

STORIES OF THE SEA:
REFLECTIONS ON A RESEARCH PROJECT
ON THE SUBJECT OF MARITIME MEMORATES

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0. Introduction

Between September 2010 and May 2013, the Research Institute for Irish and Celtic Studies at the University of Ulster hosted a research project entitled ‘Stories of the Sea: A Typological Study of Maritime Memorates in Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic Folklore Traditions’. The authors of the present paper directed the project; Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, University College Dublin, and John Shaw, University of Edinburgh, acted as consultants; Séamas Ó Catháin, and Liam Mac Mathúna of University College Dublin, together with Margaret Mackay and Caithlin Macaulay, University of Edinburgh, were members of the International Advisory Board.¹

The project succeeded in identifying, selecting, transcribing, editing and, where necessary, translating three hundred stories concerned with extraordinary happenings at sea, involving phantom boats, sea ghosts, speaking seals and mermaids, water beasts and water monsters, and other supernatural characters. A detailed description of what kind of stories one could expect from the fishermen is found in *The Handbook of Irish Folklore*:

Fishermen are wont to tell tales about their own adventures or those of others. Examples: supernatural sights (lights, strange boats, drowned fishermen, strange men, riders, processions, animals or lands) seen at sea; very large fish, animals (rats), or objects caught by fishermen; strange sounds heard. These narratives may also deal with great storms, cold, fog, or other rigours encountered while fishing; escapes from death or disaster, rescues; great fish catches; humorous incidents, other adventures.

(Ó Súilleabháin 1942: 28)

¹ We gratefully acknowledge the support of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the funders of the project, and the important contributions of our researchers, Séamus Mac Floinn and Pádraig Ó Tiarnaigh. Thanks also to Ailbhe Ó Corráin (Director, Irish & Celtic Studies Research Institute, Ulster University), Ríonach Uí Ógáin (Director, National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin), Anna Bale (National Folklore Collection Audio Archive, University College Dublin), and Caroline Milligan (Copyright Officer, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh).

The database of stories constituting the project's content has been made available online,² and the results have also been publicised at a number of public outreach events for non-academic audiences,³ as well as at sessions on the maritime folklore of Ireland and Scotland at various conferences and colloquia.⁴ In what follows, we outline the nature of the project, its theoretical implications, and the methodological framework employed in carrying it out. The first part will be devoted to the nature of a memorate as a folklore genre; the second and third parts will focus on related categories which underpin the methodological framework used in organising the data systematically.

1. What a memorate is: theoretical deliberations

The memorate is defined by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1934: 261) as a personal first-hand account of an experience or encounter with the supernatural and is concerned with various phenomena of human life, including experiences at sea and other accounts which occur in liminal spatio-temporal contexts, such as sea-shores, streams, fords and bridges. The stories typically involve encounters with ghosts and other beings, and portents of death symbolised by phantom boats. The collection of maritime memorates in our study is classified according to a number of exemplary themes, such as mermaids, seals and seal legends, enchanted islands, enchanted ships, water animals and sea monsters, gales, winds and storms, ghosts and spirits, shipwrecks, drownings, the sea, fish/fishing etc.

The example below is a short memorate in line with von Sydow's 'classical' definition. There are no extraneous or secondary details of the kind which are sometimes added later during the course of telling and retelling. It was collected by Seosamh Ó Dálaigh from the sixty year old fisherman Pádraig ('Peats Tom') Ó Cearnaigh of the Great Blasket Island in June 1940 (IFC 701: 299-300):

² See <http://www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/storiesofthesea>.

³ We have convened project roadshows that included public lectures and exhibition of the project's materials at Inishowen Maritime Museum, Greencastle, Ireland on 7 May 2011 and Ionad Chaluim Cille Ìle on the Isle of Islay, Scotland, on 10 May 2013. Other events organised by the project included a public lecture by Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh at the Ulster University Belfast Campus on 15 December 2010 as well as talks by Maxim Fomin at the Ulster University Magee Campus on 14 August 2013 within the confines of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann – International Irish Music Festival (14 August 2013) and The Pan-Celtic International Festival (21 April 2014).

