

INTERVIEW WITH DIARMUID Ó GIOLLÁIN AT THE 14TH CONGRESS OF THE ISFNR, 28 JULY 2005, TARTU

Interviewed by Ave Tupits

I understand that you have been to Estonia quite a lot. Can you say a few words about your visits to Estonia?

Well, I knew a little bit about Estonia before I first came here. I spent 1986 in Helsinki on sabbatical leave: the whole year. And I think – for me – part of the attraction there was its proximity to Estonia. At the time, of course, Estonia was quite closed in many ways; it was difficult to come to and travel around. So, when I was in Finland I was taking Finnish courses. That year I came to Estonia twice. The first time I didn't really know enough Finnish, and I certainly didn't know Estonian or Russian. But the second time I came was in..., I think it was September of that year and I remember calling in to the *Keele ja Kirjanduse Instituut*. And I met Ülo Tedre and we spoke, and I remember him with the pipe. He was very friendly and I remember we had a conversation in Finnish.

So, I wasn't here in 1987. I came in 1988 and then I met a lot of people for the first time. After that I was here in 1989, I was at the Baltica festival¹ and I met new people. I've been coming back since then quite frequently. I've been in Tallinn more often than in Tartu. A couple of times I've been in the *Kirjandusmuuseum*'s library and I've read some material there and then I've got to know a lot of the people there. Some of them aren't there anymore, but I'm still in contact with some of them. So, over the years then I gradually taught myself a little bit of Estonian. Finnish was a great advantage, I think; I actually bought self-learning books on Estonian in Finnish. Because it seemed in a way it was easier: you know, the cases, for example, didn't have to be explained to me, knowing Finnish. I think I have a book published by some Finnish publisher called *Saagem tuttavaks*. And I think that was my first attempt, so I worked through that and I got dictionaries.

And of course the good thing about coming here, and still coming here, is that books were always relatively inexpensive by Irish standards. And they still are, so that I've been able to buy books very easily and I have quite a lot of Estonian books at home. Buying them is one thing, reading them is the other! It's not as easy to read them, but I can read them: I've read articles with some difficulty; I've read parts of books, for example. So I think I've read enough on



Diarmuid Ó Giolláin at the 14th ISFNR Congress in 2005, Tartu. Photo by Ave Tupits.

the history of Estonian folklore scholarship too, to have a fair idea. I couldn't claim any sort of special knowledge, but I've read a good bit about it in Estonian, I've read stuff in Finnish and also, I have poor German as well, and I've read a few things in German that are published here. And I've read a lot about Estonian history, in terms of the history of national movements and nationalism and all that. I think that there are a lot of similarities there [with Ireland]. I think the materials of folklore

in every country are very specific to a particular environment and to a particular cultural tradition. At the same time, there's a lot of underlying commonalities. In the end, people are people everywhere. But once you talk about, perhaps, more modern ideas, such as ideas of national identity, of nation-building and so on, then you find many more similarities, because, in the end, the ideas are the same, and the history of Enlightenment ideas, the history of Romantic ideas in Estonia, in Ireland and in other small countries isn't necessarily that different. I think the relationship to powerful neighbours as well is something that both countries can identify with. Of course, Ireland was different in the sense that there was always only one powerful neighbour, whereas you've had two powerful neighbouring powers...

Not just two.

Well, that's true actually, you had the Swedes and the Danes and all that! But certainly, let's say, in more recent centuries... Maybe the Estonians found some sort of strategic space to build a national culture between the Germans and the Russians. In Ireland, I think, ultimately in the 19th century or maybe even earlier national identity came to be identified with religion more than with language. So in that sense the position of the language is different – that's a separate question, of course, the social and the linguistic situation of the languages. In Ireland, the Irish language has had more symbolic than practical significance. In the 19th and early 20th century it had huge symbolic significance, but wasn't the language of the majority of the population. So the linguistic situation is quite different in Estonia and Ireland.

