5. Archives and artefacts: collecting, collections and ethnography in an Irish and comparative European context

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‘Folklore’ and ‘folklife’ have usually been considered as separate, if related, scholarly domains that emerged from Romantic interest in peasant culture. Sometimes both are part of the remit of the same university department, or they may be taught and studied in separate departments. Folklife, sometimes called ‘regional ethnology’ in the past, has to a large extent moved away from the study of peasant material culture towards a closer engagement with the social sciences. It continues, of course, to have a strong presence in museums, specifically through collections of material culture that in Europe were usually acquired in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century; there are many museums specially dedicated to it. In the case of folklife, and to a lesser extent of folklore, ‘European ethnology’ has become the preferred denomination of many European university departments, as well as representing a new research orientation.

Towards a folklore archive

In the 1760s a national literature in German was a project. Italy, France and England, each with a long-established literature, had embraced classicism and the Enlightenment and had little reason to abandon them. A German renaissance looked beyond these intellectual influences, and this is where the importance of Johann Gottfried von Herder lies (for Herder see Berlin 1976; Barnard 2003; Dekens 2003). He battled against the perspective of the Enlightenment that saw the force of tradition as synonymous with ignorance, and against contemporary German literature and art that was based on foreign, and especially French, models. To Herder human groups were unified by common traditions and memories and above all by language, the most precious possession of a nation, which expressed the group’s collective experience. Volkspoesie (‘people’s poetry’), which he opposed to the artifice of Kunstdichtung (‘art poetry’), best reflected the authentic character of a people. His interest in song, nevertheless, was not ethnological but aesthetic, and involved the sleight of hand that made plebs and populus coincide (the word Volk signifying both the national and the popular, as Gramsci (1991, 123) was later to point out). Folk traditions thus pointed
to an authentic national culture that the cosmopolitan élites who ruled the German princely states could never supply; peasants, rooted for generations to a specific territory and a particular way of life, were the antithesis of a refined and transnational aristocratic society.

The value of folk culture was already apparent from the 1760s in the poetry of Macpherson and Bishop Percy, so appreciated by Herder, and, of course, in the writings of Rousseau. With the appearance of Kinder- und Hausmärchen in 1812, the Grimm Brothers’ endeavours in the realm of folktales were emulated all over Europe, including Ireland, where Thomas Crofton Croker’s Fairy legends and traditions in the south of Ireland of 1825 came to the attention of the brothers, whose German translation of it appeared the following year (Ó Giolláin 2000, 44–5, 100–2). Pascale Casanova points to the relationship between the founding of a literature and the founding of a nation. First-generation writers, who consciously rebelled against the previously metropolitan parameters of literature, ‘use all the means at their disposal—whether literary or politico-national, or both—to gather and concentrate literary wealth’ (Casanova 2004, 223). Herder’s model was revolutionary in that it gave writers on the margins of literary metropolises (and especially of the literary metropolis, Paris) access to literary resources of their own. She argues that ‘the popular tales collected, edited, reworked, and published by patriotic writers thus became the first quantifiable resource of a nascent literary space’ (ibid., 225). But the people were hardly a social or ethnographic fact: ‘for writers they were above all a literary (or literary-political) construction, a sort of instrument of literary and political emancipation having its own distinctive use, a way of producing literary difference—and therefore capital—under conditions of great literary destitution’ (ibid., 224–5).

To Miroslav Hroch, the typical nineteenth-century national movement in central and eastern Europe involved a disadvantaged non-dominant ethnic group reaching a level of self-awareness sufficient to see itself as a real or potential nation, and to set about achieving all the necessary attributes of a nation. This took place in three structural phases. The first was that of intellectuals who took a purely academic interest in the language, culture and history of the people (to a large extent what was to be called folklore and folklife). The second phase was the so-called national awakening (with a strong Herderian influence), whereby programmes of action were drawn up and contacts between the intellectuals and the people were established. The third phase was a mass movement, involving broad cross-sections of the people and political action on a large scale (Hroch 1996, 79, 80–5; his argument is outlined in more detail in Hroch 2000).

Interest in folk culture until the middle of the nineteenth century was almost always literary and historical. Its importance was in the aesthetic value of oral traditions and in their supposed historicity (the latter especially when the type of documents that long-established nations possessed were absent or scarce). Hroch, in
rejecting Ernest Gellner’s (1983, 35, 61) claim that nationalism was a response to the transformation from agrarian to industrial society, argues that most European national movements pre-dated industrial society. There were antecedents for modern nation-building in late medieval and early modern times, often in aborted earlier efforts that left resources for a later period: relics of an earlier political autonomy, the memory of former independence or statehood and the survival of the medieval written language (Hroch 1996, 84). In the Irish case, elements of Gaelic high culture survived the destruction of the native learned class in the seventeenth century, and it is that national ‘residue’ that was of particular interest to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars, including folklorists. In a lecture given in 1937, Séamus Ó Duilearga, director of the Irish Folklore Commission, explained that after the destruction of the native élite the common people saved ‘in spite of all persecution some of the culture of the upper classes and admitted it into their age-old treasury of oral tradition’. Thus ‘a large part of our medieval literature exists in oral form . . .’, and hence he could say of himself and his staff that ‘. . . we consider ourselves not as creators or adapters, but as literary executors of earlier generations’ (Ó Duilearga 1943, 21–3, 30, 36).

