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THE SCHOOLS' MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTION  
PROVERBS OF IRELAND AND THEIR DIGITIZATION

**Abstract:** A large collection of contemporaneous folklore from Ireland has recently become available online. It contains thousands of proverbs, mainly in lists but some in various kinds of narrative and some with explanations. The article below outlines the background to the collection, the main concerns and contents of the proverbs and how to access them. The collection is being transcribed and these transcriptions are word or even proverb-searchable.

**Keywords:** all-Ireland, background, contemporaneous, content, context, digitization, Dúchas Team, English-language, Fiontar, Irish Folklore Commission, Irish-language, lists, National Folklore Collection, Schools' Manuscripts Collection, text search, transcription

The Schools' Manuscripts Collection proverbs are some of the fruits of a scheme carried out from 1937 to 1939 by the Irish Folklore Commission, which was in the Department of Education of Ireland, to use children to help collect folklore. I wrote about this in *Proverbium Paratum* (Williams 1980) but I would now like to draw attention to the fact that this collection, part of the National Folklore Collection and all housed in University College Dublin, has been digitized and to describe how to access the many thousands of proverbs in it. The digitization was carried out in partnership with Fiontar School of Irish, Dublin City University, and funded by the Irish government Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Part of it became available online in late 2013 but it is now accessible in its entirety at [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie) (The Folklore of Ireland Council 2013, 3). In addition to scanned images of the originals, a scheme called 'Meitheal' [co-operative labour] was launched in 2015 in which members of the public provide online transcriptions of the manuscripts which were all handwritten (The Folklore of Ireland Council 2015, 3). The transcriptions are text searchable, for in-

stance, all the transcribed instances of 'Far away hills are green' can be located through <https://www.duchas.ie/en/src?q:far+away+hills+are+green&t:CbesTranscript>. Any other proverb or part of one can be substituted and sought. There is also an electronic database of all the contributors and collectors. For the sake of all the new researchers who have emerged since my earlier article I will describe again how the proverbs were originally garnered. I will finish with an overview of proverbs in the Collection.

A booklet (Irish Folklore Commission 1937) was issued to all the primary schools and, as well as this, staff of the Irish Folklore Commission travelled the country, lecturing enthusiastically on the importance of collecting and preserving folklore. The booklet can be viewed at <https://www.duchas.ie/download/Irish-folklore-and-tradition.pdf>. The older children, who were up to 14 years of age, obtained folklore from relations and neighbours, writing it down and sending it back to the Commission in Dublin where it was bound school by school and county by county. Many teachers themselves also collected and contributed material. The scheme was a resounding success and resulted in 1,128 volumes containing 451,000 hand-written pages (mostly foolscap) of consistently good material. It is fair to say that, until the Schools' Manuscripts Collection, collectors of folklore had concentrated on material in Irish-speaking districts but the Schools' Manuscripts Collection covered all 26 counties and all corners of those counties, both Irish and English speaking; the six counties of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland were not included at that time. For some areas this is the only collection of folklore that there ever was or has been since. In all over 5,000 schools returned material.

As it was mostly children who would be collecting the material the booklet which was issued did not request all aspects of folklore. Proverbs were one topic that was selected as being suitable, presumably because they are short, easily remembered and not controversial. Proverbs and sayings were also mentioned in some other sections of the booklet - 'Weather Lore,' 'Festival Customs,' 'Churning' and 'The Care of the Feet'. The term 'proverb' was not defined in the booklet but was well understood as most of the items which the children classed as such are and the overwhelming majority of proverbs were accurately written

down. There are probably proverbs in each of the 1,128 volumes and from almost every school. Taking one county, Monaghan, over 3,100 proverbs were collected, representing about 1,050 different proverbs. From my research on various other counties Monaghan is typical, so the number of proverbs in all the volumes should be well over 3 million, giving ample scope for research on various aspects such as the frequency and distribution of certain proverbs, variation within proverbs, and so on. It might be added that calendar and weather sayings, of which there are also thousands of examples, are additional to the figures mentioned. In County Monaghan there were about 90 different calendar and weather sayings. As well as proverbs there are certainly hundreds of proverbial comparisons, if not thousands, and a lesser number of proverbial phrases. There is also blason populaire, but a lesser amount than of proverbial phrases. For the record, the blason populaire is typically found in pieces titled 'My Home District' and the like. It concerns provinces, counties, down to townlands, a land division smaller than the parish, towns, streets and even some families