⁴ The project's major undertakings included organising two panel sessions on 'Maritime folklore and mythology in Celtic and Indo-European' at the 14th International Congress of Celtic Studies (Maynooth, 2 August 2011) and the 3rd AASE International Congress (Yerevan, 5 October 2011) and taking part in Panel 314 'Coasts of the Future' at the 10th SIEF International Congress 'People make Places' (Lisbon, 17 April 2011).

Bhíos féin is Muiris Cuainí ag dul 'on bhfaill lá agus bhí seol ar an naomhóg againn agus chonac féin naomhóg triúir im choinne agus í ag déanamh orainn. Agus ní bheadh a bhac orm iad a dh'aithniúint dar liom dá dtógfainn aon cheann mór dóibh. Bhí an fear eile i mbun an tseoil, agus ní raibh aon radharc aige ortha agus ní dúirt aon ní leis. Bhí sí ag déanamh orainn cruinn díreach agus nuair a bhí sí ana-gheairid dúinn ghaibh sí lastuaidh dúinn. Agus chuaigh a tosach ar scáth an tseoil orm ar dtúis agus bhí a deireadh le feiscint agam, agus nuair a chuaigh a deireadh ar scáth an tseoil bhí súil agam go bhfeicfínn a tosach ach ní raibh sé le feiscint agam. Leagadh an seol láithreach ansan, agus ní raibh aon phioc ann di. N'fheacaigh Muiris Cuainí ó thúis deireadh í.

(Mac Cárthaigh 1999: 176, 'An Bád Sí')

Myself and Muiris Cuainí set off one day for the cliff in the boat with the sail raised. I saw a three-man curragh coming towards us. I felt it should be easy to make out who they were if I looked carefully. The other man was tending to the sail at the time and I said nothing to him. She was heading directly towards us, and when she got very close she swung away to our starboard. As she did so her bow passed out of sight behind our sail and then her stern, and I expected to see her bow emerge on the other side of the sail, but it didn't. We lowered the sail immediately, but there was no trace of it. At no stage did Muiris Cuainí ever see her.

(Mac Cárthaigh 1999: 168, 'The Fairy Boat')

The following points of definition should be noted:

- 1) It is a personal, first-hand account:
Bhíos féin is Muiris Cuainí ag dul 'on bhfaill lá ... agus chonac ...
- 2) There is a supernatural encounter with another boat which comes very close to them and which the narrator clearly sees:
Chonac féin naomhóg triúir im choinne agus í ag déanamh orainn ... nuair a bhí sí ana-ghairid dúinn, ghaibh sí lastuaidh dúinn.
- 3) The supernatural boat disappears without trace despite steps being taken to locate it:
... nuair a chuaigh a deireadh ar scáth an tseoil bhí súil agam go bhfeicfínn a tosach ach ní raibh sé le feiscint agam. Leagadh an seol láithreach ansan, ach ní raibh aon phioc ann di.

- 4) It contains a typical personal digression or rationalisation on the part of the narrator which takes the form of narrative telescoping. The teller pulls back to reflect upon feelings, fears and rationalisations experienced during the event before continuing on with the story:

Agus ní bheadh a bhac orm iad a dh'aithniúint dar liom dá dtógfainn aon cheann mór dóibh.

- 5) It has psychological veracity; that is, it appears to be truthful. Certain stylistic features underpin its trustworthiness. A specific person (*Muiris Cuainí*) is named and a particular local landmark is mentioned (*an fhaill*). It is told in a clear, precise and matter-of-fact style with no hint of exaggeration. The conditions under which the supernatural event occurred are presented simply and starkly. The teller saw the boat and is able to describe it as a three-man curragh. Visibility at sea appears to have been excellent. It was not dark or dusky and the teller is not hindered either physically or mentally in any way. His companion did not see the boat and he does not tell him that he has seen it (visual and auditory). This is repeated twice, once quite early on when the teller sights the boat and in the final sentence. This adds veracity to the story and it does not seem to have been added to in the telling/retelling by providing a further witness to the event as often happens in other memorates:

Bhí an fear eile i mbun an tseoil, agus ní raibh aon radharc aige ortha agus ní dúirt aon ní leis... N'fheacaigh Muiris Cuainí ó thúis deireadh í.