In folklore scholarship, there are a lot more people here than in Ireland. Of course, there is a very good archive in Ireland – as there is here – as you know yourself, but the number of scholars working in the field is very few, really, in Ireland. You know the people in Dublin, it's a small department in terms of the number of scholars working there. There are probably four or five academic jobs there; we have four academic jobs in Cork. And they are the two folklore departments in the country. There's a few folklorists in the museums or in Irish language departments, but it's a very small field... And I think that, probably there isn't the same range of topics that have been studied [compared to Estonia], partly because of the small number of people. But I think there are still quite a lot of different perspectives, varying influences. I think the Dublin tradition is more philological, I think our tradition in Cork is probably a bit more anthropological. But at the same time I think there is no fear for the future of the subject.

I think I've talked about a lot of things now without, perhaps, answering your question!

Can you say just a few words on you own background?

For my degree I did Irish and folklore... I was born in a small, little place, well, it's not that small! My father was a policeman. Both himself and my mother grew up on farms. When my father was a young policeman from Sligo stationed in a small village in County Kerry, he met my mother there. Because there's only one national police force, and, in the past, they were never sent to their home districts. It was believed that maybe they'd make contacts that could compromise their judgement as public servants, so they were never sent to their home districts. So we moved around a lot. So I was born in Limerick, but we lived in several different places in Ireland.

I went to university in Dublin, to UCD, I studied in the Folklore Department there. I did folklore and Irish and then I went and did post-graduate work in folklore in UCD. And luckily I got a job very fast in Cork. They were starting a new program there. My colleague Gearóid Ó Craulaioich set it up in 1977. Basically I was offered a one-year job, but I've been there since!

I think my own perspective has changed a lot since then. I've travelled a lot and I've brought back ideas from, I think, certainly, the year in Finland – the contact there with the Folklore Department in Helsinki University, with the Finnish Literature Society: that had a big influence on me. In 1992 I spent another sabbatical, in Stockholm, and working with the Ethnology Department in Stockholm University. Again, I think I learned a lot... The preoccupations of Swedish ethnologists working on questions of modernity and identity,

those were new topics for me at the time. I hadn't really read any social theory. I'd read some anthropology at that stage and some religious studies as well, and some semiotics. But from the time in Sweden I started reading a lot on social theory by ethnologists, but also by sociologists. Now I really do read a good bit about sociology. In the mid-1990s I started getting interested in Latin-American work on popular culture. From 1997 on I've spent a good lot of time going to Argentina, but I've also gone to Brazil and Chile. I've developed a great interest there in their work and great admiration for a lot of the work they do. And I think they have a very different perspective on this field.

Through all of these influences, I would think I'm trying to take a perspective that's not purely Irish, I'm trying to take a comparative perspective, I'm trying to make myself aware of the work that's been done in other countries. I read several languages, some better than others. I'm a folklorist; at times I've called myself an ethnologist, but I think I'm back to being a folklorist now! At the same time, a folklorist who sees himself as very much a person between disciplines, who likes to read in areas such as... I've read a good bit about communications, I'd like to read more on philosophy. But I've read a lot in history, a lot in sociology, a good bit in anthropology, on Nordic ethnology. So I feel that there's a lot to be learned from a lot of different areas. For me, what's been written in folklore studies alone, isn't enough, it doesn't satisfy me enough. I feel that for the complexities of the issues we're dealing with today each discipline has a different perspective. One of my... perhaps a hero isn't quite the word, but someone whose work I really like is an Argentinean anthropologist who's been based in Mexico for many years now, Néstor García Canclini. He's also someone who'd be aware of some of the work on folklore, he's aware of some of the folkloristic problems. He talks about somebody studying the modern city and he jokes that the anthropologist comes on foot into the city and the sociologist comes in on the train and the communication specialist flies in. And each of them gets a different perspective on the city, from their different mode of transport.

And I think that it is true that each of us sees from a different perspective... and particularly, when you are dealing with questions of culture today, of folklore today. We've seen in all of these papers [at the congress]: it's very difficult to define. I mean, you could say that folklore is simply what folklorists do – I'm not the first person to say that! And there are so many forms. For example, the concert on the first evening – for purists, that's not folklore. But then, for purists almost nothing is authentic enough. The reality, of course, is that sort of music that was performed on the stage in the theatre there on Tuesday night, you can study it as an ethnomusicologist, you can study it as a specialist of popular music. You can study it, if you're a communications person as well,