The majority of folklorists’ informants in Ireland and in other European countries came from the poorest sections of the rural population. The narrators of the stories in Douglas Hyde’s seminal collection Beside the fire were ‘to be found only amongst the oldest, most neglected, and poorest of the Irish-speaking population’ (Hyde 1910, ix–l). Hyde’s most important source for An Sgeuludhe Gaedhealach (1901) was an inmate of the Poor House in Athlone. Hyde commented on his unfortunate circumstances: ‘How sad that the Poor House then was the best place to collect stories!’ (de h-Fde 1933, v–ix).
A chapter in Lady Gregory’s Poets and dreamers, ‘Workhouse Dreams’, is based on ‘three happy afternoons’ in a workhouse where she recorded a number of folktales, moved by the contrast ‘between the poverty of the tellers and the splendour of the tales’ (Gregory 1903, 129–30). Here the difference between plebs and populus is elided and folk poetry is able to transcend the peasant condition. The oldest folklore archives are a product of Romantic nationalism and the largest of them are to be found in Estonia, Finland and Ireland: the work of collecting helped to map the nation, to assert its historical depth and to provide raw material for the construction of a national culture. André Chastel has pointed out that the work of art is admitted to the national heritage on the basis of its uniqueness, the opposite of the notion of ethnological heritage, which admits something on the basis of its typicality. In a sense, then, the work of folklorists was only partly ethnological (Chastel 1997, 1458).

The Irish folklore archives can be traced indirectly back to nineteenth-century folklore-collectors. Hyde’s 1892 lecture on ‘The necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland’ was informed by the idea that unless Ireland rediscovered its Volksgeist it would be incapable of any worthwhile artistic production. The Gaelic League was founded in
1893 on this premise, with the aim of reviving Irish as a spoken and as a literary language. It held competitions for storytelling, singing, dance, and for collections of folklore. It published volumes of folklore that helped to fill the gap for reading materials (since the language had largely become a continuum of marginalised dialects) and provided an appropriate model for prose fiction in Irish (since the only other prose model was from the seventeenth century). The nineteenth-century development of Old Irish philology on the Continent led to the study of modern Irish dialects, storytellers often providing outstanding informants and folklore convenient texts for scholars (Ó Giolláin 2000, 114–28).

In 1927 several members of the Gaelic League founded the Folklore of Ireland Society with the aim of collecting, publishing and preserving the country’s folklore. The writer Pádraig Ó Siochfhradhá (1883–1964) was elected president, Hyde treasurer and Séamus Ó Duilearga (1899–1980) librarian and editor of the society’s journal, Béaloideas, whose first number appeared in the same year. In 1930 the government established the Irish Folklore Institute, to be replaced in 1935 by the Irish Folklore Commission, attached to the Department of Education, with Ó Duilearga as director (on secondment from his university lectureship) and Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1903–96) as archivist. Its task was to record, catalogue and publish Irish folklore, its remit covering all of Ireland. A number of full-time fieldworkers (‘collectors’), all male and mostly native speakers of Irish, were recruited and were generally sent to their home districts. Their work was supplemented by the voluntary contributions eventually of thousands of others, including in 1937–8 senior pupils from primary schools in a scheme carried out with the cooperation of the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers Organisation. They also collaborated with the National Museum of Ireland in the acquisition of objects for its collection (see below). The Commission’s understanding of folk culture as well as the contents of its archives can be gauged by the fieldworkers’ manuals prepared by Ó Súilleabháin, especially A handbook of Irish folklore (1942). The latter is arranged thematically according to the following categories: ‘Settlement and Dwelling’, ‘Livelihood and Household Support’, ‘Communication and Trade’, ‘The Community’, ‘Human Life’, ‘Nature’, ‘Folk Medicine’, ‘Time’, ‘Principles and Rules of Popular Belief and Practice’, ‘Mythological Tradition’, ‘Historical Tradition’, ‘Religious Traditions’, ‘Popular Oral Literature’ and ‘Sports and Pastimes’.

Nordic models were to the fore in folklore research. The Swedish folklorist C.W. von Sydow’s encouragement was behind Delargy’s extended visits to the universities of Lund and Uppsala in 1928. The Norwegian folklorist Reidar Th. Christiansen, like von Sydow an Irish-speaker, was influential in the establishment of the Folklore of Ireland Society. Ó Súilleabháin spent three months in Sweden in 1935 and applied the methods of Uppsala’s folklore and dialect archives to the IFC. The close links between philology and folklore facilitated contacts with the Nordic countries and with
Germany—Kevin Danaher, the foremost folklife specialist in the IFC, studied there—as well as with Scotland, where there had also been an overlap between Gaelic philology and folklore: Ó Duilearga was strongly interested in the pan-Gaelic dimension. The influence of Ó Duilearga, the key figure in Irish folklore studies for half a century, is crucial, both from his formal position and from his charismatic personality. With knowledge of many European languages, he was well versed in international folklore and philological scholarship and his contacts with other countries were extensive. A cultural pessimism regarding the future of Gaelic culture informs much of his work, and he was preoccupied with rescuing the remnants of the Gaelic past. The Commission was abolished in 1970, its staff and holdings transferred to University College Dublin. By that time the archives had at least two million pages, plus some 25,000 photographs and thousands of hours of sound recordings (Ó Giolláin 2000, 128–36).¹

Folklore: museums and world’s fairs

‘Folklore’—a term coined by the antiquary Thoms in 1846—in practice tends to mean the intangible aspects of folk culture, especially oral narrative traditions, rather than material culture (partly covered by the term ‘folklife’). The latter is normally seen as belonging to the remit of the museum rather than the archive. The decline of the peasant world and the influence of the social sciences from the 1960s reorientated folklife research (for this change in Sweden see Löfgren 1997 and Arnstberg 2008). If folklore is closely linked to efforts to create national literatures, a sustained interest in folklife is somewhat later and is closely related both to the development of museums of folklife and to the display of aspects of folklife in world’s fairs.

