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Folklore, Ireland, and Oliver Cromwell: The Archival Evidence

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Archives, even the driest among them, have always told a story, or many stories. While repositories were and perhaps still are fetishized by some historians as neutral and static sites of information and little more, they do live and yield riches, not only in terms of what can be found within, but in their potential to carry multitudes of meaning. Archival theorists have long known that social memory is carried and shaped in these repositories, even if it is too anthropomorphic to claim that archives themselves actively "remember." The nature of that archival "remembrance" is also open to question when it comes to another story which archives reveal, namely around questions of power. Who or what decides on the body of memory and forgetting that an archive will carry, in the inclusion of some sources and not others? Who or what gives meaning and interpretation to those sources, according to the terms dictated by the archive? How is power generally embedded in archival institutionalization? And what about the gaps in those archives where marginal or overlooked voices of the past are occluded?[1]

Silences and gaps therefore prevail in archives, but there is also accidental archival destruction, leaving behind another kind of absence. In the case of Ireland, the disastrous conflagration of the Public Records Office by the Four Courts fire on June 30, 1922 has been a tragedy which has haunted medieval and early modern scholars for a century. Left in the ashes were thousands of documents that included chancery records, religious censuses, and other sources that told the story of Ireland at critical times in its past.[2] Thankfully, much of this loss is

now being redressed as documents are retrieved and duplicated from repositories around the world and digitized through Ireland's Virtual Treasury. Coming out of the "Beyond 2022" project sponsored by Trinity College Dublin in collaboration with the National Archives (Ireland), the National Archives (UK), the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and the Irish Manuscripts Commission, the digital archive represents not only an enormous act of document recovery but one that makes previously-lost sources available to the public through open access.[3] Even the Record Treasury building and its reference room have been virtually recreated, promising, according to a statement, a "fully immersive, three-dimensional, virtual reality model."[4] The latter only reminds us, however, that the PRO is as ultimately gone as the Library of Alexandria; for the archive has now moved to another, digital space, with duplicates of its scattered documents gathered in a searchable database which elicits a different kind reading as well. The virtual library nevertheless carries revolutionary potential in terms of scholarship, with former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar stating that the enterprise would "[recreate]…seven centuries of historical, genealogical and administrative records [and] enable a new understanding of Ireland's shared past."[5]

The Virtual Treasury does not hold all of Ireland's past and certainly not all of its voices, however. Another archive—an equally important one, I would argue—has also been digitized, though its records also survive in thousands of notebooks, photographs, films, sound recordings, material culture, and other sources. The National Folklore Collection, housed at University College Dublin, has its own storied past, resulting from a golden age of folklore collecting that emerged from an initiative of the Irish Folklore Commission in the 1920s and 1930s. Early on, the archive was bound up with issues of identity, memory, state-building and institutionalization of a newly independent country;[6] it continues to expand and to grow however, as a living,

evolving archive, not only one that is site-specific but also digitally available through the Dúchas project (Dúchas.ie), begun in 2012. One of the largest folklore collections in the world, it has justifiably been entered into the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, with President Michael D. Higgins speaking of the "the rich diversity of our cultural expressions and art forms" that the archive contains."[7] I would add that it also holds the key to entire worlds that cannot be conveyed in the elite documents of officialdom. While the NFC is not without its own silences, its archive brings to life voices that convey an altogether different understanding of an earlier world.

It was an especially revelatory experience for me to be introduced to the NFC's riches by archivist and scholar Dr Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh when I began my project on Oliver Cromwell's afterlife in Ireland in 2009. I had not been exposed, as a historian, to such an archive before, confronted as I was with the immediacy, diversity, and historical and imaginative scope to be found in the Main Manuscript Collection, the Schools' Collection, and the questionnaires. Though folkloristics was new to me, and I was not skilled at first in reading these sources or identifying their typologies, or grasping with their factual "looseness" in representing the past, I nevertheless sensed their importance as sources. One would think that given the paucity of sources to work with after the Four Courts fire, that historians of an earlier time would be all over this alternative material. Yet with a few notable exceptions, including Guy Beiner and Clodagh Tait, few who have studied the pre-1700 period even touched on folkloric sources. In this regard, one could say that just as Irish history, to paraphrase Vincent Morley, is perhaps the only field that does not require any working knowledge of the Irish language, so does the social history of early modern Ireland need no consultation of the folklore that may contain traces of earlier beliefs and experiences.[8]

