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The Academic Position of Ethnology in Northern Ireland

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to describe briefly, and in accordance with a format suggested by the Editorial Executive Board of this journal, the present position of ethnology in Northern Ireland.

For all practical purposes the term *folklife* is used instead of ethnology in referring to the study of local culture in Northern Ireland. Furthermore it is used in a comprehensive way to relate to all aspects of culture — spiritual, social and material.

In Northern Ireland the study of folklife is not yet represented as a distinct discipline within the University. Yet, paradoxically, the extent to which folklife studies have developed in the Province in recent times is traceable to the university (The Queen's University of Belfast) and in particular to the School of Geography in which the chair is held by Professor Estyn Evans.

To be more specific, the institution in Northern Ireland most directly concerned at present with the study of folklife — the Ulster Folk Museum — can attribute its origins in large measure to Professor Evans's work both in research and in teaching. The trend, of which the Folk Museum represents a significant end-product, was largely initiated by his pioneer studies in Irish folklife, which not only emphasised a relatively neglected field of research, but also represented an early appreciation, in terms of the history of modern ethnology, of the relationship between it and established academic disciplines, especially archaeology. Thus, if ethnology is not taught directly in the university, it is at least incorporated to an appreciable extent in the teaching of geography as practised by Estyn Evans.

This is particularly so in the case of post-graduate studies within the Geography School: a fair number of theses submitted for higher degrees (M.A., M.Sc., Ph.D.) during the past three decades have been on ethnological subjects.

It may also be valid in the context of this paper to predict that the direct teaching of ethnology at university level may possibly develop in the foreseeable future. It is significant that in recent years a Department of Social Anthropology has been set up under the general supervision of Professor Evans, and while up-to-date its interests have been directed more beyond Ireland than towards it, it is conceivable that this emphasis may change in due course.

Meanwhile one may draw further hope from the fact that other university departments, notably English and Economic History, have already recognised the relevance of folk life studies and have organised, or are in process of organising, individual lectures within the set courses. These, incidentally, involve members of the professional staff of the Ulster Folk Museum. In the English Department lectures on local dialect have already been given. In economic history it is intended that a short course of lectures on local folk life will be fitted into the academic time-table in the near future.

But the absence of formal university courses in ethnology is a factor in determining a graduate's career. In a sense, a typical vicious circle exists. With no trained ethnologists to draw upon, such professions as teaching, social planning, journalism, broadcasting, etc., can hardly be expected to consider ethnological knowledge and training in recruiting staff. Conversely, without a demand for trained ethnologists from the professions the case for developing a formal university course, not to mention a department, is weakened.

At present in Northern Ireland the only institution outside the university likely to require and employ a trained ethnologist is the Ulster Folk Museum, whose Director and Senior Keeper are graduates of the School of Geography at the Queen's University of Belfast and, therefore, have come as close as is possible in present academic circumstances to being trained in the discipline of ethnology.

In view of its unique position, the Ulster Folk Museum, established by Act of Parliament in 1958, is being developed in accordance with a policy which tries to reflect a realistic assessment of the current situation and a resultant awareness of where improvements need to be made. Perhaps it could be argued that to create a folk museum in advance of academic teaching facilities is to approach the problem backwards. On the other hand the

dissemination of ethnological knowledge — or to revert to the local term "folklife" — through a folk museum, is to bring the community it represents, in terms both of individuals and organisations, into *direct* contact with the subject. In contrast to this the effect of university teaching in relation to the community, is more likely to be *indirect*. Therefore, the museum, if properly conceived, is better poised to demonstrate in an effective way not only the theoretical and physical content of "folklife", but also the *application* of the knowledge it provides to the benefit of contemporary society. Again, in contrast to this, a university department is likely to be concerned with ethnology more as a *pure* science than as an *applied* science. Ideally the functioning of a broadly conceived museum should be coexistent with, and complementary to, academic teaching and this is the end towards which we are working.

Meanwhile, in the absence of any complementary institution, the Ulster Folk Museum is already operating in a comprehensive way. It has, for example, initiated a research programme, and while this is inevitably related to other aspects of the Museum's work, it is by no means unduly influenced by the Museum's obligation to popularise folklife for the benefit of a sizeable lay public. On the contrary, its conduct is more determined by an intention to conform to the best academic standards of research.

The Folk Museum has also been active in promoting the idea that pre-university teaching in primary, secondary and grammar schools could usefully adopt folklife as a subject within organised school curricula. In this connection, too, an opportunity is now being explored of having folklife incorporated into teacher-training. Such developments at this fundamental level of education could help to strengthen a case for university teaching in ethnology and should facilitate any future move made in this direction.

In the field of Northern Ireland industry and commerce, the Museum's interest in the revival of traditional crafts may soon produce a significant contribution. It is estimated that several crafts, including handloom weaving, blacksmithing, carpentry, etc., have a commercial future either as service industries or as manufacturers of consumer goods. Their collective development, both within the Museum and within the Province as a whole, is envisaged as creating a composite industry of sizeable proportions, and while the precise nature of the Museum's participation has yet to be worked out in detail, the broad outline of a scheme is in being. It anticipates the Museum playing a central part and at this stage the crafts of spade-making, wrought iron work and farriery already operate in the Museum, with handloom linen weaving soon to follow. These have already demonstrated clearly a significant consumer demand both locally and abroad.

Town planning in Northern Ireland has recognised the potential of folklife. The planners currently designing the new city of Craigavon some 30 miles from Belfast feel that both the social and architectural problems stemming from the plantation of a new citizenry in a new environment may create an important opportunity for using knowledge of the traditional social pattern now being buried under the new city. Accordingly, Folk Museum staff have initiated a survey and documentation of folklife in the Craigavon area with a view to its being applied to new city development in the future.

In other respects the Ulster Folk Museum is exerting a useful influence. In its short life-time the relationships it has built up between itself and the press, broadcasting organisations, adult education bodies, the state Tourist Board, etc., may well lead in the foreseeable future to the employment of trained ethnologists in any or all of these public institutions.

In the international field the Ulster Folk Museum makes its contribution to comparative ethnology in publishing annually the journal *Ulster Folklife*. Out of a total circulation of 700 copies approximately 160 go abroad to both individuals and institutions. Similarly it is intended that the museum's one sizeable monograph to date — *Ulster Dialects* — will be the forerunner of further publications of interest to the specialist.

One other more recently formed body remains to be considered in reviewing the position of ethnology in Northern Ireland. Possibly it should have been referred to at an earlier stage in this paper since the body concerned is the Institute of Irish Studies which developed within the university. However, its administration is not wholly a university responsibility; its Board of Management includes, in addition to university personnel, one representative from each of three state institutions — the Ulster Museum, the Ulster Folk Museum and the Public Record Office.

As its name implies, the Institute of Irish Studies does not specialise in ethnology but merely includes it among a broader range of local subject matter, but at the same time the advance of folklife not only in Northern Ireland, but Ireland as a whole, is likely to benefit substantially from the Institute's work. Under the Directorship of Professor Evans, it is concerned essentially with research and publication and thereby assumes automatically a role of fundamental importance.

Thus, to summarise, the present position of ethnology in Northern Ireland relative to that of other European countries is perhaps expressible more in terms of potential than of actual achievement. Yet substantial progress has been made in a relatively short space of time. More important still is the conviction, firmly held in Northern Ireland, that the development of folklife is not merely desirable, but essential, to the well-being of the community.

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