Though they can be seen as proto-museums, the social milieu of the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities by definition limited access to them. The museums as such that came from and after them progressively granted access to the population at large. Indeed, they aimed ‘at the mixing and intermingling of publics—elite and popular—which had hitherto tended towards separate forms of assembly’. Tony Bennett thus sees the modern museum as the ‘emblem’ for the emergence of a new set of relations in which ‘a democratic citizenry was rhetorically incorporated into the processes of the state’ (Bennett 1995, 93, 98). The museum’s educational mission was not just in its artefacts and explanatory texts, in its evolutionary sequences and its totalising orders, but in its layout and organisation, promoting a type of public sociability, interaction and discipline among the people, and especially the working classes, that were seen as essential for an orderly modern society. The world’s fairs were even more important in that regard, receiving immense numbers of visitors and actively promoting a sense of national identity.
The national museums created in Europe under the influence of national Romanticism early in the nineteenth century were largely devoted to prehistory and the Middle Ages. It was only after the middle of the nineteenth century that interest in folk culture, already existing at the literary level, was extended to its material aspects, and in that the role of the world's fairs was particularly significant (see Stoklund 2003, 22). ‘The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations’ was held in London in 1851 and was the first truly international example of a genre that originated in the late eighteenth century. Some 14,000 representatives from 27 countries took part, and it received more than six million visitors. It was surpassed by the 1889 Paris World’s Fair, with nearly 62,000 exhibitors from 56 countries and over 32 million visitors (for world’s fairs see Rydell 1984; Rydell and Kroes 2005).

Bjarne Stoklund considers the international exhibitions as hugely important media for visual communication. The techniques they developed were partly adopted by museums, especially by the numerous museums that arose more or less as a result of them, through the interest in preserving the collections of artefacts accumulated for display (Stoklund 2003). In Paris, Ernest Théodore Hamy’s ethnographic museum of the Trocadéro dates from the international exhibition of 1878 and was located in the building erected especially for it. It was revamped as the Musée de l’Homme under Paul Rivet and Georges Henri Rivière for the 1937 exhibition, and it and the new Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires were placed in wings of the building erected for the exhibition, the Palais du Chaillot. The Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie originated with the 1931 colonial exhibition (Cuisenier 2006; Parkin 2005, 168–9, 199–200; Rogan 2003). Sometimes the exhibitions were seen as furthering plans for a particular museum, especially museums of applied art. The London exhibition of 1851 was partly intended to raise questions about the quality of industrial production in the context of a sense of decline in the quality of British craftsmanship. The idea was to make the exhibition permanent to provide high-quality examples of craft that could inspire manufacturers. These considerations resulted in the founding of the South Kensington Museum in 1852, later to be renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum, and it was imitated in the form of numerous arts and crafts museums in central and northern Europe (Stoklund 2003; Thiesse 1999, 206ff).

The London exhibition did not include an ethnographic dimension, but subsequent exhibitions did, in particular that of Paris in 1867. While there are examples of wax mannequins in folk costume on display at earlier world’s fairs, Paris systematised this kind of representation. Competition between national cultures in part at least brought material folk culture to the fore owing to the visual requirement of the exhibition format and the ‘typicality’ exemplified by traditional rural life (already stereotyped through tourism). The Paris organisers requested participating countries to send wax mannequins in folk costumes to be placed in a newly created
section. The costumes were not meant just to symbolise certain national and popular values but also to inspire handicrafts and domestic industry. France displayed 42 costumed mannequins, Russia twelve, Austria–Hungary eleven and Spain eight. The Swedish–Norwegian section attracted great interest, with mannequins made from life models by the sculptor Carl August Söderman arranged in small narrative groups representing popular paintings in the style of the Düsseldorf School, with scenes from country life. The success of the Scandinavian mannequins was repeated at exhibitions in Vienna in 1873 and Philadelphia in 1876 (Wörner 1999; Sandberg 2003; Maure 1993; Stoklund 2003). Paris also introduced the idea of a park with national pavilions alongside the great exhibition hall. The national pavilions to a large extent represented the vernacular architectural styles of the participating countries, Vienna in 1873 planning an ‘ethnographic village’ with houses from all over the world (though only seven appeared) (Stoklund 1999).

Artur Hazelius (1833–1901) applied the mannequin displays to the new kind of ethnographic museum he founded in Stockholm in 1873, devoted to all the Scandinavian countries. He used Söderman’s mannequins and the three-dimensional representations of genre paintings, but now ‘the small narratives were acted out in recreated peasant rooms in the form of dioramas with an open wall facing the audience’ (Stoklund 2003, 21). The idea seems to have come from the wax museums or panopticons that were appearing all over Europe at that time and that were often a mixture of anatomy exhibition, freak show and ‘human zoo’ (Sandberg 2003, 23ff; Bancel et al. 2004). An example is Castan’s Panoptikum, founded in Berlin in 1871, where, besides the usual wax displays, there were also wax anatomy exhibits, live displays of ‘freaks’ and members of exotic ethnic groups as well as curiosities such as elephant tusks, mummies, stuffed alligators and gorillas. There was an obvious relationship with the nineteenth-century travelling wax cabinets and anatomy shows. The 1880s and 1890s were boom years for the wax museum as a bourgeois entertainment.

Hazelius brought his improved displays to the Paris Exhibition of 1878 to great acclaim and thus introduced his museum ideas to a wider audience. The Danish museum pioneer Bernhard Olsen met him there and was strongly influenced by him. Olsen’s background was in the arts and he worked partly as a stage-designer before becoming the artistic director of the Tivoli amusement park from 1868 to 1885. In the Copenhagen Exhibition of Art and Industry of 1879 he was charged with the exhibit of Nordic national costumes (which inspired him to begin a costume collection), and he recreated house interiors realistically with artefacts and wax mannequins. In 1879 he founded the Dansk Folkemuseum, the national ethnographic museum, as well as the first Nordic wax museum, both installed in the same building in Copenhagen.