you're looking at the whole question of dissemination of this sort of music today, because there are concert promoters, it's sold over the Internet, there are publishers who publish it. It's a part of youth culture, which is studied by sociologists, anthropologists and so on. At the same time, they are themselves [the musicians], maybe working with the folklore texts that they get from archives and they may liaise with folklorists as well. I mean, where is it [folklore] anymore? And García Canclini talks about folk or popular culture today being multidetermined. He says, it's both traditional, popular, it's both hegemonic and subaltern, it's both local and international. It's a bit of everything! In the end, if you're dealing with small problems, you would perhaps, be happy to see them from a single perspective. But I think, if you're dealing with the nature of global traffic and the global networks of culture today, they are too complex for anyone in one discipline to have a more authoritative perspective than another.

What's your view on the position of the Irish folklore in Ireland and folklore in general in the world?

Do you mean the material?

The material and the studies.

The material is like everywhere else, it's being hybridized all the time in ways that don't satisfy many of the traditional folklorists. For example – modern story-telling, many folklorists aren't interested in that, because it's not really story-telling as they understand it, but at the same time it has a cultural reality, it's a part of culture. That is happening in Ireland. Some of the modern story-tellers are people who have come from a traditional story-telling environment, some of them haven't. You can say that modern story-telling is something that's very hybridized in that sense. Some of the practitioners come from traditional story-telling backgrounds or, at least, they have a memory or some sort of knowledge of traditional types of story-telling. But at the same time too, they are very much engaging with this new international phenomenon, which is modern story-telling. You can think of traditional boats. You have probably seen the traditional boats of the west of Ireland – the *currach* and *naomhóg*...

Mostly pictures of them.

Folklorists traditionally, or ethnologists, would interview the makers and they'd describe the functions and they'd maybe measure them and all this sort of

thing. But the major use being made of these boats today is for racing, not for fishing or for transport or anything like that. And there are modern festivals of boat-racing, which are big tourist attractions and they are also a focus for local identity. But this is a very new role for these boats. At the same time, the people who are rowing the boats are the sons of those who rowed them before them, the makers of the boats are the sons of those who made them before. There's this sort of continuity and change. I think that's what's happening all the time. I think that you can take the pessimistic view and say, it's all disappearing – and many of my colleagues would take that perspective – that we've got to work to try and record it while it's still there. And the other perspective is that it was always dying, because traditions always die. Traditions die, traditions change, traditions are born. Clearly there are some very old traditions that die out and that aren't replaced, such as particular types of songs. For example, there was a particular type of heroic song called Fenian lays. Some recordings were made in the 1940s, but it's gone now, nobody can perform it. At that stage it was residual. A couple of old brothers in Donegal were recorded, but already it was residual at that stage; they remembered it from their youth. But there are such traditions clearly..

I'm in the Cork department, even though I studied in the Dublin department. And my feelings are that many folklorists are less interested in these hybrid phenomena which are really the nature of most folklore phenomena today. If there ever was a sort of a pure form, we really don't know; we just assume that there was once a pure, ideal folk life. I certainly don't believe there ever was any sort of perfect, ideal folk life living in splendid isolation. Because, again, all the ethnographic work on peasants, for example, has shown that peasants have always had a relationship with other social classes, with higher social classes and society. Peasant society was never independent, which is why the American sociologist Robert Redfield called the peasants a part-society. And in that sense too, folklore as an important aspect of peasant culture always had the same relationship to a wider society. So, I think that the tendency to idealize it has also tended to hide the contradictions and hide perhaps, its links with the wider society and the wider culture. There are two terms that I like using, that I borrowed from a book by two French sociologists, it's 'miserabilism' and 'populism'.² And the populist perspective on folklore and popular culture values it as a cultural form that merits being valued highly. But at the same time, by valuing it and by praising it and by idealizing it, it gives it an independence that it does not really have. This is a sort of populist perspective, which minimizes the links of inequality between folk culture and folk societies and the wider community. It was possible to idealize

them, but they weren't equal, they were actually treated with a lack of equality. Their relationship with the rest of the society wasn't that between one social group and other social groups or one valid form of culture and another valid form of culture. The peasantry, folklore, never had that wider validity in society. So the populist perspective, I think, has minimized those [unequal] links, whereas then the miserabilist perspective takes a more pessimistic view on folklore itself, because it sees that the main problem for folk communities is the one of isolation and poverty and underdevelopment. So the solution then is education and economic development, which will bring them to the same level as everyone else in society by integrating them into society. In a way we're often stuck between the two, the folklorists tend to be more on the populist side, and maybe sociologists and those who deal with various social problems of poverty and underdevelopment and so on then are the miserabilists, who see that development is the solution to the problems of folklore, to folklore societies.