Much of this neglect is due, I think, to the constraints and conservatism that have limited historians who have studied early modern Ireland and Britain in the years between 1500 and 1700. Suspicions of oral traditions which include folklore, and especially the "myths and legends of the people", could be dated in part to the "value-free" school of revisionism expressed by the *Irish Historical Studies* editors of the 1930s and continuing in different forms to historians later on; their aversion was a reaction in part to the damaging nationalist and sectarian tendencies that could inhere in a myth-making "story of Ireland," as they sought refuge instead in a hyper-empiricism or, with others, a mockery or condescension.[9] Yet this aversion was also felt even earlier. In the 17th century, the great antiquarian Geoffrey Keating, for one, attempted to address the slurs of colonialists (and the fantastical picture of Ireland presented by Giraldus Cambrensis) by elevating elite Gaelic culture. But Keating too ignored popular Gaelic culture, describing it as "the ways of inferiors and wretched little hags."[10]

Two hundred years later, and like Keating before him, the great John O'Donovan—brilliant, erudite, acerbic, and often quite funny -- was also suspicious of oral traditions, even if he confronted them at every turn on his often-soggy travels as an ordnance surveyor. What mattered was written authority—and the *Annals of the Four Masters*, edited by Keating, a compilation of historical material which O'Donovan used as his fact-checking source base. For O'Donovan, oral traditions on the other hand "have only mushroom existence…[since] they had no foundation in fact or [even] early superstition; these traditions [in the end are] worth nothing, as [they serve] to illustrate nothing." Elsewhere, he described the folklore collector Thomas Crofton Croker as "that little fairy elf."[11] But O'Donovan was also forced at every turn to engage with what he called his "old antagonist," oral tradition, even though he used "history" as a weapon to "crush" it, and rather unsuccessfully attempted to lecture the locals about the

inconsistency and extravagance of the stories that gave meaning and substance to their lives and pasts.[12] O'Donovan, however, was more complex than these condemnations may reveal, as he would also have agreed with the antiquarian Margaret Stokes, who wrote to George Petrie that "an Irish tradition is a vocal history," and while "It may be corrupted it is never unfounded."[13]

There is certainly much artfulness and coloring in the thousands of stories housed at the National Folklore Collection, but even so, they contain within themselves a remarkable consistency, and convey their own valuable truths reflecting a distinctive if also disparate social memory. Traditional historians today, however, have a problem with material that tends to be open-ended, enigmatic, often containing jokes or silences, and performative and fluid (that is, until they are written down). And while the achievements of a Séamus Ó Duilearga (James Delargy) or a Seán Ó Súilleabháin (Sean O'Sullivan) are recognized, the problem arises when it comes to tracing the morphology of these stories back to a farther past.

To be fair, a pre-modernist who works with the NFC sources, or proto-ethnographic antiquarian texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, enters a potential methodological minefield. So much material, after all, is mediated or one could say "corrupted": in transcriptions of the tales being told, orality is mediated (or changed) by textuality, just eighteenth-century folklore was mediated and often edited by antiquarians who included that folklore in their books. The manuscripts found in the NFC are also "compromised," perhaps, in that they were transcribed in the 1930s on, even though the tales they told were often set many centuries earlier. To cite one example: during a talk I once gave about Oliver Cromwell and the NFC sources, a historian raised a very good point by asserting that the sources I cited did not come out of Cromwell's time but reflected instead the more modern age in which they were transcribed. In this regard, tales of Cromwell in the NFC archives were actually invented traditions, reflective in

this case of the 1930s, when the tales were written down. If one were to push it, he continued, one could perhaps claim that the Cromwellian tales reflected the time of the elder informants or interviewees, at the end of the nineteenth century, with the legacy of the Land Wars and ongoing issues of property accounting for all the narratives which focused on the Cromwellians' acts of confiscation and dispossession. Finally, he added that the stories around Cromwell also overwhelmingly reflected memories from the Catholic population, and as such would have been influenced by the many Catholic nationalist histories written in the nineteenth century, by Father Denis Murphy and others.[14]

In other words, those sources were only valuable in reflecting modern history, and useless for trying to understand how Cromwell was remembered in previous centuries. Yet as I mentioned in the subsequent book that came out of my work, one could argue two points: Cromwell would not have been evoked as a villainous polemical weapon if he had not carried resonance in the first place. Equally important, while we must place these transcribed folk memories in their contemporary context, to read them only through that prism would, I argue, close off larger possibilities, especially if the tropes and motifs they employ can be shown to have origins in an earlier time. To claim that the records of the NFC are the product of their times is certainly true. But such a view is also too limiting, not only of folklore but of history itself.