Hazelius had studied Scandinavian languages in Uppsala. Scandinavianism had a
large role in student life at the time, and he enthusiastically took part in student
meetings throughout the region. Excursions on foot were in fashion, and Hazeliuš
spent many summers getting to know various parts of the Swedish countryside.
During an excursion to Dalecarlia in 1872 he became acutely aware of the changes
taking place in peasant society, and he purchased his first ethnographic artefacts—folk
costumes—in that same year. When he began his museum work Sweden was still a
largely agricultural country, but folk culture had no status in museums and there was
little interest in it. There was a pan-Scandinavian bent to his collecting, with materials
from Norway (united with Sweden under the same crown until 1905) as well as from
Denmark. Indeed, Norway’s most famous folk museum pioneer, Anders Sandvik, was
motivated by seeing consignments of Norwegian artefacts passing through
Lillehammer on their way to Stockholm. Sandvik founded Maihaugen in
Lillehammer in 1904, from a collection begun in 1887.

Hazeliuš’s Skandinavisk-Etnografiska Samlingen opened in 1873; his original
intention was for it to be a museum of folk costume, with life-sized mannequins and
authentic interiors. But it quickly took on a wider content in terms of cultural history,
with objects from all social classes. It was important at a time when there were no
regional or local museums in Sweden, and folk culture had no place in the existing
museums. The museum was given its new name, Nordiska Museet, in 1880, and
moved to its sumptuous new home in 1904. From 1880 Hazeliuš was already working
on the idea of an open-air folk museum. The first building for it was purchased in
1885, and Skansen opened in 1891 with buildings from different parts of the country
and various kinds of Nordic animals, trees and plants. Skansen was envisaged as a
Sweden in microcosm and as a place where cultural and natural history could be
united. Hazeliuš intended that the artefacts displayed should inspire patriotism in its
visitors. He organised festivals on important days in Swedish history, with participants
dressed in folk costumes. Skansen pioneered the annual celebration of the day of the
Swedish flag at a time when there had been an already old and inconclusive debate
about having a national day. It also popularised or introduced other festivals: the Lucia
festival of light, celebrated originally in the west of Sweden on 13 December, was
generalised through its performance in Skansen.³

The open-air folk museum was not an especially original idea in the Scandinavian
context. From the end of the eighteenth century, Chinese pavilions, Gothic ruins,
Greek temples and even rural cottages were to be found in parks and gardens
throughout Europe. It was common in the Nordic countries to take wooden houses
apart and reassemble them on a new site, and a similar procedure was developed in
the first half of the nineteenth century for preserving medieval buildings. A twelfth-
century Norwegian stave church, for example, was sold to the king of Prussia in 1841
and underwent this procedure, and today is a working church in the Polish town of
Karpacz (formerly Krummhübel). Between 1850 and 1860 the general ethnographic
museum of the University of Oslo had begun collecting artefacts from Norwegian folk culture, a collection later transferred to the Norsk Folkemuseum, founded in 1894 by Hans Aal (1896–1946), the keeper of an industrial arts museum. King Oscar II’s collection of historical buildings was established on Bygdøy near Oslo in 1881 (and is now part of the Norsk Folkemuseum). Olsen in Denmark had the idea of an open-air museum from the second half of the 1880s, which was opened as Frilandsmuseet in 1901. Georg Karlin in Lund had opened his own folk museum, Kulturen, in 1882, with an open-air section opening in 1892 (see Maure 1993; Stoklund 2003; Sandberg 2003; Wörner 1999). The importance of Hazélius, then, was not so much in inventing the open-air folk museum. He pioneered the establishment of a comprehensive and scholarly collection of domestic ethnographic artefacts for a national museum. His influence was widespread in the Nordic countries and beyond, and in many ways he created the model for the ethnographic museum devoted to the folk culture of the national territory. In Scandinavia, and in Norway in particular, there was a huge growth in open-air museums between 1890 and 1920.

Skansen arguably helped to incorporate the peasant experience into Swedish heritage at a time when peasant society was irrevocably changing, through emigration, modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. It legitimated the people’s peasant past in a country where the cities were never large and where there was a strong democratic and egalitarian tradition (peasants owned their own land), and where peasant culture could not be ‘ethnicised’ (there was no ethno-linguistic divide between rulers and ruled, as there was to a greater or lesser extent in Ireland, Estonia or Finland, for example).

There is an overlap between folk museums, museums of applied art and wax museums. Some folk museums are housed with museums of applied art. Many of them overlap with museums of applied art containing folk culture collections—whole farmhouse rooms, for example—and folk museums often aimed to stimulate the revival of rural crafts. The folk museums were projects for popular education but, unlike museums of applied art that tried to develop good taste, they also aimed at promoting national revival. They used many of the same techniques as the wax museums and there was a continuum between education on the one hand and entertainment on the other in both kinds of museum, as indeed there was in the world’s fairs (Stoklund 2003, 33; Sandberg 2003, passim).

Peasants and ‘savages’ in world’s fairs

Irish cities (except for Belfast and, to a lesser extent, Derry) stagnated after the Great Famine of the 1840s, and for the next century or so most Irish peasants experienced the city for the first time in America. It is interesting that perhaps one of the first
ambitious attempts at ethnographic representation of Irish peasants in exhibition form was in Chicago, at the World’s Columbian Exhibition of 1893. The patriotic backdrop to the exhibition was very clear: Columbus Day was celebrated for the first time during the exhibition and it also hosted one of the earliest public recitations of ‘The Pledge of Allegiance to the United States Flag’, written earlier that year by Francis J. Bellamy. Nearly 28 million people visited the exhibition. Previous exhibitions had seen popular amusements set up by hucksters and entrepreneurs outside the formal exhibition, undermining in the eyes of the organisers the exhibition’s educational message. Chicago for the first time, and for sound commercial reasons, installed popular amusements in the heart of the exhibition, with the famous Midway Plaisance, which helped to legitimate the nascent American mass culture.

The Midway Plaisance included carnival rides, the world’s first Ferris wheel and the ‘Street in Cairo’, which had a performance of belly-dancing and was the most successful Midway attraction. The list of exhibits from the official catalogue was extensive.4 Franz Boas and Frederick W. Putnam of the Peabody Museum brought Kwakiutl Indians from British Columbia to perform, and among the replica villages from all over the world were two from Ireland.

