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« Tous les jours fête »
Games and Pastimes in Irish Folklore¹

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Ireland has been described as a country somehow perversely destined to lose its records. One recalls, for instance, the disastrous fire in the Public Records Office in Dublin in 1922 in which irreplaceable records of our collective past were lost forever. Again, in a very different area, given that Irish lore is essentially oral (even to our own day we are a people more at ease with the spoken rather than the written word), there is the problem of trying to piece together a record of a past that was largely never committed to writing. The monks of the early Irish church who first couched in written form the memory of our past were clearly less shocked by the carryings-on of Deirdre, Naoise, Diarmuid and Grainne (which they blithely transmitted to posterity) than by pre-Christian accounts of the formation of the universe. Consequently, they seem to have deliberately left a gap where such cosmological stories must have been.² Given, therefore, that we are surrounded by gaps, lacunae, destroyed records and, quite simply, silence, the Archives of the Coimisiun Béalóideasa Éireann (the Irish Folklore Commission) take on an even greater importance. This extraordinary corpus of 1.5 million pages of first-hand, authentic, largely hand-written records (preserved in the Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin) dates mainly from the Ireland of the 1930s. It consists largely of interviews in Irish and English with c.40,000 informants, mostly elderly people (many of whom were born shortly after the Famine) living throughout rural Ireland. This heady mixture of mythology, recent history, folk remedies, poems, songs, ballads, local gossip, drawings and sketches, topography, local customs and beliefs, this Finnegans Wake of the common man, is a unique snap-shot of rural Ireland from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Games and pastimes, clearly a prominent feature in the life³ and indeed in the literature⁴ of the period under discussion, feature prominently in this vast, kaleidoscopic collection. What were these games, how, when, where and by whom were they played? How were they integrated into the wider social context that produced them and to what degree were they a reflection of this society? These questions form the basis of the present paper.

The modern reader, mindful of the immense popularity of hurling and Gaelic football in contemporary Ireland, might assume that the Archives would merely provide further evidence of these passions. Such an assumption would be ill-founded. One is taken aback by the extraordinary range of games to be found here: not just ball games (hurling, football, handball, bowling) but many games that no longer exist: games with flowers, plants, fruit,

¹ I should wish to express my warm thanks to Professor Bo Almqvist, Professor of Irish Folklore and Head of Department, Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin, for his kind permission in allowing me to use material from the Archives of the Irish Folklore Commission in this article.

² See Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Conservation and Innovation in Early Celtic Literature', *Etudes Celtiques*, 13 (1972), pp.61-119.

³ One is surprised by the relative paucity of histories of sport in Ireland, given the great interest in sport that the Irish always seem to have had; in this context, see Kevin Whelan, 'The Geography of Hurling', *History Ireland*, vol. 1, no.1, Spring 1993, pp. 27-31; for a history of hurling, see Liam ó Caithnia, *Scéal na hIomána ó Thosach Ama go 1884*, Clóchomhar, 1940. For an analysis of sport in Britain, see D. Birley, *Sport and the Making of Britain*, Manchester U.P., 1993, J. Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes, 1870-1914*, Manchester U. P., M. Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter: Popular Gambling in England, c. 1820-1961*, Manchester U.P., S.G. Jones, *Sport, Politics and the Working Class: Organised Labour and Sport in Inter-War Britain*, Manchester U.P., 1992. For a more general discussion of play, see the seminal work by historian Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Boston, The Beacon Press, 1955 (first published, in German, 1944).

⁴ The novels of William Carleton and Gerard Griffin, inter alia, reflect the passion for sports and pastimes at the period in question.

coins, buttons, matches, sticks, rope, string, marbles, stones, pebbles, bones, hoops, tops, household objects, paper, shells, guessing games, riddles, masked games, practical jokes, horse-play, tongue-twisters, guessing games, card-playing, to name but a few.⁵ The concept of games and pastimes expands and takes on an elastic definition as it covers music, dancing and other physical activities such as wrestling, running, jumping, hunting, bird-nesting and coursing. Many of these games no longer exist. Indeed, the informants themselves sometimes add that they were no longer played at the time at which this material was collected: 'I don't think it was played for years' (1162/15).⁶

How were these games played? Detailed instructions are given by the informants on how different games were to be played, as in the following conversation between an informant, Michael Mac-Manus, and the collector, Michael J. Murphy:

Michael McManus: 'Wrastle the Connachtman' was (played) with a stick. The kitchen floor was flagged you see, and you had say the broom handle or the pot-stick and you caught it, like that, in your two hands, and you turned your back round, and you held the stick in the one position and you turned your body round in the one position and you came up again.