2. Setting up the context for the memorate's telling

Whilst the definition of a memorate given above adheres to von Sydow's definition, there are some methodological difficulties with it. The question arises if it is not too narrow in confining the account to the experiencer of the supernatural event alone. In our research we have sought to be inclusive and have at times deviated from this classical definition by including stories which have a high level of credibility and fulfil other relevant criteria. Before giving an example of a related category, called a 'fabulate', it should be said that it is difficult to exclusively focus on the stories without taking into account the circumstances and contexts which led to their collection and preservation. Taking the phenomenon of folklore collection in its entirety, one cannot imagine that the stories related in the first person were recorded in an absolute vacuum – and were then made available to the audience through written, print and now digital media – without any encouragement or sometimes intrusion of a medium or a transmitting agent.

In this connection, it is necessary that we take into account the figure of the folklore collector, working hand-in-hand with an informant, who makes the story available to the audience. The multiple tasks of enquiring, probably enticing, interviewing, questioning, writing down or recording the answers, editing the written accounts, checking the edited material, presenting the data to the audience and selecting a format for the presentation – all such tasks, performed in stages and over a period of time, take the story away from its immediate domain, from the storyteller and his exterior setting, and transform them into an artificial construct, a mixed creation of the enquiring mind of the recorder and the words of the speaker.

Having thus established the necessity of the existence of the mutually dependent relationship between the informant and the collector, one has to bear in mind the character of such a relationship: there is a bond of frankness, friendship and openness between the two.⁵ The example of James Delargy talking about his devotion to folklore collection and how it was possible for him to find a connection with Seán Ó Conaill comes to mind. As is to be seen from the citation below, Delargy considered his mission to be important, describing it as a “bold enterprise” for an Ulsterman. He was lucky to find a confident informant who was totally responsive to his requests, a man with an in-depth knowledge of oral tradition, showing full respect for it:

I mí na Lúnasa 1925, do bheartúos ar thabhairt i ndáiríribh faoi sheanchas agus fé sgéalta Sheáin a scríobh. Tuigeadh dom gur mhór an feall dom é dá scaoilinn leo... Ní raibh éinne ann chun cabhrúithe liom, ná chun mé threóru i gcúrsaibh ealadhan an bhéaloideasa, ach do bhí fonn orm chun na hoibre, agus do shocruíos m'aighe ar an ngnó a dhéanamh chomh mhaith agus dob' fhéidir liom é. Ba dhána an mhaise é d'Ultach ó íochtar Éireann, agus d'fhear nár tógadh le Gaeilge, tabhairt faoi bhéaloideas sheanduine ó Íbh Ráthach a chnuasach. Dob é rud a spreag chuige mé ná go rabhas láidir air mara ndéanfainn-se é ná déanfí go brách é... Do thuig Seán Ó Conaill cad a bhí uaim. Duine ab eadh é go raibh uaisleacht na sean-aimsire ann, agus urraim mhór aige do léinn béil na seana-mhuintire. Má bhí fonn orm-sa chun a chuid seana-scéalta a scríobh sara gcaillítí (sic) iad, bhí fonn air féin dá réir iad a thabhairt/túirt dom, agus misneach a chur orm chun na hoibre.

(Ó Duilearga 1948: xiii-xiv)

It was in August 1925 that I decided in earnest to write down Seán's stories. I was convinced that it would be a great dereliction on my part

⁵ Cp. Uí Ógáin (2013: 117) who confesses “that collecting folklore was a two-way process necessitating mutual respect between the collector and the informant”.

to let them slip away... I had no one to help me or to guide me in the scientific methods of folklore-collecting but I was eager for the work and I made up my mind to do it as well as I could. It was a bold enterprise for an Ulsterman from the far North of Ireland and one who had not been brought up to speak Irish to undertake the recording of the folklore of an old man of Iveragh. I was encouraged to do it by my strong conviction that if I did not do it, it would never be done... Seán Ó Conaill understood what I wanted. He was a man of old-time nobility with great respect for the oral tradition of the past generations. If I was eager to write down his folktales lest they be lost, he was as eager to give them to me and to encourage me in the work.