The vast majority of the proverbs are in lists. Lists are easy to locate online and in any case 'Proverb' is one of the online subject headings or 'Seanfhocail' in the Irish-language version; the lists in the manuscripts themselves have a variety of titles besides 'Proverbs' such as 'Sayings,' and so on, and are sometimes untitled. All the lists of proverbs, whatever their title or lack of one, should appear when one uses the subject heading 'Proverb'

The Irish Folklore Commission did not ask for explanations of proverbs. Of the c.100 lists of proverbs for County Monaghan only four lists included explanations; it was often the commonest proverbs that had explanations. Some proverbs are found in isolation or in passing references, while some are found elsewhere, so I will indicate the most profitable topics to search under. Proverbs are to be found in descriptions of birds, cures, customs and occupations; some of these are simply beliefs in proverb form. A very small number of proverbs are found in folk tales, songs and poems; most of those in such places are common proverbs and found elsewhere in the manuscripts for the county. Two of the eight in County Monaghan were central to the narrative. In addition, five proverbs in the county were found in anec-

dotes; in this case they were all central to the narrative. As mentioned in my *Proverbium Paratum* article the Folklore Commission's booklet specially requested local stories which illustrated proverbs (Irish Folklore Commission 1937, 20-21). Despite this there was not a great response to this there being, for example, only six such cases from County Monaghan. All but one of the stories, which are mainly legends, were based on the literal meanings of the proverbs. Versions of nearly all the proverbs which turn up in the places mentioned can also be found in one or more of the lists.

The Schools' Manuscripts Collection proverbs (many of which are still in circulation), calendar custom and weather rules as a group reflect the values of the society from which they were gathered and the values which come across most strongly are those of a conservative community. The proverbs reinforced the status quo, for example, 'Be not the first by whom the new is tried nor yet the last to cast the old aside' and 'Don't make a custom and don't break a custom'. The proverbs used by a community become an integral part of that locality's inheritance and are regarded as such by that community, not as something brought in from outside or in any way international. This is evident from the fact that a local origin was sometimes assigned to a proverb, as in the following account from County Leitrim:

this...woman...was churning this day when a man came in and sat down. He was known as a wizard. He would not churn for her. When she had churned there was no butter on the milk. When he went home, his wife was churning. After a few minutes it was churned and she was not able to move the dash with all the butter [that] was on it. He and his wife made it up and tried to sell it but he failed and it rotted. That gave rise to the proverb, 'Ill-gotten goods never prosper.' (NFC S Vol. 0199, page 067).

More often than not it was a very common proverb such as the above or 'Live horse and you will get grass' to which a local origin was attributed and, as mentioned, for the great majority the explanation was of the literal meaning of the proverb, rather than its metaphorical one.

The Schools' Manuscripts Collection contains many sayings about the weather such as 'A wet and windy May fills the haggard with corn and hay,' a few beliefs in proverb form like 'A blue bride is a rue bride' and some simple proverbs or apothegms such as 'Better late than never'. These three groups - weather rules, beliefs and apothegms were all meant to be taken at face value but, as in any group, by far the greatest number of proverbs were metaphorical. The metaphors are largely drawn from everyday life such as 'A burnt child dreads the fire,' 'It's a long lane that has no turning' and 'Ná caitheadh amach an t-uisge salach go mbeidh an t-uisge glan istigh' ['Don't throw out the dirty water until the clean water is in'] - from the house and yard and not much further afield. A look at the commonest proverbs shows that none of them contains unusual words or metaphors, on the contrary, their entire vocabulary is made up of everyday things - brooms, sacks, children, horses, water, and so on, and the metaphors were taken from everyday experience, for example, 'Borrowed horses have hard hooves,' 'A new broom sweeps clean' and 'Is deacair do malá folamh seasamh suas direach' ['It's hard for an empty sack to stand upright']. Such metaphors, selected as they were because they related to the life of the people who used them, give us insights into the things which mattered most in that society. As might be expected in a farming community a large proportion (15% in a sample county - Monaghan) of the proverbs drew on animals, especially domestic animals, for their metaphors. In fact, there are more proverbs about animals than about any other set of referents such as plants or food. In most cases the behaviour of animals metaphorically represented or informed human behaviour, as in the following 'A barking dog won't bite,' 'A cat in gloves catches no mice' and 'It's a great horse that never stumbles'.