MJM: Underneath the stick?

MMcM: Underneath the stick: the stick was in the one position and you just turned right round without letting the stick slip.

MJM: You'd have to go right round under your hands: is that it?

MMcM: That was 'Wrastling the Connachtman' (1838/84).

Where were these games played? What strikes even the casual reader of these pages is the pervasive, omnipresent, all-encompassing nature of these games and pastimes. Today, games are, in general, reserved for certain places: the gym, the aerobics centre, the sports club. Not so in these Archives. Here, games belonged everywhere: in the outside world, in the home, in the workplace, in school (1162/80, 99). Or, to put it another way, there were no places where games of some nature could not be played, no game-free areas.

When were they played? Nowadays, like the space reserved for games and pastimes, the time devoted to these is strictly delimited: they are reserved for certain periods of our schedule, certain periods of our day, our week, our year. In this respect, once again, the Archives are different: games and pastimes seem to have been played all the time, throughout the entire year, throughout the day, even throughout the night. They gave a rhythm to the year, to the week, to the day. They constituted a form of time-keeping. The year was one long festival, with specific games and pastimes being linked to certain key dates.⁷ To take just one example from literally hundreds of such feastdays or important dates: Mayday, we read of how the first of May, which was regarded as the first day of Summer, was welcomed: the whole community, adults and children, would go from house to house in the locality, playing on home-made flutes (1835/166). The following curious pastime was associated with May Eve:

There was another old custom that died out: — 'The May Babby'. I was at one or two of them. They'd get a lump of a stick and dress it up as a girl, and they'd put it standing on a ditch. Pat Hand, the fiddler, would be there, and the boys and girls would dance till daylight. There was no badness, and everyone enjoyed themselves. It was held on May Eve. It started about nine or ten o'clock. They wouldn't carry the 'May Babby' in a procession round the roads. They just put it standing on the ditch and danced on the road beside it ... The boys sat on one ditch, and the girls sat on the other. They danced reels and hornpipes and jigs. A boy would stand up and ask a girl to dance with him. And you wouldn't tire looking at them (1162/20-1).

In addition to specific feasts and dates, the seasons lent a pattern to the order in which certain games were played. Thus we encounter statements like: 'they used to play buttons in summer

⁵ See Seán ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, Detroit, Singing Tree Press, 1970 (repr., earlier version published 1937), pp.xxx-xxxii, 660-99.

⁶ In this article, references to the Archives will specify vol.no. followed by page no.

⁷ On this whole topic, see a fascinating book by renowned folklorist, Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, Cork, Mercier, 1972.

time and harvest' (1162/16). We read of indoor games being played in winter time (1162/18). One informant remembers which children's games were played outdoors at different stages of the year, starting in February (1162/74 ff). Activities linked to the agrarian year feature prominently as they wove a kind of commonly-agreed and shared time-table for the year:

they'd have the best of fun when they'd be cutting turf. You'd get fellows that would sing while they'd be pitching mud into a slipe or a barrow. I was listening to three fellows once and it would delight you to listen to them (1162/24).

Another form of time, not the measurable one of the external world with its festivals of Christmas, Easter and Samhain, was that of the individual's life. Games and pastimes marked the milestones of the human existence such as weddings (1162/98) and departures for emigration. The latter involved a night of drinking and dancing prior to the emigrant's leavetaking (1162/36-7). Similar series of parties were given when the emigrant returned home on a visit (1162/137). Of all forms of festivities, however, those associated with wakes were by far the most extensive. To quote the renowned folklorist, Séan Ó Súilleabháin:

wakes in Ireland and in other countries in former decades were far from being the solemn occasions which they are now. They were gay, social functions, with merriment and games, except when the deceased was a young person or was regarded as a 'great loss'. They were far merrier than weddings. The young people of every district looked forward with keen anticipation to the death of an old man or woman, which would offer them a 'night of turf-throwing and frivolity'. This type of behaviour was not intended to show disrespect for the dead or for the clergy; rather was it a deeply-rooted traditional custom, which people were loathe to discontinue, offering, as it did, some enjoyment and pleasure.⁸

Storytelling, singing, music and dancing, card-playing, riddles, tongue-twisters, versifying, repetition of jingles: these were just some of the many activities associated with wakes, many of which lasted for up to three days and nights and involved the entire local community. The keen pleasure to be gained from these wakes is vividly recalled in the Archives:

There used to be good fun at the wakes. After you said your prayers, you got a clay pipe and filled it with tobacco, and you sat down and had your smoke. You'd get a glass or two of whiskey. They'd sing songs, and some of them would delight you (1162/9).