(Ó Duilearga 1981: v-vi)

This close relationship was the cornerstone of the success of Delargy's mission: the co-operation of informant and collector working together as a close-knit unit, an ideal combination of a collector serving as medium of transmission and an informant being a treasure trove of lore to be revealed and recorded.

Beyond this particular discourse which existed along the axis of 'informant-collector' mutual regard and relationship, the memorates under investigation were born out of the collective pool of stories that belonged to neighbouring households – in the traditional setting, a household was an extended family of at least three generations – that used to live close by one another and used to share one fireplace during the long winter nights of social gathering, storytelling and entertainment that involved the majority of members of the local community (Ir. *airneán, céilí*).

Another factor that shaped the formation of memorates was the origin of such stories within a professional community. In many instances the stories were based on or served as explanations of the provenance of particular professional taboos and regulations that surrounded the welfare and proper functioning of such communities, preventing them from perishing in the open sea, destruction of fishing equipment and/or the loss of income.

Professional contexts could only have existed in a certain exterior setting, instigated by verbal exchanges of an occupational nature. Hence, gatherings in which maritime memorates were told were normally supervised by experienced members of, for example, a fishing crew, who were considered to be the guardians of the old tradition and capable of finding solutions to problems when they arose. The opinion of the old and/or experienced members of the crew was always adhered to and it was vital to have such a person on board the fishing vessel when at sea. It is important to underline that their stories were a reaction to specific circumstances, a necessary component of their professional everyday business. Delargy recorded one such example,

shared with him by Seán Ó Conaill who invoked the following professional context for the telling of a maritime story:

Bhíomar ag iascach saighne oíche thuais 'dir Cheann Bhóluis agus Ceann Dhuichealla. Ní raibh ao' bhád ann ach sinn féin. Bhí an áit faoinn féin; ach dúirt duin' éigint á raibh sa bhád gur chuala sé iomara báid 'dir é is a' talamh. Thóg na'h éinne a cheann a' féachaint. N'fheacaig éinne aon ní, agus níor chualadar aon ní. As san go ndúirt a' captaon linn gur chuala sé féin ó dhuin' eile go rabhadar...

(Ó Duilearga 1948: 317 (128.) 'An Bád Deoranta').

We were seine-fishing one night to the north between Bólus Head and Ducalla Head. There was no other boat there but our own. We had the place to ourselves, but one of the men in the boat said that he heard the rowing of a boat between him and the land. Everyone raised his head to look. No one saw anything, and they heard nothing. That led to the captain telling us that he heard from another man...

(Ó Duilearga 1981: 279 (128.) 'The Strange Boat').

This extract is the epitome of the typical situation which provides a context for the telling of a maritime memorate by a member of a fishing crew as described above with regard to the story of 'An Bád Sí' ('The Fairy Boat', Mac Cárthaigh 1999: 168, 176). Firstly, it is clear that the narrator underlines the exclusive character of the setting when they were at sea: no other boats were fishing in their vicinity. Secondly, one of the members of the crew heard the rowing of the boat and informed the others – and yet, no boat was seen and no splashing was heard. However, this story differs from 'An Bád Sí' in so far as the incident reminds the captain of another story told to him by a third party concerning a similar happening. Since the captain was not actually present at the time of this happening, it cannot be classified as a memorate according to the von Sydowian definition, but is rather what is defined as being a *fabulate*. Nevertheless, its contextual importance lies in the fact that the captain as an authority in maritime matters introduces the crew to an important part of the fishing lore connected with phantom boats and apparitions, partly aimed at instructing them in how to deal with such things at sea.