The idea of a zoological spectacle that would also display exotic populations is found in the 1870s in several European countries and is particularly associated with Carl Hagenbeck, director of the Hamburg zoo. The success of the first of his exhibitions (of ‘Samoaans’ and ‘Lapps’) was such that from 1876 he sent agents to Egyptian Sudan in order to bring back animals and ‘Nubians’. In August 1877 fourteen ‘Nubians’ accompanied by exotic animals from Somalia and the Sudan were exhibited in the Jardin d’Acclimatation in Paris (which was later to be the site for the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires) as well as in London and Berlin, to huge acclaim. They were to be followed by more Sami, Fuegians, Zulus and North American Indians (‘Redskins’), sent by traders who specialised in this type of show in various European countries. Such ethnographic attractions were very popular at world’s fairs and colonial exhibitions, and often itinerant troupes of ‘ethnographic’ performers were formed which toured widely, in the provinces as well as in the metropolises (for example, the Somalis at the Irish International Exhibition in Dublin in 1907). In many ways these exhibitions can be seen as forerunners of theme parks. Their success derived from the notion of the ‘savage’ (sometimes with Rousseauian nuances), from scientific racism and from the denigration of indigenous peoples conquered in the building of colonial empires (Bancel et al. 2000; 2004).

The world’s fairs commodified diversity. The most important ones took place in the major cities of the chief industrial, political and colonial powers and asserted their civilisation and technological progress. As Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (2006, 210) cogently expresses it, ‘the world’s fairs discharged an exemplary role: they didactically exposed the advancement of some and the backwardness of others; technology in the hands of
some, exoticism as the privilege of others’. For the major powers, neither peasant nor tribal peoples were of direct symbolic importance; indeed, they were intermingled in the entertaining displays of diversity that attracted the wider public in the early commercialised popular culture exemplified by the Midway Plaisance. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to equate representations of peasant and ‘savage’. The savage was framed by a scientific and a popular racism and by colonial domination. If ancestral, the savage was ancestral in an evolutionary sense. The European peasant of Midway Plaisance appealed genealogically, as it were, to the nostalgia and the relative rootlessness of an immigrant society and helped to legitimize the ‘old country’ heritage of many Americans. At the same time the progress that emigration to America made possible was implicit. The peasant displays of the pavilions of smaller or newer European countries, on the other hand, were in keeping with the positive and Romantic ideas that underpinned national identity and were associated with the largely agricultural products that these countries, late to industrialise, were promoting.

‘Home industries’

Exhibit no. 2 of the Midway Plaisance was described in the catalogue of the World’s Columbian Exhibition as follows:

President, the Countess of Aberdeen.
Grouped around the four sides of an ancient square, in the midst of which rises the Castle Blarney, are typical peasant cottages in which, especially in the industrial part, can be seen the life and labor of the frugal and industrious poor. In these humble domiciles one hears the bright sallies of wit and the keen repartee from Irish lassies who plainly have no need to kiss the Blarney stone. Exquisite laces, beautiful carvings, grow before the eye, while rare old relics of the days gone by adorn many rooms. In the village hall the music of the Irish harp accompanies sweet voices singing Irish national melodies.

Exhibits in the Village—In this village may be seen a number of Irish peasant girls working at their various occupations, such as needle point lace making from the Presentation Convent Youghal, County Cork; tambour and run lace making . . .’

Also demonstrated were various other kinds of lace-making, knitting, wood-carving, jewellery-making and glass-engraving. A working dairy was managed by three students from the Munster Dairy School. The catalogue specified that the proceeds of the village, ‘of which Lady Aberdeen is the guiding spirit’, would go to the establishment
and development of home industries in Ireland.

Exhibit no. 9 was described in the catalogue as follows:

‘The Irish Village and Donegal Castle
Mrs Ernest Hart, Founder and Honorary Member of the Donegal Industrial Fund, Concessionaire.

The Irish Village and Donegal Castle contain a representative exhibit of Irish industry, art and antiquity. The village is entered by a mediaeval gateway, which is an exact reproduction of the St Lawrence Gate in Drogheda, on passing which the visitor enters a street of industrial cottages picturesquely grouped around the village green, on which is placed the carved market cross. Here jigs are frequently danced by the villagers to the stirring music of the Irish piper.’

Dyeing, carding, spinning and weaving homspuns was carried on in one cottage, lace-making in another, wood-carving and designing of Celtic crosses, linen-weaving, sprigging, embroidery, etc. in more cottages. There was also a village smithy making artistic ironwork, a cottage restaurant, and an exact reproduction of the Wishing Chair of the Giant’s Causeway. Also on the site was a 100ft reproduction of a round tower. ‘The aim and object of the Irish village’, according to the catalogue,

‘is to show the possibilities of Ireland by exhibiting some of her best work of both the past and the present, and to illustrate the fact that in her industrial development lies her chief hope. The profits of the village will be devoted to the furtherance of the industrial and technical teaching work of the Donegal Industrial Fund, a philanthropic organization founded ten years ago by Mrs Ernest Hart, and which has done pioneer work and exercised considerable influence.’

The origin of the Irish villages is to be found in philanthropic organisations founded by two British women. There had been philanthropic efforts by upper-class women to alleviate Irish distress through the development of cottage industries from the time of the Great Famine. Both the Donegal Industrial Fund and the Irish Industries Association were Victorian organisations concerned with order, morality and hygiene, and they shared the belief that the promotion of cottage crafts would further these concerns (Helland 2007, 2). The former was founded by Alice Rowland Hart, who came from an English merchant family, and who with her husband, an eminent Jewish doctor and reformer, toured poverty-stricken parts of Ireland in 1883. Influenced by the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris, she decided to develop and improve spinning, weaving, knitting and embroidery in the Congested Districts of Donegal by establishing schools and classes in villages and providing improved
designs and materials.\textsuperscript{6} She opened a shop in London in 1885 where the finished products could be sold—Donegal House, just off Oxford Street (\textit{ibid.}, 5, 14–15, 26).