Who played these games? The vast majority of the informants — in fact all the informants I have studied, belonged to the same social class: 'le petit peuple', small farmers and fishermen. They recount their own pastimes, the games they themselves played and fought over, not those of their social superiors. The different components that made up this world of the rural are classified: thus we read of games and pastimes for men, boys, (less often) girls and mixed groups. The c.40,000 informants and 2,000 collectors involved in the compilation of these Archives were mostly men. The world they describe is mainly their own i.e. a masculine one. Emphasis is laid on male pastimes, male games. Thus, describing marbles, an informant specifies that 'we played marbles when we were gassons [boys]' (1162/15). This is not to criticise the collectors and informants for the fragmented image they consequently give us of their universe. The Archives were inevitably a product of their time and it would have been difficult to imagine women having an equally important part as men in the collation of this material.⁹ The 1930s in Ireland were, after all, coloured by de Valera's vision of the world. It is, for instance, significant that the little information forthcoming on girls' games is provided by a woman (1162/95). In fact, while one woman describing games and pastimes automatically refers those played by girls (1162/95), women elsewhere describe not only girls' but also boys' amusements (1162/97-8, 162). The opposite is less true. It is interesting to note

⁸ Séan Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements*, Cork, Mercier, 1967.

⁹ For an account of the input of women into the Archives, see Fionnuala Nic Suibhne, *Cuntas ar Ghnéithe de Shaol an Bhaineannaigh as Insint Bhéil Fhaisnéiseoirí Mná ó chúige Uladh*, unpublished M.A. thesis, Department of Folklore, University College, Cork, 1990.

that in a section entitled ‘children’s games’, the male informant automatically talks about boys’ games: of a game called ‘Fool in the Middle’, he says:

big fellows played that game as well as the gassons (1162/78).

Where were the girls? Did the men not notice how the women and girls amused themselves? Or perhaps they did but not deem it important enough to be recorded.¹⁰

Why were these games played? Explicit reasons are advanced: to change people’s humour, to cheer them up. This is specifically mentioned in the case of games played by parents with their children:

When a child would be in bad humour, the mother or father would ‘dance’ it on their knees, and them saying:
‘Trot, trot, my little horse, trot, trot again.
How many miles to Dublin town?
Three score and ten.
Will I be back at candle-light?
Yes, and back again.
Trot, trot, my little horse; trot, trot again’.

They’d catch the child by the big toe and say: ‘This little pig went to the market’. They’d catch the next toe and say: ‘And this pig stayed at home’. They’d catch the next one and say: ‘This little pig got bread and butter’. They’d go to the next one and say: ‘And this little pig got none’. And they’d catch hold of the little toe and start tickling it, and them saying: ‘This little pig is his own Mammy’s and Daddy’s pet’. And they’d give the toe such a tickling that the child would start laughing and be in the best of humour (1162/83).

Implicit reasons, however, are equally obvious: girls’ games often involved nurturing and buying/selling (playing with dolls, making dolls’ houses out of stones, playing ‘shop’, etc.) as if they were being prepared or were preparing themselves for their future roles as housewives and mothers (1162/160-1).

In general, the people described or describing themselves in these pages seem to have had limitless quantities of time, much of which, either as participants or as onlookers, they devoted to games and pastimes. At news of some impending sports event, however minor, the entire community seemed to drop what it was doing and flock to the venue (1162/16). Why were these games so omnipresent? To defuse tension? To create a kind of inner time-table, a mappa mundi for the people themselves — in other words, to act as a kind of external representation of their mental landscape, perhaps.

The tightly-knit communal aspect of these activities is evident throughout these Archives. They were experienced not by individuals but by the whole community, as if the entire community was marching to the same tune, as in the following description of a crowd gathering for a wrestling-match:

when it became known that it [the wrestling-match] was coming off, crowds of people came to see it — you’d think it was the congregation coming from the Chapel (1162/16).