Could you sum up our interview with a few words on the congress?

I must say, at congresses like this, I always find that I come out of them full of energy, full of intellectual energy and I find them incredibly stimulating. There's been a few papers now I look forward to reading, when they come out, but I particularly like the sessions on vernacular religion. It's a few years since I really read much on religion and there's a lot of stuff I have to catch up on. But in general this sort of conference gives you a great sense of the range of topics being covered in the discipline and in that sense too, it sort of firms the discipline. But I do feel that there has been very cutting-edge stuff here as well. And I think we can see many of the stars of the future in the discipline here today.

Thank you very much!

Comments

¹ CIOFF International Folklore Festival "Baltica" is an international event which has taken place in turns in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia since 1987.

² The book is by Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le savant et le populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin is presently on sabbatical leave in Paris, and will be working as a visiting professor in the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, for 2008–2009.

Recent publications include a book

An Dúchas agus an Domhan. [‘The native/vernacular and the world’.] Cork: Cork University Press, 2005. 206 pp.

and the following:

Celebrar a San Patricio, prologue to María Inés Palleiro (ed.), *San Patricio en Buenos Aires: Celebraciones y rituales en su dimensión narrativa*. Editorial Dunken: Buenos Aires 2006, pp. 15–17.

The national and the local – practices of de- and retraditionalization. FF Network No. 28, June 2005, pp. 10–18.

Revisiting the Holy Well. *Éire-Ireland* Vol. 40, No. 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2005, pp. 11–41.

Folk Culture. In: Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 225–244.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE: A SHAMANIC BOOK WITHOUT SHAMANIC STORIES

I am writing in response to Aado Lintrop's highly critical and negative review of my book (see "A Shamanic Book without Shamanic Stories" by Aado Lintrop on Michael Berman's *The Nature of Shamanism and the Shamanic Story*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, in vol. 38 of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 2007).

Nowhere do I suggest shamanic stories 'oppose folktales, myths, sagas and fairytales'. What I do say is that these categories tend to overlap, and I am sure even Aado Lintrop would not dispute this fact. And the reason why the period of initiation is not covered in any detail is quite simply because the initiate is not a shaman at this point.

It goes without saying that the participants serve an important role in a ritual, because without them there could not be one. However, contrary to what the reviewer seems to believe, that does not mean that they always play an active role, and I am not only considering Siberian peoples in my book as I make clear right from the outset.

It is nowhere suggested that 'neo-shamanism is dangerous only to the degree at which it attempts to apply traditional methods' and I cannot be held responsible for the reviewer falsely assuming that it is implied. And as for my definition, it is intentionally broad so as to include both indigenous and neo-shamanic practitioners rather than only half of the picture.

The question as to why shamanism emerged in the first place was not covered for a very good reason – as we can never know for sure. All we can do is speculate and make educated guesses, but it was not my intention to do so in this book, and I nowhere suggested it was.

As for the criticism of my choice of tales for inclusion in the volume, the tale from Korea can be directly associated with shamans and is used by them in Korea to this day. And in defence of my other choices, let me simply quote Eliade himself,

Probably a large number of epic "subjects" or motifs, as well as many characters, images, and clichés of epic literature, are, finally, of ecstatic origin, in the sense that they were borrowed from the narratives of shamans describing their journeys and adventures in the superhuman worlds (Eliade 1989: 510).

But perhaps Aado Lintrop would disagree with this statement too.

The reviewer is of course entitled to his opinions, but a great deal of time, energy, and hard work goes into writing such a book, several years of my life in this particular case, and it would be helpful if Lintrop bore this in mind the next time he writes a review. Fortunately, however, not everybody agrees with him, and the book is proving highly popular with readers.

Michael Berman BA, MPhil, PhD (Alt. Med.),
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