There is a great variety of named animals from the elephant down to the beetle but the animals which turn up again and again in the greatest number and variety of proverbs are (in declining order) the dog, horse, cow, hen, pig and cat - the range of animals that one would expect to find around any farm of the day (see [Carson] Williams, 1983 for further details of animals in proverbs). The adult animal and its offspring are often portrayed together to reflect human families, as in the following 'What's in the cat is in the kitten,' 'Many shaggy colts turn out fine horses'

and 'Is geal leis an bhfiach dubh a géarrach fhéin' ['Every raven thinks its own nestling fair']. When wild animals are mentioned it is because they were closely connected with the farming economy. Some, for example, the fox were a threat to the stock and were hunted 'Long runs the fox but he is caught at last'. The fish which are mentioned - trout, herring and salmon, were part of the diet. The long-established animals turned up more in the proverbs than very similar species introduced later, for example, there are many proverbs which mention the hare and none mentioning the rabbit and again many mention the horse but only a few the ass; both rabbit and ass were only introduced to Ireland in mediaeval times. Some migratory wild birds are mentioned because they are good indicators as to when crops should be ready, for example, 'Cuckoo corn and woodcock hay make the farmer run away'. The other reason that wild animals were included in the proverbs is because they symbolised certain human qualities.

Just as proverbs referring to domestic animals far outnumber those about wild animals there are many proverbs about cultivated plants and very few about wild plants. The wild plants which are mentioned are mentioned for the very same reason as the wild animals - because they impinged on the farming economy, as weeds or as food or fuel, for example, 'Ash green makes a fire for the queen'. In the same way that weather predictions were made from the behaviour of certain wild animals, the growth of certain wild plants was also carefully noted: 'If the oak is out before the ash you are sure to have a splash'. This meant that if the oak trees came into leaf before the ash you would be in for some wet weather. If, on the other hand, the ash was in leaf before the oak a fine summer was predicted. Another popular weather saying of the same type is 'A sloe year is a low year, a haw year is a braw [fine] year' which means that if sloes, wild plums, are plentiful the weather for the coming year will be bad but if haws are plentiful the opposite will be true. Chiefly wild plants and animals are used in weather predictions, rather than cultivated plants and domestic animals. Perhaps this is because however much the farmer's livelihood may depend on the weather, he knows it is nature and not he who is in control of it. The trees which are named are all species which have existed in Ireland for millennia (those which are often referred to as 'na-

tive' species) - oak, crab-apple and rowan - and are bound up with many other aspects of traditional life as well as proverbs: the rowan, for example, was widely used as a protection against evil. The crab-apple of the hedgerows is contrasted with the sweet apple of the orchard 'An apple can't grow on a crab tree' and is used in one of the many proverbs which warn us not to be deceived by appearance 'The crab-tree has a sweet blossom'. Trees in general are often used as metaphors for people 'A straight tree can have crooked roots,' 'A tree is known by its fruit' and 'The higher the tree the greater the fall' are typical examples. Ireland is now the least forested country in Europe. Do countries with more trees have more tree proverbs?