Feasts and festivities had the same relevance for the entire community, as in medieval society where the individual was subsumed into the collectivity — the peasantry, the church, the aristocracy or some other social unit. As such, crowd scenes like the following have a haunting, Breugel-like quality:

Crowds would go to them [the races] from Meath Hill and other parts of the country. Plenty of them would walk to it on foot, and others would go on horseback and carts and jaunting cars and commissary cars — any way that they could get there. People thought nothing of walking thirty miles in a day them times. Girls and women and men and boys went to the races, and they’d have a great day’s fun. The horses running the races was only part of the fun. There would be fiddlers and pipers and Punch and Judy shows and fellows doing curious classes of tricks, and crowds

¹⁰ On similar silences regarding female emigration depicted in the Archives, see Grace Neville, “‘She never then after that forgot him’: Women and Emigration to North America in Irish Folklore”, *Mid-America: An Historical Review* (ed. Janet Nolan), Fall 1992.

standing in rings round them, enjoying the fun. There was plenty of ballad-singers them times, and when they'd sing a good song the young people would buy the ballad of it from them. There was plenty of great step-dancers in the country that time, and some of them would step out in front of one of the musicians and dance hornpipes and jigs and reels, and they'd get great applause from the crowds that would be watching them (1162/3-4).

The poverty endemic in the communities in question is evident in the primitive nature of many of the toys used. The girls made dolls from animal bones which they dressed with rags, and the boys played with homemade footballs. Instructions are frequently given on how these balls were made: they were made of rags that were wound round very tightly and then stitched together (1838/91). Hay (1162/8-9, 13), an old stocking (1162/74) or paper tied with cord (1162/74) could equally be used in the making of a football. Even corks given by some local publican could be pressed into service:

a fellow that was well liked would be able to get a 'lock' of corks from some publican! and he'd bring them home and split them up and wet them and stuff them into the [leather] cover. They'd wet the cover and leave it there till it dried (1162/14).

Footballs made of corks and rags might then be covered in tweed (1162/74). The introduction of leather balls made by local craftsmen is remembered (1162/13). One is constantly struck by the self-sufficiency displayed by these people. Horse-shoes and harrow-pins (1162/15), buttons (1162/16) and even chairs (1162/18): they could transform these utensils of their daily lives into material for games. Even without these minimal props, they could make games with words, with shadows cast by their fingers (1162/84). Entertainment cost nothing.

The essentially oral quality of the society recorded here explains the love of word-play, riddles and tongue-twisters in daily entertainment (1162/88 ff). One sees everywhere the fabled Irish love of storytelling, of the anecdotal. Even in an account of races long ago, the description soon gives way to a tall story (which may or may not be believed!) about a champion horse bought by an American and taken with him to the New World and the fortuitous meeting between him and his former jockey there (1162/5). Likewise, accounts of the popularity of card-playing soon lead on to a story on the origins of card-playing, involving a discontented king and an ingenious courtier (1162/92 ff).

One is struck by the competitive nature of many of these games: even weddings could be occasions for the outing of competitive spirit:

They would 'race for the bottle' at weddings. As soon as the marriage was over, they'd jump into their saddles and gallop as hard as they could to the wedding-house. The first there got a bottle of whiskey, and he galloped back and gave the bottle to the bride. The bottle 'went round' a few of them, and before it was all finished the bride broke it into smithereens. The winning of that race was reckoned a great honour (1162/98).

Even activities as simple as walking could be transformed into competitions (1162/39). Rewards for the winner were not inconsiderable: games were played for 'a quarter-barrell of porter' (1162/14). Anyone could become a competitor: children competed with each other in their games, wagering a button or even money. Referring to the games of marbles or 'harrow-pin and horse-shoes' he used to play as a child, one informant remembers:

We played for a ha'penny apiece. The man [boy] that would win might have the full of his fist of ha'pence (1162/15).

Foreigners become competitors in an anecdote involving a particularly savage hurling match between the Irish and the French — in France, of course. The Irish won (47/188-95)! Even the devil could not resist pitting his wits against players in a game of cards. Other allied preoccupations can be glimpsed in these pages e.g. inter-religious rivalry. Thus we are treated to the account of the wrestling-match between a Catholic and a Protestant (1162/16). The Catholic won ... Other types of rivalry e.g. social rivalry, are also in evidence: we learn of how an 'ordinary' person's horse beat a local 'gentleman farmer's' horse in a race (1162/2). Even

within the same social class, room was found for other types of one-upmanship: see the importance accorded in these Archives to playing tricks (especially at Halloween) (1162/23 ff).¹¹ What was seen as the heroic, superhuman nature of many of these activities echoes the boasting that often accompanied feats of valour and rivalry in Old-Irish literature: of a game called 'Pushing the Stone', one informant has this to say:

They [people in general] wouldn't go in much for pushing a heavy stone from the shoulder. There was only a few fellows would go in for it. The Doogans of 'the Diamond' were great at it. I wish you saw them. They were what you might call men (1162/16).