How, then, do we proceed? For one, historians need to engage more deeply with the scholarship of folkloristics in order to gain skills in reading and identifying this material, and to engage with the field in more developed ways than they previously have. It would spare them embarrassment, if nothing else. Peter Burke once pointed out the famous story of the great historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie announcing at a conference an original approach to

folktales that he had uncovered; unfortunately, "Scandinavian scholars gently pointed out that what they had just heard, which had been offered as a new approach, was effectively a revival of the methods of the Finnish historical–geographical school."[15] To be fair, Le Roy Ladurie, as Burke points out, was one of the few scholars to engage seriously with folklore after the *annaliste* and history-from-below schools, and his work continues to be unmatched even among scholars today (who would benefit from new "turns" in folkloristics since the 1970s).

A significant problem for scholars, it should be said, is that "folklore" can be a contentious term, not least among folklorists themselves, especially since "folklore" is not always about the "folk" or the "lore." It certainly is not (just) about the colorful story. Alan Dundes reminded us many years ago that the "folk" can be "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is." In this regard, the most elite of the Gaelic poets, for example, can be considered a "folk group," sharing the same traditions. Writing in the same essay, Dundes also asserted that "that rather than dying out, folklore is constantly being created and recreated to suit new situations."[16] This would apply to the ways in which Cromwell tales in the NFC archives, for example, did not suddenly spring up in the 1930s, when they were transcribed, but "re-created" according to new contexts and times. Meanwhile, "lore," it should be notes, encompasses a large range of expressive traditions, forms, rituals, beliefs and genres that can extend to the study of objects or folklife, including ruins or graveyards that accumulate stories around them.[17] To overlook oral accounts and material culture, and to rely on the written record alone, is to therefore present only half the story of Ireland's past, and again, to misconstrue history and folklore both.

Tracing these stories back through the decades and centuries thus involves what Marc Bloch once called the regressive method—which does not mean that we take folktales

transcribed in the 1920s and 30s and, in the words of Peter Burke, "cheerfully [assume] that they [occurred in the same way and meant the same thing] in the past."[18] But by working one's way back through the centuries, step by step and source by source, through antiquarian texts, newspaper articles, property memoirs, treatises, and pamphlets, not to mention Ordnance Survey letters, connections can be made and a fuller picture of deep memory forged.

Historians and literary scholars should also approach this material through a familiarity with the genres and motifs that run through it. More care should be taken, for example, to understand the formal properties and distinction between a myth and a legend, just as they should grasp the ways in which stories vary and change. Folklore types and motifs must also be recognized in their universal as well as local contexts; while this does not mean that one should necessarily "chase down" motifs, consultation with the Motif Index of Folk Literature or the Stith-Thompson-Uther index, for example, would help to set the folklore that runs through the NFC in their comparative contexts. Not all people, of course, share the same stories, as Alan Dundes reminded us when he criticized a universal approach to motifs. But their embeddedness in narrative and their meaning across wider contexts could help scholars to identify their larger resonances and understand the nature of their meaning and function in culture.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to focus specifically on the story, or stories, that the National Folklore Collection tells of Cromwell. Turning to Ireland's great villain as he was cited across the schools manuscripts and main manuscript collection proved to be somewhat fateful for me, and shaped the book that I ended up writing. Not only did these sources confirm how big the memory of Cromwell was in Ireland, but how various and surprising as well. There are hundreds of stories about Cromwell in the archive, in English and Irish, more than any other

historical figure except for Daniel O'Connell. As I have written elsewhere, in this sense the archive conveys the twin pillars or bookends of good and evil in the Irish imaginary: a story right there about the construction of heroism and villainy in a nation's culture.

One might pause here to speculate as to why Cromwell, over and above other English colonizers, gained such a central position in the Irish cultural repertoire in the first place, when there were so many other nefarious historical contenders, from Diarmaid Mac Murchadha to the Tudor re-conquerors to Charles Trevalyon. None of them, however, inflicted the kind of violence that Cromwell oversaw during the 1649 massacres at Drogheda and Wexford. Cromwell was also not the first extreme Protestant leader to come to Ireland; yet he was distinct in harnessing that extremity to a military discipline that led, according to near contemporary William Montgomery, "Oliver Cromwell's army triumphing over us all."[19] Cromwell was also associated with regicide—itself a shocking act—and had been preceded by royalist propaganda that depicted him as the devil already. While Ireland had been no stranger to English soldiers, his army even looked different, as they "cropped their hair, dividing it into so many little peaks as was something ridiculous to behold," according to Col. Hutchinson[20] (Swift would later pick this up in his *Tale of the Tub*). Above all, Cromwell's enduring notoriety resided in a legacy that was shaped not by him—he only spent only eight months in Ireland, after all— so much as by the men who served his regime. Cromwell's accompanying men also represented something new—most of all William Petty, who brought with him not only the New Science that led in turn to his political anatomy and arithmetic, but abilities as a "fiscal supremo" whose maps embodied, more than any other textual artifact an actionable blueprint for land possession and dispossession, and a utilitarianism that came to be memorialized by figures such as Yeats as "Cromwellian."[21] In effecting these changes, and not least, in Petty's mapping enterprise known as the Down Survey,

the complex reality of previous socio-geographical relations would be effaced for a new political and economic regime of power based on land transformation and ownership: more than the massacres, Cromwell's biggest legacy of all.[22]

