background (July 1965). CBÉG [B024.25.00008](#)



Fig. 5. Stephen Corney and his son, Drumintee (July 1965). CBÉG [B024.25.00005](#)



Fig. 6. Micky Kelly (aged about 67) labourer, Drumintee (October 1965).

CBÉG [M004.25.00034](#)



Fig. 7. Barney Loche and Micky Kelly, Drumintee (October 1965). CBÉG [M004.25.00006](#)



Fig. 8. Mary Alice Morgan and her husband Arthur Morgan (aged 94), Carrickbroad
(June 1969). CBÉG [M004.25.00044](#)

"Was last night with old Arthur Morgan of Ballinamona, Carrickbroad... Just on his birthday too as it happened: he is 94. And I had a wee jorum of stout with me. In very good form, but the memory fading and the hearing also. His wife, Mary Alice, looking remarkably fit and young: these were always a very fine couple... Listening to Arthur record a few fairy tales... am struck more forcibly than ever of the true wonder in these accounts: the incident, the people, the telling." (CBÉ 1748: 36-38)



Fig. 9. Wooden double gate made at home of Owen Quinn (in picture), Carrickbroad, Drumintee (September 1962). CBÉG [A043.25.00005](#)



Fig. 10. Last thatch surviving in Drumintee at Micky Kelly's. House known locally as Anne Corney's – Anne was Kelly's mother (April 1965). CBÉG [A015.25.00012](#)



Fig. 11. Larry McAllister outside his home in Fathom (April 1964). CBÉG [A015.25.00003](#)

"Larry McAllister... A free enough soul and I have always had a crack with him and tried to get what lore he could remember... His father was a good storyteller, the man from whom the late Dan Rooney of Lurgancarty here in Co. Down learned many tales and traditions." (CBÉ 1698: 26)



Fig. 12. Sheep fold at Larry McAllister's, Fathom (April 1964). CBÉG [B024.25.00001](#)



Fig. 13. Hand-stacks of oats referred to locally as 'atucks' (Ir. *adóg*) being constructed at

Peter Toal's, Drumintee (October 1965). CBÉG [B028.25.00004](#)



Fig. 14. Schoolchildren in Belleek at play in the space between school and the roadway
(May 1965). CBÉG [E004.25.00002](#)



Fig. 15. Miss 'Babs' Haughey, whose family run Larkin's public house in Forkhill (April 1969). CBÉG [M004.25.00005](#)



Fig. 16. Barney Shortt, Michael J. Murphy and Frank 'Wings' Campbell outside Larkin's public house in Forkhill (April 1969). CBÉG [M004.25.00014](#)



Fig. 17. Frank 'Wings' Campbell, Forkhill, Newry (June 1963). CBÉG [M004.25.00017](#)

"I say, Mickey: there's a thing come into me head the other day... And we're off again. And after twenty minutes or half an hour Frank will lean back, erect while holding his stick on the floor, and laugh: 'The devil took the house since you come in. How the hell is it you always rise some great crack between us.' More often Frank rises it himself!" (CBÉ 1749: 127)



Fig. 18. Michael 'The Milestone' Quinn, Ballinamaddy, Drumintee. A noted local man referred to in data and diaries of Michael J. Murphy. Known as 'Milestone' because the public-house of Quinn's in Newry is known as 'The Milestone'. He died March 1966, and is buried in Drumintee cemetery (1965). CBÉG [M004.25.00057](#)



Fig. 19. Michael 'The Milestone' Quinn, tending to his cattle at Carrickbroad (1965).

CBÉG [M004.25.00063](#)



Fig. 20. Photograph by Ellen Ettlinger of Michael J. Murphy and his wife Alice and their sons. Michael is holding his son Michael, as Patrick sits on a stone to the side of the door – a common feature in houses then (February 1947). CBÉG [M004.25.00068](#)