In corresponding accounts or rural games and pastimes from late nineteenth and early twentieth century France, one is struck by the presence of the clergy and of religion in general. This does not seem to be the case in the equivalent Irish situation. Even when religious feast-days such as the eve of St. Peter's and St. Paul's Day (1162/19) are mentioned, it is clear that the games and pastimes associated with them — in this case bonfires — are indisputably pre-Christian in nature. Whether the participants themselves were aware of this is not sure; what is certain is that Christian and pre-Christian traditions blended to produce an untroubled hybrid, as in the following matter-of-fact recollection of these bonfires held on the eves of saints' days:

when they'd be leaving, they'd be sure to bring bits of the burnt sticks and throw them into their own crops or their neighbours' crops. That was an old custom. It was done to bring good luck to the crops. (1162/20)

One sometimes gets the impression in the Archives that some pastimes were frowned upon, especially one that was extremely popular throughout rural Ireland until the advent of television: card-playing. Card-playing could, we learn, mesmerise people: they lost their wits because of it (1162/41). They could and did gamble away their daughter as a wager (1162/43). Fortunately, the local priest was often on hand to retrieve such situations (1162/43). Specifically, card-playing had anti-religious over-tones. Consequently, it was discontinued during the holy season of Lent (1162/39). Many elderly people linked the devil to this pastime:

There were people that wouldn't play a card if they had any religious object on them. If they had a prayer book, they'd take it out of their pocket and leave it one side till they were done playing. You wouldn't be let play cards bareheaded. They'd tell you it wasn't right. If you took off your hat, you'd soon be told to put it on again. There were old people that wouldn't play 'The Joker' in any game. They'd take it out of the pack and burn it or throw it someplace. They thought it was like a picture of the devil. You'd be told you shouldn't carry a pack of cards about with you at night (1162/91-2; see also 1162/90, 163).

The devil (referred to euphemistically as 'the old boy', 'the black fellow' or 'the lad with cloven feet') in his rôle as eternal trickster is frequently to be found playing cards in these Archives (1162/40, 41). Not only that but other games as apparently innocuous as 'tig' (chasing played by girls) could meet with disapproval for similar reasons:

some old people didn't approve of that game — they'd say that the devils were playing it in hell. They'd ask you did you ever hear of 'Innocent Abby that went to hell without sin'. They said he was free to leave hell any time he liked, but when he'd reach the gates on his way out one of the devils would come and 'leave tig' on him, and he'd run back through hell to 'leave tig' on the devil, and that that was how they were keeping him in hell. They'd say that that was happening him because he was fond of playing 'tig' (1162/100).

Organised religion is far less obtrusive in these Archives than one might have expected. When mentioned, specifically in the case of games and playing, it is often depicted as a kind of kill-joy, at odds with the wishes and practices of the local population.¹² From 1936 in Co.

¹¹ See Alan Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1989.

¹² This attitude can, of course, be traced back at least as far as the seventeenth century when the various episcopal synods held in Armagh e.g. in 1660, 1668 and 1670 tried to ban alcohol from wakes. Earlier, in the fourteenth

Wexford, we read in the Archives of a priest who tried, like so many of his colleagues, to put an end to mumming, dancing and other pastimes deemed anti-Christian. However, his wily parishioners outwitted him: they were reciting the Rosary when he arrived at the local hall, as they knew he would, in order to surprise them. After his embarrassed departure, the dancing started in earnest (172/20-3)! Elsewhere, we read of a priest who used to order people to do penance for dancing (1359/18). The informant muses:

I never heard exactly why he was so much against the dancing then.

If orthodox religion is only faintly present, the non-Christian Otherworld appears frequently even in games and pastimes. Ghosts are characters in girls' games (1162/95-6). Fairies (referred to in euphemisms such as 'the good people') play hurling with the same gusto as any self-respecting Corkman (437/389). This latter account is very matter-of-fact: the Otherworld exists, everyone has seen it; it is superimposed on the world in which we live: the fairy hurlers play 'down in the inches near the Liss' (437/389; see also 256/18-20), just a few yards away. Many of these games and pastimes were soaked in violence. For instance, the following was one of the standard activities at wakes:

One fellow would give a button to somebody in the company, and every other fellow would be asked to guess who had it. If you didn't guess the man that had it, you got a good scud of a belt across the hand. But if you guessed the right man, you took the belt and went round with the button, and the other fellow sat down (1162/9; see also 1162/25).