It would be impossible to reconstruct a farmhouse or know exactly how people dressed from the proverb record but one aspect of life it does tell us a great deal about is the diet. Next to animals, food is the second biggest concern of the proverbs. This is not peculiar to Ireland, but is widespread. The inter-relationship between eating and work as shown by proverbs in another pre-mechanised farming economy, Finland (Hakamies 2008), is likely to obtain in Ireland, 'Food is the horse of work' being one wide-spread example. What changes according to locality is the type of food crops grown and the products which are made from them. Over 10% of the County Monaghan proverbs, for example, actually mention food and many more, such as 'Always taking out of the meal-tub and never putting in soon comes to the bottom' and 'There is no feast till a roast and no torment till a marriage' draw their metaphors from food and eating habits. Yet others display attitudes to eating and drinking and especially urge moderation, particularly advocating restraint where alcohol is concerned 'Thirst is the end of drinking,' 'The drunkard will soon have daylight in through the rafters' and 'When the wine is in the wit is out' are typical. The frequent mention of wine in the Bible probably accounts for its persistence in the proverbs in a country where, historically, wine was not drunk. Indeed, some versions of this proverb substitute 'drink' for 'wine': 'When the drink's in the wit's out,' also found in this form in Irish 'Nuair atá an t-ól istigh atá an chiall amuigh'. Staying with drinks, milk, tea and whiskey are also all mentioned. As befits its important place in the farm economy there are more proverbs about milk than any other beverage

'Eggs full of mate [meat] are as good as new milk,' and milk is also alluded to indirectly: 'Is maith sugha bó beo nó marbh' ['The juice of a cow is good alive or dead']. Compared with the other drinks tea is a late-comer to the Irish kitchen and there are many versions of stories about when tea first became available people did not know how to use it and some threw away the 'juice' and served up the leaves. It went on to become a firm favourite, however, and established itself in the proverb record. 'Dead with tea and dead without it' was a popular saying and 'There is nothing as mean as tea in a tin'.

Like tea, the potato is a relative newcomer to Ireland. It was originally introduced, some say, by Sir Walter Raleigh in the late 16th century, but did not become part of the staple diet until much later. It, too, has made its way into the proverb stock and the greater dependence of Ireland than England on the potato is reflected in proverb collections. Thus no proverb of the 10,000 or so in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (Smith 1970), a collection of proverbs from English literature, mentions the potato, whereas six of those in the much smaller County Monaghan collection of c.1,050 do. 'If the potato misses Ireland's beaten' refers to the reliance on this crop and 'The old man to the big potato' is perhaps a dig at the continuing hearty appetite of old folk despite the fact that they are no longer doing so much work around the farm. The dish of champ which is well-known in the northern part of Ireland and is chiefly made of mashed potatoes gets several mentions such as the following 'Champ to champ will choke you'. In the past milk was used to make many kinds of food which would keep. In her book *Irish Food*, Bríd Mahon describes a flourishing tradition of hard and soft cheese making which, however, diminished and died out before the end of the 18th century (Mahon c.1980, 'Whitemeats,' 79). Butter alone, with its by-products skimmed milk and buttermilk, continued. to be made and for a considerable period Ireland has consumed more butter than almost any other country (Mahon c.1980, 79). Naturally this is reflected in the proverbs, for example, 'Long churning makes bad butter,' 'There is many a way to choke a dog besides with butter' and 'Butter's dear-bought when its licked off a briar'. In the last proverb 'butter' has been substituted for 'honey' which was the original food mentioned in this old homily. Butter is added to basic things like



bread and potatoes to make them more appetizing. When it, or any other food, was used in this way it was known as 'kitchen' but only a little for contrast was required as the proverb says 'Butter to butter is no kitchen'. Butter was prized and valued, not only in the diet but also as a cure, for example, for burns. One proverb tells us that 'What butter or whiskey will not cure is incurable'.

Proverbs associated with dairy products are plentiful but there are even more about cereals. These are not only to do with the end products - bread and stirabout or porridge - but concern the preparation of the ground, growth of the crop, harvesting and milling. 'Is furasda fuineadh in-aice na mine' [It's easy to knead when the meal is to hand] turns up frequently in both languages. Oats, commonly called corn, was, of course, the main crop and it is almost exclusively corn that is named in the proverbs, for example, 'Plough deep while sluggards sleep and you will have corn to sell and to keep'. Weather sayings helped predict the harvest that might be expected. In some as noted earlier in the section about animals the behaviour of migrant birds played a part, for example, the following: 'It is supposed to be a good sign to see the trees and bushes covered with foliage before the cuckoo arrives. There is an old saying around here: "If the cuckoo arrives on a bare thorn you may sell your cow and buy some corn." This means that the crops will be bad if the leaves are not on the trees before the advent of the cuckoo' (NFC S Vol. 0949, pages 215-16, Co. Monaghan). In others the sort of weather at a certain time of year was believed to affect what happened later on, as in the following 'A dry March never begs it bread,' 'A wet and windy May fills the haggard with corn and hay,' 'A backward May leaves a good harvest' and 'A cold May makes one rich'. Metaphors from measuring grain and milling are common, for example, 'Don't weigh everyone's corn in your own bushel,' 'The mill cannot grind with the water that is past' and 'If you don't want flour do not go into the mill' (cf the current 'If you don't like the heat stay out of the kitchen').