At the International Inventions Exhibition in London in 1885, the Fund had a large room in which ‘native Irish girls’ dressed in Irish fabrics spun and wove (\textit{ibid.}, 34). Ernest Hart was one of the organisers of the Irish Exhibition held in London in 1888, for which Alice Hart had a facsimile Donegal village built consisting of an ‘irregular street’ and twelve thatched houses of stone—with fires burning imported Irish turf—in which Irish craft-workers demonstrated their skills and sold their products (\textit{ibid.}, 50–1, 56). For the Chicago exhibition, Mrs Hart acquired a plot of some 25,000 square feet near the entrance to the Midway Plaisance for the building of her village, which was very successful and won six awards (\textit{ibid.}). In 1895 Mrs Hart contributed to the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society of Ireland in Dublin.

The Irish Industries Association was a less entrepreneurial and more aristocratic body that explicitly linked Irish rural craft and English high fashion. It was founded by a Scottish aristocrat, Ishbel, countess of Aberdeen, whose husband was viceroy of Ireland from February to August 1886 and again from 1906 to 1915. During the first such period she founded the Association to coincide with the preparation of a stall to represent Irish women’s industries at the forthcoming International Exhibition in Edinburgh, which was very successful. She remained the Association’s president until 1897, during which time a number of other aristocrats became well known as its patrons. Garden parties in which guests wore Irish fabrics—the 1886 one in the Viceregal Lodge in Dublin had 2,000 guests—and exhibitions and sales in the London townhouses of aristocrats associated with Ireland were among the means used to promote rural crafts.

For the Chicago world’s fair she employed Irish craftswomen who could perform publicly. She fell out with Mrs Hart over the Chicago exhibit, intending that only her own would represent Irish crafts. Instead there were two such exhibits. Hers was situated on one of the Midway’s busiest thoroughfares. Each of the replica Irish cottages that formed a village around the model of Blarney Castle was supposedly based on an original; a replica of her own holiday home near Queenstown was in the centre (\textit{ibid.}, 101–2). The Association clearly saw its market as being largely English. The emphasis on lace in all its exhibitions and the importance of aristocratic patronage are self-explanatory (\textit{ibid.}, 125ff). It did not exhibit in Dublin, for example, though in 1899 it held an exhibition in Belfast’s Ulster Hall (\textit{ibid.}, 119). In 1905 it received a royal warrant as furnishers of Irish-made goods to the king and henceforth became the Royal Irish Industries Association (\textit{ibid.}, 125). Much as the Congested Districts Board is seen as an example of ‘constructive Unionism’ designed to ‘kill Home Rule by kindness’, Janice Helland considers the Association as ‘a Dublin Castle outreach programme’ and ‘fundamentally a colonial project’ (\textit{ibid.}, 123). It declined with the loss of Lady Aberdeen’s patronage when she left Ireland in 1915 (\textit{ibid.}, 133).
The Irish International Exhibition held in Dublin in 1907 had a Home Industries pavilion, and beside it stood a model village hospital and model artisans’ and labourers’ cottages. A thatched gable-hearth ‘Irish cottage’ was also built in the grounds (Siggins 2007, 32, 58, 72, 105). There were 177 home industries entries, with manufacturers of linen, lace, tweeds, carpets, crochet and embroidery, all presided over by Lady Aberdeen. The most popular attraction at the exhibition was the Somali village, inhabited by several families who went about typical daily tasks and made crafts that were sold to the visitors (ibid., 61–5, 80, 85, 118). There were also the usual attractions of the Midway kind.

The activities of the Donegal Industrial Fund and the Irish Industries Association gradually declined at the beginning of the new century, and were displaced by projects with a more obviously cultural nationalist orientation (ibid., 65). The various cultural festivals associated with the Gaelic Revival—the Gaelic League’s Oireachtas and feiseanna—actively promoted arts and crafts from 1902, with particular emphasis on Irish-speaking districts. 7 In 1904 Feis na nGleann, held in the Glens of Antrim, included exhibitions and displays of Irish arts and crafts, which became the norm in the Gaelic League’s annual cultural festival, the Oireachtas (McBrinn 2006–7). Visiting the Oireachtas Industrial Exhibition of 1905, the Manchester Guardian’s correspondent noted:

‘The imperfect embroideries and rough home-spuns of the Congested Districts faced the tapestries, types, and bindings of the Dun Emir [sic] looms and presses. Miss Purser’s stained-glass windows and panels, with their reminiscences of Botticelli, Angelio [sic], and mediaeval tapestry, were faced by Belfast pocket-handkerchiefs and flanked by pillars of soap and pyramids of plate polish. But the unifying idea was there—the idea of Irish self-help’ (Ó Súilleabáin 1984, 138). 8

**Folklife collections: the National Museum of Ireland and the Ulster Folk Museum**

From the late 1920s Adolf Mahr (an Austrian archaeologist who headed the museum from 1934—and the German Nazis in Ireland until 1939) was instrumental in assembling a folklife collection in the National Museum of Ireland based on previous holdings. The museum later collaborated with the Irish Folklore Commission and with the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, which had surveyed craft-workers. Still photography and film along with field surveys, such as those of the Swedish ethnologists Åke Campbell and Albert Nilsson (Eskeröd) in the 1930s and the village surveys by the School of Architecture, UCD, in the 1940s, added further documentation. The first major exhibition of folklife material was displayed in 1937
and a permanent exhibition from 1950. A.T. Lucas (1911–86), later director of the National Museum, was put in charge in 1947, the first full-time appointment, though the material was part of the Irish Antiquities Division until 1974, when a separate Irish Folklife Division was created (Lucas 1984).