Of these wake games, one informant says:

They were all rough kinds of games (107/108).

Even children's games were violent. We read of a girls' game involving a character pretending to be ghost. Part of the account goes like this:

the ghost would have egg-shells beside her, and the mother [girl participant] would say to her: 'What are you doing with them egg-shells?' And the ghost would say: 'I have them for sharpening my knives'. The mother would ask her what she had the knives for, and the ghost would say: 'I have them for cutting children's throats'. The ghost would make a race at them, and the mother and children would run away, and them all shouting and yelling (1162/96).

The informants' tacit approval of such violence is clear: for them, it lent spice to the proceedings:

Charlie Doogan was a great boxer. Old Tom Malcolmson, of Drummiller, told me that one time they had a bout [of boxing], and Doogan hit him a clout and put him across the ditch. Tom was a man fourteen stone weight, and mustn't it be a tremendous clout that put him across the ditch! The two of them are dead a good while. Charlie was a powerful man. Any man he hit fell. I remember his brother Matthew. Three men attacked him one night and gave him a beating, and it 'took ten years off his life'. He said that if he had another man along with him that would 'take on' one of them he'd be able for the other two, himself (1162/8).

This penchant for violence even in sports and pastimes should be viewed in the light of the violent tenor of life at the period, which manifested itself elsewhere in (inter alia) faction fights and domestic violence.¹³

Another constant in these pages is the omnipresence of drink: many of these games and activities were soaked in it. A glass of whiskey was the first thing handed to a guest at a wake. Porter was the reward for winners at games (1162/14). Whereas one might read of great family gatherings organised around meals in the France of the corresponding period, food is

century, Bishop Richard de Ledrede tried to ban French and English love-songs that were, he said, polluting the throats of the people of Kilkenny. He uttered a decree ordering the replacement of these 'lewd' words with more acceptable religious ones; see G.Neville, 'French Language and Literature in Medieval Ireland', *Études Irlandaises*, XV-i, June 1990, pp. 26-7.

¹³ On domestic violence in Ireland in the period in question, see Liz Steiner-Scott, "'To bounce a boot off her now and then': Domestic Violence in Ireland in the Late Nineteenth Century", unpublished paper, Women's Studies M.A. Seminar, University College, Cork, April 1993.

relatively rarely mentioned in these Archives as an accompaniment for games and pastimes: drink is far more important.¹⁴

Music rang out everywhere: games and pastimes were drenched in it. Ever-present in the background, sometimes in the foreground, a constant like drink itself, it accompanied allied occupations like dancing and singing. Music rang out at play and work: people would sing even as they cut turf (1162/24). We read of a fiddler who used to play at bonfires on St. John's Eve and Saints Peter and Paul's Eve as well as at weddings, American wakes and other gatherings (1162/19). Even the fairies loved music (256/18-20). The introduction of different though no less popular sources of music such as fife and drum bands and brass bands (1162/22) playing nationalist tunes (1162/23) as well as older traditional ones, merely extended the range of musical possibilities.

Clearly, many of the games and pastimes recorded in the Archives are indigenous. The gradual penetration of the rural milieu under discussion by foreign i.e. English influences is tracked. These came, for instance, in the form of circuses with English-sounding names:

The first circuses I remember were Powell and Clarke's, Patterson's and Davidson's. There were two great clowns with Powell's and Clarke's circus. One of them was Johnny Quinn, and the other was a fellow called Patterson. I think Quinn was the best clown of the two. I don't know what circuses were before the three I mentioned (1162/6).

Elsewhere, games accompanied by standard English nursery rhymes are mentioned: the informant adds: 'we used to play that game at school' (1162/ 99). Presumably that was where they were originally learnt. A section entitled 'old rhymes' contains standard English-language nursery rhymes like 'sing a song of sixpence' (1162/84 ff; see also English nursery rhymes, 1838/83). Not that everyone approved of these foreign influences: the unflattering phrase used to describe people dancing foreign dances was:

daoine dí-chéille ag caitheamh a gcosa trí-na-chéile (54/407) [literally: foolish people throwing their legs all together/getting them all mixed up].