Moving on to another aspect many of the proverbs reflect the Christian values of the community. A few, which include some of those used reasonably often, are based on passages in the Bible, the New Testament being represented about twice as frequently as the Old Testament. Some proverbs appear in more

than one book. 'The measure you give is the measure you will get' and 'It is as hard to get a rich man to heaven as to put a camel through the eye of a needle' not only occur in the Gospel of Matthew but also in Mark and Luke and this repetition in such well-known parts of the Bible would have helped to make them popular. 'An té a cuireas sé a bhaineas' ['The person who sows reaps'], 'Pride comes before a fall' and 'Do as you would be done by' are three more Biblical proverbs which were and are well-known. In addition the most frequently used weather rule is also to be found in the Bible. There are several variants in the record. 'A rainbow in the morning is the shepherd's warning; a rainbow at night is the shepherd's delight' is its most common form and other variants are 'A red sky at night is the shepherd's delight; a red sky in the morning is the shepherd's warning' and 'A rainbow in the morning is a sailor's warning'. It is, of course, still widely known and used today. Coastal counties have 'sailor' more frequently in variants than non-coastal ones. It is based on Matthew which I referred to earlier as a popular source for proverbs where the words are 'When it is evening, ye say, it will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, it will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowring' (Matthew XVI, 2-3). Although there were not many different Biblical proverbs altogether (about 20, or one in 50, in County Monaghan) the Bible is certainly the biggest single literary source for the Schools' Manuscripts Collection proverbs. Other proverbs, although not direct quotations from the Bible, sound Biblical and have a definite literary ring, for example, 'The Lord loveth a cheerful giver' and 'Jest not at sacred things'. Coloured pictures of such sentences in ornate writing either printed or embroidered adorned and still do adorn many a parlour, thus helping to perpetuate proverbs which in style are quite removed from everyday speech. However, now that the Bible is available in up to date English, this style of proverb will probably decline. Also arising from the religious beliefs of the people, although not quotations from the Bible, is a small group of proverbs which mentions God or the devil. Both are referred to in very concrete terms. God is a benevolent figure, close at hand, ready to support the small person and help the weak. 'God' or 'God's help' is nearer than the door: 'Is goire cabhair Dé ná an doras,' 'God fits the back for the

burden' and 'God never shuts one door but he opens another' are typical of this group.

Far fewer proverbs name the devil than God. This may be partly because it was mainly children who collected the proverbs and adults may not have wanted to mention the devil to them. A glance at the published collections of Irish-language proverbs shows that the devil does not feature prominently there either but for them also some sort of filter system may have been operating, perhaps on the part of the informants. 'An idle man tempts the devil' is one example. It is similar to 'Satan finds work for idle hands to do' and there are some examples of 'Idle hands find mischief to do' which expresses the same sentiment without specifically mentioning the devil. There is evidence that some other proverbs which also originally only included the devil survive in a form which does not name him or have variants without him such as 'Speak of angels and they appear'. 'Never eat a blackberry after Michelmas day for the devil spits on them' warns children that after this date (29 September) the blackberries are past their best and, may be bad, for them. In some counties another malevolent supernatural creature - the puca - is substituted for the devil in this belief. It would be interesting to compare a large range of 'devil' proverbs to see how much the 'native Irish' puca replaces the universal devil. It is unusual to find any other supernatural beings in the proverbs - even the fairies, which figure so strongly in many, many aspects of tradition, do not appear in the proverb record. Some Christian, but non-Biblical, saints are represented in the collection. Saint Patrick and Saint Brigid - the male and female patron saints of Ireland - sometimes meet together in weather rules and Saint Patrick also turns up on his own, but it was a surprise to me to come across Saint Swithin of Winchester since we have so many saints of our own: 'Swithin's day fifteenth July if thou dost rain forty days it will remain; Swithin's day if thou be fair forty days it will rain no more'. When I investigated, further references to this proverb were found in two of the three major Irish-language published collections - from Connacht and Munster which shows that the proverb about this English saint was widely known in Ireland. The church and clergy are featured in several proverbs such as 'It is a poor priest who has no curate,' 'You can't live in Rome and