In 2001 the collection—the largest in Ireland and amounting to some 50,000 artefacts—was permanently housed in a new branch of the National Museum, the Museum of Irish Country Life, after decades of neglect. It is situated at Turlough Park House, a few miles from Castlebar, Co. Mayo. It is a fairly conventional indoor museum, with a new purpose-built gallery and the lower floor of the Victorian mansion for the exhibits, while the upper floor is used for administration. The restricted space of the museum site and the fact that the museum itself is not an independent institution may have implications for its future development. Its official name is something of a misnomer since its holdings are not representative of rural life as a whole. According to its website, the museum ‘tells the story of our rural ancestors from the mid 19th to the mid 20th century’ and ‘through clothing, tools, domestic furniture and other artefacts you can glimpse this vanishing way of life’ (www.museum.ie/education [2008]). Its exhibitions ‘portray the lives of ordinary people who lived in rural Ireland’ in this period, with emphasis ‘on the continuity of lifestyles, which were established for several hundred years and which lasted well into the 20th century’ (www.museum.ie/countrylife [2008]). It was established in the west for essentially political reasons, but has been very successful in attracting visitors. It has a very active programme of exhibitions and activities—typical of open-air museums—such as craft demonstrations.

The belated recognition of folklife can be explained by the fact that its artefacts unavoidably linked it to the peasant condition. The intangible nature of folklore lent itself to the national-popular, where traditions recorded from peasants nevertheless ‘transcended’ their social condition and were used to assert the continuation of a national tradition. Folklore was a resource for creating a national literature. Folklife developed as a research field in a lower key, far removed from cultural revolutions since it did not challenge any existing hegemony. It could be read in evolutionary terms as primitive survival, as Emyr Estyn Evans did following Tylor and nineteenth-century anthropological theory, and not as the remnants of a vanishing glory, as cultural nationalists read folklore (the ‘devolutionary premise’, as Alan Dundes (1975) termed it).

Estyn Evans (1905–89) was the key figure in the development of folklife studies in Northern Ireland. Born on the Welsh borders, with a background in geography, archaeology and anthropology, he arrived in Queen’s University, Belfast, in 1928 to set up a department of geography. As a student he had visited Skansen and had conceived the idea for such a museum in Northern Ireland, seeing Ireland as a periphery in which prehistoric and medieval relics had survived (Evans 1996, 11). He published
the first major book in the field of Irish folklife in 1942, *Irish heritage*. By 1955 he had established the journal *Ulster Folklife* and pushed for the creation of a folk museum. He also campaigned for the teaching of anthropology in Queen’s. His books were widely read, especially *Irish folk ways* (1957), which gives a perspective of thousands of years on Irish folk culture. Evans saw the fact that Ireland was in essence a peasant society as being crucial to the retention of Irish folk culture (see McManus 2000). He saw the province of Ulster as differing both from the rest of Ireland and from Britain in its geography, prehistory and history (Evans 1984, 8).

The Ulster Folk Museum was founded in 1958; even if it was envisaged long before, its moment arrived with the emergence of a post-war movement in museums of everyday life in the UK. It consists of representative vernacular buildings furnished and decorated as they would have been around 1900 and provides demonstrations of traditional arts and crafts. The region covered is the historic nine-county province of Ulster, perhaps owing to Evans’s belief in Ulster’s difference from the rest of Ireland, or to the fact that the Ulster Plantation also included Donegal and Cavan, while Monaghan had a large and historically significant Protestant population (each of these three counties, of course, being largely Catholic, was excluded from Northern Ireland as established by the Government of Ireland Act of 1920). Established under the Stormont government, the museum can be seen as ‘indicative of a confidence in the regional status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom’ (Kirkland 1996, 136), but at the same time the act establishing it specified its mission as ‘illustrating the way of life, past and present, and the traditions of the people of Northern Ireland’. The period reflected in the presentation of the buildings ‘is the earliest period for which a sufficiently complete inventory can be gathered together’ (Gailey 1984), standard practice in such museums. The centre of the complex of buildings is Cultra Manor, and there are exhibition centres for the display of traditional artefacts. Merged with the Belfast Transport Museum to form the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in 1967, it was more recently amalgamated with other heritage institutions in the umbrella grouping of the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland. Its first two directors, George B. Thompson and Alan Gailey, were both geographers by training and former students of Evans’s. With a large staff of curators and researchers, it is the major centre for folklife research in Ireland.

**Folk museums: whose voice?**

Folk museums were intended to be both modern and national (or regional within the national frame): there may be as many as 2,000 in Europe today (Gailey 1998). The folk museum (and by extension almost any national museum) implicitly asserts an underlying unity behind the surface diversity of the region or nation, and intimates
the fate of regional cultures synthesised into national culture. Referring to a different museum of national culture, the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, Néstor García Canclini (1995, 130) asks whether national identity can be affirmed ‘without reducing ethnic and regional particularities to a constructed common denominator’. It is true, too, that the symbolism is unfortunate when the museum is located around a manor (as in the case of both the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Museum of Irish Country Life): ‘the museum’s controlling ideological centre, a bourgeois country house under whose controlling gaze there is organized a harmonious set of relationships—between town and country, agriculture and industry, for example, as well as between classes . . .’, as Bennett (1995, 113–14) writes of a similar institution in England. These museums nevertheless were shaped first and foremost by the dominant international ethnological and museological discourses, by the physical constraints of their sites and by the need to display their collections.

In some ways they have fared better than ethnographic museums devoted to other cultures. The latter have suffered sustained critiques and have found themselves forced to engage with the argument that they are products of colonialism and imperialism, even of racism, with demands that cultural property be repatriated, and sometimes with allegations of unseemly relationships with art dealers. No ethnographic museum worthy of the name can be indifferent to these concerns today. The gallery devoted to the Patagonian Indians in the Juan B. Ambrosetti Ethnographic Museum of the University of Buenos Aires, for example, explains their fate in a large caption: ‘Those peoples who fascinated Westerners no longer exist. They were massacred in a few decades, not by the conquistadors of the 16th century but by our own grandfathers less than a hundred years ago’. Ethnographic museums now commonly seek a respectful relationship with the communities of origin of their collections, especially with ‘fourth world’ peoples. A common strategy to escape these contradictions has been to place ethnographic collections in an aesthetic frame; as art, they carry a transcendent universal value—what Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) relativises as ‘European universalism’—that neatly sidesteps these other troubling questions. One of the reasons why the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris has attracted so much controversy is precisely because these questions appear to have been given little attention (see de l’Etoile 2007, passim; Price 2007).