In the mid-nineteenth century, with the renewal of interest in folk life combined with the rise of nationalism in Ireland, organisations like Conradh na Gaeilge and the Gaelic Athletic Association (the GAA) were established.¹⁵ The aim of these movements was to promote what they saw as Irish culture — in the case of Conradh na Gaeilge to promote the Irish language, in the case of the GAA to promote Irish games. They shared many members: Michael Cusack, one of the founders of the GAA was also a Gaelic League pioneer. This is what historian, Kevin B. Nowlan has to say on the subject:

in experiencing this growing interest in a nation's traditions, the Ireland of the late nineteenth was by no means unique. The French Revolution and the romantic movement had helped to give a new significance to long neglected languages and popular traditions in many parts of Europe. Men began to look on the languages and traditions of the forgotten nationalities, especially among the Slavs and the Baltic peoples, not as quaint survivals but as fresh, creative contributions to European culture, somehow morally better than the offerings of a tired, cosmopolitan civilisation. The folk song and the folk tale were rediscovered.¹⁶

Nowlan talks of the rediscovery of lost civilisations: one might be tempted to invoke historian Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'The Invention of Tradition'.¹⁷ For it is quite interesting to see what the GAA saw as being essentially Irish games: they emphasised hurling, Gaelic football and, to a lesser extent, handball, and tended to cast aside all others. One might wonder why

¹⁴ See Colm Kerrigan, *Fr Mathew and the Irish Temperance Movement, 1838-49*, Cork University Press, 1992

¹⁵ In the France of the corresponding period, similar movements such as the *Félibrige* movements led by the poet Mistral, marked the desire to preserve local culture and languages, especially since regional languages were threatened with extinction by the rigorous implementation in Jules Ferry's francophone schools of the Revolution's 'une nation, une langue' policy.

¹⁶ Kevin B. Nowlan, 'The Gaelic League and Other National Movements' in Sean O Tuama (ed.), *The Gaelic League Idea*, Cork, Mercier, 1972, p.42.

¹⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

this was so. After all, as we have seen, long-established indigenous games were numerous and varied. It would appear that history, or pseudo-history, through the GAA, gave its blessing to certain games like hurling, the ancient nature of which was ‘authenticated’ by being mentioned in some form in Old-Irish texts: Cú Chulainn and Diarmaid, inter alia, were adepts at hurling. The Archives depict Fionn mac Chumhaill as a champion hurler (53/386 ff). Ironically, however, these games were by no means played or even known throughout the entire country at the period under discussion: an eighty-six year old farmer from the Cavan-Monaghan area, speaking in 1949, states:

There was no hurling played in my day in our part of the country. I never heard of it.
I never heard of it being played in my father’s time or any other time (1162/14).

Again:

there was no hurling in this part of the country. They didn’t know what it was
(1162/109).

An eighty year old farmer in Leap, Co. Cork, speaking in 1937, had this to say:

there never used to be football played around here when I was young. Hurling and
bowling were the two games we used to play (437/388-9).

Given how immensely popular Gaelic football has since become in Cork, it is nothing short of extraordinary to encounter such statements. Again, one informant seems indirectly to value hurling over football (a recent innovation, brought in by ‘the soldiers’, to make matters worse!): he says that the fairies used to play hurling: (437/389):

‘Twas often my grandfather saw the good people hurling by night down in the
inches near the Liss. They could hear them pucking the ball and the hurrah when a
goal was scored (437/389).

Football, a newcomer, seems to be less valued for several reasons, one of which is that ‘even the good people never played it’ (437/389).

One wonders, too, to what extent the GAA deliberately selected games that approximated to English games like rugby and hockey. In this context, Gaelic football and hurling could become powerful challengers of and equals to these English games, something one could never say for many of the Irish games listed earlier.

One of the many striking points about the games described in the Archives is what we would probably now see as their childlike nature: grown adults seized every opportunity to engage in horse-play of a kind we usually associate with young children: a game called ‘Weighing the Butter and Selling the Salt’ is described thus:

each player in turn and in rhythm to the words ‘Weigh-the-butter-and-sell-the-salt’.
Bent forward to raise other on back, then down on to the floor; the other then did
likewise (/86).

Another narrator recalls:

When I was a young fellow, there would be a certain amount of horse-play going on
round Meath Hill. Young fellows would be tumbling other and knocking other down
and mauling other on the grass on the side of the road. They’d be doing that for fun.
It would be going on on a Summer’s evening. Fellows working at the mills would be
blackening other’s faces (1162/6).