One needs to take into account other factors that may have influenced the formation of memorates, especially various peripheral accounts, such as anecdotes, jokes, legends, and other kinds of short narrative genres (Ir. *scéilíní*), which were brought into the community by people not native to it:

Tháinig fear ón nDaingean anso fadó, gurbh ainm dó Muiris 'ac Cearail, agus bhí aithne mhaith agam air, comh maith is atá agam ort-

sa... Bhíodh sé ag iascach bhallach anso i mBaile 'n Sceilig. Do chuala duine á rá go mbíodh sé ag iascach bhallach sa Daingean, leis.

Dúirt sé gur imi' sé féinig agus beirt eile pháirtithe... i gcóir na maidineach amáireach... D'imíodar ar maidin lé héirí gréine, agus do chuadar ar chluí'h ag iascach... Ní'bh fhada bhíodar ann nuair éirig a' bhean aníos as a' bhfarraige i measc na ndoruithe istigh aca. Comh luath is do chonaiceadar í, do dhíríodar ar na doruithe [a] tharrac. Do tháinig scannra ortha agus eagala... Sin scéal ná raibh aon bhréac ann. Dúirt Muiris go raibh sé féin a' féachaint air!

(Ó Duilearga 1948: 315-6 (125.) 'An Bhean ón bhFarraige')

A man from Dingle, by the name of Muiris 'ac Cearail, came here long ago; I knew him well, as well as I know you... He used to fish for rockfish here in Baile 'n Sgeilig, and I heard a man say he used to fish for rockfish in Dingle also. He told me that he and two partners ... set off at sunrise, and went on to a rock to fish... They weren't long there when a woman rose in the sea between the lines. As soon as they saw her they began to pull in the lines. They were in fear and terror... That is a story without any lie... Muiris said he himself saw this!

(Ó Duilearga 1981: 278 (125.) 'The Woman in the Sea')

This is also a fabulate. The fact that Seán knows his neighbour quite well justifies him in believing the story, which is underpinned by the fact that the landscape markers, activity of rock-fishing and encounters with the supernatural at sea were known to him.

In addition to immediate family members, neighbours and the local professional community, others also took part in the enrichment of the local tradition. Itinerant families and labourers (Ir. *spailpíní*) transmitted stories from one place to another, including maritime lore. Seán Ó Conaill, for example, says:

Chloisinn féin, fadó, go ngabhadh mórán desna hUltaig timpeall, fir is mná... Ní cuimhne liom féinig iad, ach do chloisinn mo mháthair agus m'athair ag eachtarai ortha...

(Ó Duilearga 1948: 303 (107.) 'Na hUltaigh')

I used to hear long ago that some of the Ulster people, men and women, used to travel around... I myself do not remember them, but I used to hear my mother and my father speak of them...

(Ó Duilearga 1981: 265 (107.) 'The Ulster Travellers')

Such stories fall outside the scope of our study. Similarly, local legends concerning specific landmarks and places, such as unusual rock formations,

cliffs, caves, caverns, islands, brooks, lakes, rivulets etc., were also not taken into account. However, as pointed out above, they do play an important role in defining the nature and context of memorates and fabulates. For example, some of these stories are cautionary tales. The local legend below constitutes a kind of cautionary prohibition for female community members named Máire, warning them against travelling to the Leac na mBan (‘Rock of the Women’) landmark on Valencia Island.

Chuala na sean-daoine a rá gur... do báthadh sé Mháire ar Leac na mBan i nDairire,⁶ agus ní raghadh ao’ Mháire uirthi a’ baint ao’ bháirneach; dhá raghadh ní thagfadh.

(Ó Duilearga 1948: 369-70, ‘Carraig a’ Pheidileara’, ‘Leac na mBan’)

I heard the old people say that... six Máires were drowned at Leac na mBan in Valencia Island, and no Máire would go there to pick limpets; if she went she would not return.