In short, while Cromwell cannot be blamed (at least entirely) for the machinations of those who preceded him in the establishment of plantations, or in the settlement of William III, or even in the actions of his underlings, he came to represent both the final seal of colonial violence and a more systematic opening salvo in the unbridled expropriation of an entire ruling class. How then, was this deep historical rupture understood, especially by individuals who suffered by it? For historians such as Toby Barnard, Cromwell was barely remembered at all—at least in the earlier decades and eighteenth century, since the elite historiography and texts (allegedly) do not mention him. Only in the nineteenth century, according to Barnard, was Cromwell revived as a polemical figure, useful to nationalists and unionists alike in their ongoing debates over Ireland's present and future. Barnard does recognize that folklore may complicate this story of mass amnesia until the 19th century, but he dismisses it as outside of his purview and leaves it at that.

In consulting both the on-site NFC archive and Duchas.ie, I came across a few surprises when it came to Cromwell's memorializations. For one thing, and reflecting historical sources and the literature of the seventeenth century, there are relatively few specific references to the massacres at Drogheda and Wexford, despite the widespread knowledge of these incidents by a broad early twentieth-century public exposed to them through the popular works and influence of Cardinal Francis Moran and Denis Murphy. On the other hand, there are repeated references to the destruction of monasteries and churches and the killing of monks and priests. Popular tales emphasize the same phrases or words, of "the time Cromwell blew the roof off the monastery,"

of churches that were “blown down” ‘torn down,’ “tumbled down,” “knocked,” “set fire,” “tossed,” ‘shot down’ by Cromwell--or “ battered down by Cromwell with his copper nose’—the copper nose itself first appearing in folklore from the late seventeenth century. Some of those tower houses might have actually been thrown down in a gale rather than by Cromwell, and other monasteries were in fact targeted in the Henrician and particularly Elizabethan period. Even so, Cromwell becomes a kind of mnemonic device to encompass the totality of violence in general.

I was also startled (as a historian, though folklorists know these things) to find an overwhelming number of stories that speak of resistance on the part of monks who before fleeing bury their books and bells—bells which will one day emerge “and ring at the end of time”—or a clever man outwitting Cromwellian soldiers for a parcel of ill-gotten land. Little of this was factually accurate, though resistance—and the folklore of resistance—did in fact emerge early on, in tales that accrued around rapparees and figures such as Redmond O’Hanlon. Even nature itself resists Cromwell, as in the story of him being buried in Ireland yet every morning being flung up out of the ground by an earth—a land—that rejects him. Ruins also assume a miraculous agency that goes missing in descriptions that present them as dumb and mute stones. Some ruins simply refuse to be ruined: at Muff Castle in a widely told old story, Cromwell fires cannonballs at the walls for three days, only for them to “hop off” the walls “like hailstones.” It finally takes an act of treachery on the part of a native betrayer for the structure to come falling down. All this, again, can be traced to earlier times as well. Recounting a publisher who was preparing a book about scenic landscape ruins in Ireland, Thomas Crofton Croker—in the early nineteenth century—described a local telling the publisher that the book should be dedicated to

Cromwell, since "I know of no one more deserving [than him], whose cannon has made so many dilapidated buildings for you."

Landlords comprise a file of their own in the archive's records, but they too appear in a Cromwellian context and are referred to in different places as "Cromwell's pets," even if they lived well past Cromwellian times. In seventeenth-century poetry and literature, "Cromwellian dogs" was the most common reference to the new colonizers or property owners, though "wolves," "English speaking churls," the "grimy rabble," "bastards," "upstarts," "hedge-born vagabonds," "mechanic bagman" and "fanatic scabs", while Cromwell himself, in a late seventeenth-century poem, was simply referred to as "the brewer." All this, again, appeared in seventeenth-century literature and Gaelic poetry.