The following account is typical:

I saw a chap called Terry Smith, and he was the best chap I ever saw in my life. You
know the plain red chairs with the high back on them! Well, he was able to stand at
the back of one of them chairs and rise with a standing leap in on the seat of it. I saw
him doing it (1162/17).

If some games were promoted through being sanctioned by the GAA, by definition others were demoted as a power balance was now introduced among games. It was as if a hierarchy of games was now being proposed, some being more ‘noble’ than others. The games not recognised by the GAA, at one extreme the general horse-play antics described above and, at the other, gentler games (e.g. flower games) were demoted to the status of children’s games. Some even died out. For the France of the corresponding period, historian Eugen Weber makes the following interesting point:

The relegation of serious observances to the status of children's games is one of the most striking indications of what Max Weber called the disenchantment of the world. The rationalization of a universe in which effect could be expected to follow cause followed apace. And the enchanted parts were set aside for children ... At one time the May queens had been nubile lasses collecting gifts and money for their dowries. But now this had become absurd and was left to children ... Soon it would sink even lower and be left to the children of the poor.¹⁸

The self-regulatory nature of native Irish games is evident: long before the rules and regulation laid down by the GAA, these people were able to manage their own affairs:

They'd go out and kick a match among themselves. Two men would be appointed to call a team apiece. They had sticks stuck down in the ground for goal-posts. Sometimes they'd kick for half-an-hour aside, and sometimes they'd keep kicking the half of the day. There was no referee and no frees, but you wouldn't get leave [be allowed] to rise a man with a foot, and you wouldn't get leave to hurt a man. If you did things like that, you wouldn't be let kick [play] the next Sunday (1162/13).

Games that had been self-regulated to a large extent i.e. regulated by the players and onlookers were now codified and described by outside/impersonal authorities.¹⁹ A further point is that they somehow sanitized the concepts of games and pastimes. While Gaelic games may, occasionally, like many other games, spill over into violence, they are very far removed from the presence and love of violence found everywhere in the games and pastimes described in the Archives. The GAA seems to have somehow defused the violence so prevalent in the games and pastimes that existed at the time, in the process of respectabilising them. One wonders about the influence of Victorian morality, the growing urbanisation of the country, the growing middle class (or aspiring middle class) and the emigration of so many hundreds of thousands of rural people on the ambiance created by the GAA in the world of popular entertainment that was games and pastimes.

One might have thought that this vast material would have provided an ideal opportunity for an analysis of the kind Bakhtine carried out on Rabelais' work.²⁰ Anyone knowing the milieu from which the Archives originated will vouch for the presence there of sexual explicitness and a lack of prurience in related matters. However, there was clearly a kind of self-censorship at work in the compilation of these records: it is not at all sure that the informants in question would have opened their hearts wide to the collectors: after all, the collectors were educated people, not always from the same region. Many of the peasants interviewed must have been illiterate monolinguals (unlike the bilingual collectors). They may therefore have felt themselves to be 'inferior' to the collectors and may have tried to compensate for this by giving the collectors a somewhat sanitized, 'respectable' account of the games and pastimes in question. Even the language used by them occasionally smacks of the Victorian 'respectability' that accompanied the growing embourgeoisement of the country: one informant spells out the word 'bottom' but will not pronounce it (1162/85). They may also have implicitly felt that some material was more worthy than other and may have refrained (as happened in the transmission of much material from the medieval world) from allowing less 'noble' material to be recorded.

At all events, through their detailed depiction of games and pastimes, the Archives of the Irish Folklore Commission provide a unique insight into the mentalities of rural Ireland at the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century. When Mary Robinson became President of Ireland in 1990, she promised to be a voice for the voiceless, for those

¹⁸ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1977, pp. 391-2.

¹⁹ One is reminded, in an admittedly very different context, of the similar changes taking place in the medical profession around the same time: the impersonalisation, professionalisation and masculinisation especially of areas like obstetrics and gynecology.

²⁰ See Mikhail Bakhtine, *Rabelais and his World* (trans. from Russian by H. Iswolsky), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

marginalised in Irish society. In a different context but in a curiously similar way, these Archives, all 1.5 million pages of them, are themselves a voice for the voiceless, for the thousands of forgotten people, some of whom remained in Ireland, many of whom left for the New World, people barely named, many nameless, most forgotten, who constitute the recent memory of an entire people.