'A well-discoursed man': Jim Delaney
Bairbre Ní Shloinín
Jim Delaney was one of a small and select group of men who were recruited by the Irish Folklore Commission to act as full-time collectors of the oral literature and popular traditions of the people of the island of Ireland. Jim spent thirty-two years of his life engaged in this highly specialised occupation, and he left us a legacy of some 20,000 pages of manuscript material, as well as several hundred hours of sound recordings, which today form part of the holdings of the National Folklore Collection. Jim was a dedicated and meticulous chronicler of what has been termed ‘the history of the ordinary people’, helping to ensure that their voice, too, would be documented and heard.

The Commission employed a total of twenty-one full-time collectors at various periods throughout the duration of its existence from 1935 until 1971, most of whom were based in Gaeltacht areas. Jim’s collections, however, were compiled predominantly in the English-speaking midlands of Ireland, and as such stand as evidence of the inclusive attitude of the Irish Folklore Commission and Department of Irish Folklore to the collective inheritance of Irish tradition, and represent a clear recognition on their part of the rich tapestry of threads, linguistic and otherwise, which go to make up that inheritance.

James G. Delaney, or Séamus Ó Dúshláine as he was also known, was born in Wexford in the momentous month of April 1916. He came from a long and proud line of seafarers, a legacy which he described in great detail in articles published in the Wexford historical journal, The Past. Jim’s own path in life led not out to sea, however, but rather in the opposite direction, as he eventually settled in Co. Roscommon – the only landlocked county in the province of Connaught – near the town of Athlone, almost within sight of the Hill of Berries, said in local tradition to be the exact centre of Ireland.

Wexford remained always in Jim’s blood, and – en route to the midlands – he wrote an MA thesis at University College Dublin on fellow Wexford man and nineteenth-century folklore collector, Patrick Kennedy, author of a number of popular books on the oral traditions of his native place. Through his work on Kennedy, Jim became involved with the Irish Folklore Commission, under the directorship of Séamus Ó Duilearga. Ó Duilearga was possessed of a special talent for identifying potential collectors of popular tradition and oral history, and he persuaded Jim to join the ranks of the Commission’s full-time collectors in 1954. Jim’s initial work in this capacity was carried out in his native county, but he moved to Longford in 1955, having by then met and married Longford woman May Ní Bhrádaigh – ‘a highly intelligent and gifted woman’, as she has been described, who always took a great interest in Jim’s work, and was of invaluable help to him in his collecting and in transcribing his recordings, especially in Jim’s later years.
Jim and May moved to Roscommon in 1958, eventually settling near Hodson Bay on Lough Ree, on the Roscommon side of Athlone town, a location which enabled Jim to reach many parts of the midlands with ease in his travels as a collector. Throughout his long career, he worked in counties Carlow, Cavan, Galway, Kildare, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Offaly, Roscommon, Tipperary, Westmeath and, as mentioned, his native Wexford. In his work, Jim provided a great service to these sometimes unsung parts of Ireland by demonstrating the existence there of rich veins of tradition and remarkable continuity of custom and usage. He documented virtually every aspect of traditional popular culture in these areas, including many examples of international narratives, in the form of both folktale and legends, as well as accounts of work practices, crafts, skills, and other aspects of material culture and ethnology. In this context, Jim’s very fruitful collaboration with the Folklife Division of the National Museum (now the Museum of Country Life, Turlough Park, Co. Mayo) should be mentioned. In some of his work, Jim was also aided and abetted by his long-time friend and colleague in the Irish Folklore Commission, Leo Corduff. As well as being a talented photographer, Leo would take occasional trips with the Commission’s full-time collectors in order to make high-quality sound-recordings of their informants. In this capacity, he accompanied Jim on his travels on more than one occasion, and made a number of valuable recordings.
Jim was a meticulous collector not only of the people’s traditions but also of the people themselves, their communities, their ways of life and the places in which they lived. He kept a detailed account of his collecting work and of the people he met in the form of a diary which all full-time collectors with the Irish Folklore Commission and Department of Irish Folklore were required to keep. Jim was a natural diarist, with his unfailing attention to detail, impressive writing skills and eloquent powers of expression. His collections therefore have the important advantage, in academic terms, of being highly contextualised, thus adding greatly to their value. Jim’s fondness for his ‘sources’ comes across often in his diaries, and this is certainly the case with his description of Patrick Reilly (1881–1970), of Enaghan, Moyne, Co. Longford, written in about 1970 and illustrated here. The entry is headed ‘A well-discoursed man’, and it is worth quoting part of it:

Patrick Reilly of Enaghan, Co. Longford, is one of the best sianachés I have met since I started collecting folklore for the Irish Folklore Commission in the summer of ’54. He has a wonderful memory and seems never to have forgotten anything he ever heard…. Although he lives so near the Cavan border, he is a fierce Longford man and looks askance at anyone from Cavan. He told me one time that he got into an argument with a Cavan man over the rival merits of their respective counties, and when the Cavan man was giving hard blows against the ‘Longfords’, and very nearly vanquishing Reilly, Reilly’s finishing bow was to accuse the Cavan man of poisoning Eoghan Ruadh Ó Néill. ‘That finished him!’ says Reilly. ‘He had ne’er a word after that!’

… He [Patrick Reilly] has no time for taciturnity nor has he any respect for those afflicted with it. I remember his telling me one time that he went into a pub in Drumlish on one occasion, and there met a local character known as B… M… Patrick tried to get into conversation with him and got no answer except ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and other aconic expressions of the same kind. So Patrick says about B… M…, ‘He is not a well-discoursed man!’
Biographical sketch of Patrick Reilly, Enaghan, Co. Longford
by Jim Delaney (NFC 1781: 287)
Jim himself would surely have been described by Patrick Reilly as a very 'well-discoursed man', as he was the best and most entertaining of company, with an extensive knowledge of Irish and international literature. Oral historian George Ewart Evans has written about Jim as collector in one of his books:

His was a natural, unobtrusive approach which stemmed from his individual treatment of his respondent, not so much as a purveyor of information but as a long-standing acquaintance or friend..."
Notes
1. Jim's study remains today the principal publication on this influential figure in Irish nineteenth-century literary history.
3. Jim worked in close collaboration with Anthony Lucas, who was eventually to become Director of the Museum, and with Anne O'Dowd, Brendan Doyle and other members of the Folklore Division in recording and filming a number of traditional practices and artefacts.
4. Eoghan Ruaidhri Ó Neill (c. 1590–1649), a member of the celebrated O'Neill family and famous Irish soldier and leader. There was a tradition that he was poisoned by the English at Cloughoughter Castle in Co. Cavan, although this is no longer generally accepted. See http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/biog/oneill.htm, accessed 20.09.09.
7. For a select bibliography of Jim’s published work, see Almqvist 2001, 188-9.

Further reading

Extracts from this article, along with further information on Jim Delaney's work as a folklore collector in Co. Longford, will be published in Ní Fhloinn, B., ‘Documenting oral history and tradition in a midland county: some Longford collectors and their work’, in the forthcoming volume, Longford: History and Society, O’Ferrall, Fergus and Morris, Martin, eds.

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