(Ó Duilearga 1981: 333-4, ‘The Peddler’s Rock’, ‘The Rock of the Women’)

3. Providing online access: maritime memorates digitised

One of the most difficult problems the project had to deal with was the manner in which the data selected from the National Folklore Collection (University College Dublin) and the School of Scottish Studies Archives (University of Edinburgh) should be presented to the online audience.⁷ We had a number of viable alternatives as to how the transcribed and edited stories could be digitised. On the one hand, we could have followed the TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) guidelines for the representation of handwritten manuscripts and audio files.⁸ Ideally, this approach would have involved extensive mark-up, XSLT transformations and validation of files for well-formedness.

⁶ Ó Duilearga (1948: 370, note 280) translates the word as ‘Valentia Island’. Here and elsewhere, we have preserved Modern Irish spelling conventions adopted by Ó Duilearga.

⁷ We express our warmest thanks to Natalia Abelian, acknowledging her indispensable assistance on the technical side. Besides creating an elegant website for the project, she succeeded in writing a jQuery script which enabled the data stored in the project’s XML file to be seen in the form of a sortable table. The latter allows the user to list the sources according to a specific criterion which s/he chooses according to his/her requirements. Furthermore, the database is equipped with a sophisticated search application, allowing for searches according to the stories’ ‘category’, ‘motif’, ‘title’, ‘informant’, ‘collector’, ‘reference’, ‘date’, and ‘location’.

⁸ For an example of adoption of TEI methodology in Celtic Studies and digital humanities, see Fomin and Toner 2007 with regard to the experience of the digitisation of the Dictionary of Irish Language project, Shaw and Wiseman (2013), with regard to the Calum I. Maclean project. For TEI guidelines, see <http://www.tei-c.org>.

Due to time constraints, we opted for another approach. We decided to simplify our task by compiling a straightforward list of categories (known in programming terms as ‘elements’, used as building blocks for ‘the document type definition’, the underlying corner stone of the XML files) whose presence seemed appropriate for the purposes of our project. Some of those elements have just been mentioned in the second part of our article.

They included ‘informant’, ‘collector’, ‘location’ (the place where the story was recorded), as well as other important ones such as ‘title’, ‘language’ (the stories were originally recorded in either Modern Irish or Scottish Gaelic or English), ‘year’ (in which the story was recorded), ‘category’ (includes the primary topic or the central theme of the story), ‘motif’ (listed according to Stith Thompson’s classification), ‘genre’ (besides memorates, we have included fabulates, oral memoirs, chronicates, life stories, personal narratives), ‘reference’ (includes a short reference to the first publication of the story in the printed media or else the reference to the archive notation of an item in question), ‘text’ (includes the original text of the story as it had been recorded in such ‘languages’ as Modern Irish or Scottish Gaelic or English with minimal conventional editing applied) and ‘translation’ of Gaelic narratives into English (Fig. 1):

```

<!DOCTYPE note
[<!ELEMENT note (entry)+>
<!ELEMENT entry (title | language | location | category | motif | year | informant | recorder |
reference | text | trans)*>
<!ELEMENT title (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT language (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT location (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT category (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT motif (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT year (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT informant (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT recorder (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT reference (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT text (#PCDATA)>
<!ELEMENT trans (#PCDATA)>
<!ATTLIST text
xml:lang CDATA #IMPLIED>
]>

```

Figure 1. DTD for Maritime Memorates project XML files.

The scheme of digitisation determined at the first meeting of the project in September 2010 was not substantially revised after it had been introduced. This was probably due to its robust and all-inclusive character, permitting the project to straitjacket the data into the XML-compliant files without any need for further subsequent digital transformations. At present, the XML framework

providing the basis for the files to be accessed is fully operational online, visible in all major browsers and user-friendly.

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Abbreviations

DTD Document Type Definition
TEI Text Encoding Initiative, www.tei-c.org (accessed 01.10.2014)
IFC Irish Folklore Commission
XML Extensible Mark-up Language
XSLT Extensible Stylesheet Transformations

Electronic sources

Stories of the Sea project: www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/storiesofthesea (accessed 01.10.2014)
eDIL project: <http://edil.qub.ac.uk/dictionary/search.php> (accessed 01.10.2014)
Calum Maclean project: <http://www.calum-maclean-project.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/home/> (accessed 01.10.2014)

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