Other surprises in the archive included the presentation of Cromwell as actually moderate, with the underlings—Charles Coote most notoriously, or the bloodthirsty Daniel Axtell in Kilkenny—bearing much of the blame. Or there is the comical Cromwell of the mummers plays, accompanied by Beelzebub (Here comes I, Oliver Cromwell, as you may suppose/ I've conquered many nations with my large copper nose")—which finds its echo in Joyce ("Have you heard of one Humpty Dumpty/ How he fell with a roll and a rumble/ And he curled up like Lord Olofa *Crumple*/At the butt of the Magazine Wall").[23]

Informers and betrayers, hidden treasure, ruins and resistance, Cromwell being born a king in Ireland, leaving and then returning to conquer it: all these constitute universal and also deeply Irish folkloric motifs, onto which the historical legend of Cromwell was superimposed, thus securing his mnemonic function across the centuries. And many of these stories can indeed be traced back through time even if they refract and change across different historical conditions and contexts. What they reflect is a capaciousness that exists in popular memory, and a

resistance above all to expected assumptions or frameworks. Rather than condescend to these stories, historians must respect them and see that they not only contain truths, but also, in some cases, truths that are not too far from the factual.

History and folklore should thus work in tandem as one accesses the past, in order to gain a deeper and wider picture of social groups, traditions, expressive culture, memory and identity as they played out in previous times. But even then, and despite consulting a more diverse set of archives and crossing disciplines, silences and absences will remain. Stories of the past, conveyed through oral traditions, only truly come alive in the telling, the performance, the audience responses, and the transmission across time, space and generations. Committing these tales to text—committing anything that happens in history to text—is necessarily impartial, as the more elusive elements of orality slip away. Like a butterfly specimen pinned to a board, the historical and folkloric past is preserved, available in the archives to be retrieved and consulted; but the life of the butterfly— its darting flight, the flutter of its shimmering wings—has left, and no archive can ever fully animate it again.

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[1] Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61, (2006): 215-233; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1974), esp. 142-151; Jacques Derrida*, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, 1996), esp. pp. 1-5; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory on "Archives, Records and Power," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), pp. 1–19.

[2] Michael Fewer, "The Battle of the Four Courts, 28-30 June 1922," *History Ireland* 27 (2019), pp. 44-47.

[3] https://www.virtualtreasury.ie/ See also https://www.nationalarchives.ie/article/beyond-2022-irelands-virtual-record-treasury/;

[4] https://www.tcd.ie/news_events/articles/digital-project-to-recreate-public-record-office-destroyed-by-four-courts-fire/

[5] https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-50670873

[6] Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*

(Helsinki: Irish Literature Society, 2007; Bo Almqvist, "The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy, "*Béaloideas*, 45/47 (1977 - 1979), pp. 6-26

[7] https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2017/1206/925267-folklore-archive/

[8] As Cristina Bacchilega points out, however, it is important to note that "not all oral traditions are folk," just as "not all folkloric literature is oral." Cristina Bacchilega, "Folklore and Literature," in Regina Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem, eds., *A Companion to Folklore* (London: Wiley, 2012), p. 450.

[9] R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (New York: Viking, 1994).

[10] Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn; the History of Ireland*, eds. and trans. David Comyn and P.S. Dinneen, 4 vols, (Dublin: 1902-1914), pp. 1-7; Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004), p. 125.

[11] Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition*, *Modernity*, *Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), pp. 94-113.

[12] Sarah Covington, "Towards a New 'Folkloric Turn' in the Literature of Early Modern Ireland," *Literature Compass* 15 (2019), pp. 1-13.

[13] Gillian Doherty, *The Irish Ordnance Survey: History, Culture and Memory* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), pp. 123-124.

[14] See for example, David M. Hopkin and Timothy Baycroft, eds., *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[15] P. 137.

[16] Alan Dundes, "Who Are the Folk?" In *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 2; Elliott Oring, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986); Dorothy Noyes, "Group," Journal of American Folklore 108 (1995), p. 430.

[17] Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett, "Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review," in Elliott Oring, ed., *Folk Groups And Folklore Genres Reader* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1986), pp. 329-338.

[18] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd. ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 125-129.

[19] Rev. George E. Hill ed., *The Montgomery Manuscripts (1603-1706)* (Belfast: James Cleeland, 1869), p. 91.

[20] [Lucy Hutchinson], *Memoirs of the Life of Col. Hutchinson* (London: Routledge, 1906), p. 95.

[21] https://downsurvey.tchpc.tcd.ie/down-survey-maps.php

[22] Sarah Covington, *The Devil from over the Sea: Remembering and Forgetting Oliver Cromwell in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 45-50; 165ff; 261-262

[23] Covington, *Devil*, p. 30-33, 248-252, 274-275.