fight with the Pope' and 'Patience and perseverance won a wife for his reverence'.

The fact that certain parts of the country have a population with a variety of religious denominations is reflected in the proverbs as the above and following examples show 'The nearer the church the further from God' which also has a variant 'The nearer the chapel the further from God'. Religious devotion, or the lack of it, is apparently not confined to one denomination! The proverbs mark out Sunday as a special day on which one should act and dress differently from the rest of the week because 'A Sunday well spent brings a week of content'. The prohibition against commercial transactions on the Lord's Day is reinforced by the belief 'Sunday's bargain never holds good'. Whistling on Sunday was, and still is by many, regarded as being irreverent, and so another belief in proverb form warns 'If you whistle on Sunday you will be crying on Monday'. 'It's a small smitch [dirty spot] that soils a Sunday shirt' refers to the fact that white shirts could be worn on Sundays when less work was done. An interesting belief about the weather on Saturday is expressed in the following complex proverb 'Saturday: it is an old saying in this district that there always comes sufficient sunshine on Saturday to dry the priest's shirt: "There is no Sunday without mass, no Saturday without sunshine, no townland without a barg" (sharp-tongued woman)' (NFC S Vol. 0940, page 270, Co. Monaghan). Sunday is a key day in several weather rules. In some, the weather on Sunday is depicted as differing from that of the other days of the week, for instance, if Sunday's weather is bad then the rest of the week will be good 'Every day brow [fine] makes Sunday a daw' [dull?]. Other proverbs say that the weather on Friday foretells what Sunday's will be as in 'Friday rules Sunday'. Friday, Saturday and Sunday -the end of one week and the beginning of the next - are the three days that are mentioned again and again in the weather rules. It would seem that this transition period from the old week to the new was regarded in a similar way to the transition from one season to the next, a period of uncertainty when forecasts were made about the weather.

Although I have tried to give an all-around impression of the values and interests of the people who used the proverbs, my examples have, of necessity, been selective. I have purposely chosen proverbs with word pictures which help us to imagine the

everyday rural life of the people who contributed to the Schools' Manuscripts Collection, rather than abstract proverbs, of which there are many too. Schools in the cities were not encouraged to participate in the Schools' Collection scheme. When the Schools' Collection was carried out there was no county in Ireland that was entirely Irish-speaking. Schools in Irish-speaking districts returned proverbs in Irish and those in counties which were English-speaking by and large returned proverbs in English, however, all but one of the 14 English-speaking counties for which I have made a key word index of the proverbs also returned at least some proverbs in Irish (this card index is in the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin). I would like to highlight the fact that the proverbs in the Schools' Manuscripts Collection were written down before the standardization of Irish therefore we have a close dialectal record of the proverbs. The above overview largely quotes proverbs in English although there are Irish-language versions for most if not all of those exemplified. Individual references to them have not been given as they are all widespread and common. The [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie) site is very easy to use and I do hope that this introduction to it will lead to international interest and research on the proverbs in it. The scheme's information resources page is at <https://www.duchas.ie/en/info/res> while the proverbs can be accessed directly through <https://www.duchas.ie/en/tpc/cbes/5287955>. Anyone can elect to transcribe via <http://www.duchas.ie/en/meitheal/> which, I can assure you, is a fantastic way to get to know the material.

#### ***Acknowledgements***

I would like to thank the Director of the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin, for permission to quote from the Schools' Manuscripts Collection. I would also like to thank the Dúchas team at Fiontar School of Irish, Dublin City University, for details about the digitization.

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