The Nordic countries, uniquely in the western European context, have faced the question of representing their own ‘fourth world’ people, the Sami, in museums. Sápmi, the standing exhibition devoted to them in Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, for example, identifies them with other marginalised and exploited indigenous people and speaks of ‘a story of possibilities and difficulties, power and resistance, rights and unrighteousness’. Throughout the exhibition, large placards ask provocative questions that go to the heart of representation: ‘Who was first?’, ‘Whose lands?’, ‘Whose story?’, ‘Whose history?’, ‘Whose eyes?’, Whose voice?’, ‘Whose cultural heritage?’,
'Who is Swedish?' Nearby in Skansen, beside the ‘Lapp camp’, originally from the province of Jämtland, are two placards explaining ‘Sami people today’ and asking ‘Vem är same?’ (‘Who is Sami?’), information that does not really need to be given and a question that does not need to be asked about the constructors of any of the other vernacular buildings on the site.10

The same provisos apply to national folklore archives and folk museums. In their origins they were cultural nationalist projects that asserted an underlying national unity in their materials; this is now practically a truism owing to the extensive scholarly literature on the relationship between folklore studies and cultural nationalism (representative examples include Anttonen 2005, Bausinger 1993, Herzfeld 1982, Ó Giolláin 2000, Prats 1988 and Wilson 1976). We can repeat the question posed in the Nordiska Museet’s Sápmi exhibition: whose voice? Whose voice do we hear in folklore archives and whose representations do we find in folk museums? It goes without saying that the frame of reference was not that of the communities concerned. The information in the archives was elicited by questions that reflected the interests of the collector of the time, and the static representations of folk culture that appear both in archives and folk museums seem to reflect a certain cultural pessimism: there was not a sense of culture as being a dynamic system but rather changes were seen as degeneration. By focusing on artefacts and oral utterances objectified in written texts, something unchanging was constructed that seemed to resist the disintegration of traditional bonds in a modern individualising society.11

The challenge for many museums today is to remain relevant in a changing world. Representations of the ‘other’ have become much more problematic; Gianni Vattimo argues that modernity ends when it is no longer possible to speak of a unitary history, which implied the existence of a supreme, unifying viewpoint. In the light of the pluralisation of viewpoints experienced by and in the West, this is no longer tenable (Vattimo 2000, 8–10, 13; cf. Chakrabarty 2000). The ‘other’ is nowhere and everywhere. Jean Franco (1999, 209–10) cogently expresses these implications for folk culture:

‘Migrations, the mixing of high-tech and “primitive”, of mass-mediated and oral culture, the scrambling of languages as they cross borders, the scrambling of social classes that can no longer be securely stratified except through taste—all this has seriously compromised any notion of an undiluted popular culture “made by the people themselves” (to use Raymond Williams’s phrase)’.

With the decline of peasant society in the West, folk culture seems more and more remote from highly urbanised societies, and folk museums appear more and more like specialised historical museums. At the same time, as globalisation cuts across the previous prerogatives of nation-states, museums may try to repeat their role of the
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as synthesisers of new forms of community. The hundreds of new ethnographic museums founded in Spain since the restoration of democracy testify to that; ‘Every political entity, from the smallest municipalities to the autonomous communities, has erected an ethnographic museum to illustrate its identity’ (Llopart 2000, 233). In France and in Germany the transformations of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (1937–2005) into the Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée (see Segalen 2005 and Colardelle 2002) and of the Museum für Volkskunde (under different names 1889–1999) into the Museum Europäischer Kulturen (Tietmeyer 2006) can be seen in that light as part of projects to build European identity.

Notes
1. For a comprehensive and authoritative study of the Irish Folklore Commission see Briody 2007.
2. For an important recent study of ethnographic museums, especially in France, see de l’Estoile 2007. For the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires see Segalen 2005. For the controversies associated with the new Musée du Quai Branly, which has taken over the ethnographic collections of the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, see de l’Estoile 2007 and Price 2007.
3. The discussion on Hazelius and Nordic models is based on Sandberg 2003, Maure 1993, Stoklund 2003, Wörner 1999, Bergman 2000 and Medelius 1998. A recent important study that I was unable to consult in the writing of this paper is Rentzhog 2007.
5. For example, the Irish Village of the Irish Industries Association was situated next to the Libbey Glass Co. display, the Japanese Bazaar, the Hagenbeck Animal Show and the Venice Murano Co., and near the Samoan Islanders and the Javanese Settlement.
6. For craft industries and the Congested Districts Board see Breathnach 2005, 55–72.
7. The first Oireachtas was held in 1897. The Gaelic League decided in 1898 that at
least one local feis be held annually in each Irish-speaking county; the first, Feis Mhaigh Chromtha, in Macroom, Co. Cork, occurring that same year (Ó Súilleabháin 1984, 194).

8. Dun Emer Industries was set up in 1902 by Evelyn Gleeson and Susan and Elizabeth Yeats. The notion of ‘Irish self-help’ is at the origin of the name of the political party founded in 1901, Sinn Féin (‘ourselves’).

9. Noted on a visit in September 2007. The original reads: ‘Esos pueblos, que fascinaron a los occidentales, ya no están. Fueron masacrados en pocas décadas y no por los conquistadores del siglo XVI, sino por nuestros abuelos y hace menos de 100 años’.


11. I discuss the representation of traditional culture in more detail in the conclusion to my An Dúchas agus an Domhan (2005), pp 125ff.

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