

1. Introduction: Ireland's new ethnographic horizons

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An appropriate entry point to our discussion of ethnographic collections in Ireland is the remarkable history of an assemblage of non-European ethnographic artefacts housed in the National Museum of Ireland (NMI), Dublin. The 12,500 artefacts from the Pacific, the Americas and Africa are described as 'one of the finest collections of that kind in the world' (Hart 1995, 36). In contrast to a parallel collection in the Ulster Museum, Belfast, which for some time has been drawn on for exhibitions, this collection has been out of view for a considerable period. Indeed, William Hart writes that '[t]he African collections of the *National Museum of Ireland* are one of its best-kept secrets' (*ibid.*, 36). One of its constituent units—the O'Beirne Collection—'has never been on view to the public' and has been 'totally forgotten' (*ibid.*). While these collections have been largely kept in crated storage from 1979 to 2002, a permanent exhibition space is now being planned. This unveiling of an extensive collection in the National Museum comes at a time of extensive rethinking of ethnography and its artefacts—both nationally and internationally, academically and in practice. And though ethnographic exhibitions are not an uncommon presence in many European capitals, in Ireland the disclosure of this 'absent presence' (Buchli and Lucas 2001) suggests a potentially fruitful medium to refract shifting identities within the island of Ireland.

But there are other sets of ethnographic artefacts housed in Irish museums, north and south—collections of indigenous items, i.e. of Irish traditional (and mainly rural) culture, generally described as folklife material or European ethnology. Although historically the separation of overseas and indigenous artefacts spoke to geopolitical designations of culture, which refer to '... European mapping of the world' (Colunge 2009, 25), today we see such categories as constituting these distinctions rather than explaining them. For the purposes of this publication, therefore, 'ethnographic collections' refers to the assemblage of both overseas and indigenous folklife objects. This designation, which merges 'local'/national and 'foreign'/international artefacts, is purposive in order to place assemblages side by side that all too often are kept separate. When the dualism of the 'ethnographic' as opposed to the 'folk' is used by the volume's contributors, it is done only to refer to institutional taxonomies that we wish to challenge. Though the two types of material have had different historical

trajectories and might normally be thought of as distinct, their fates have been inextricably linked, as the papers in this volume will show.

Relatively little has been published about the history of museology on the island of Ireland (e.g. Bourke 2011; Crooke 2000; Lacey 1997; Lucas 1969; Buckley 1996), or about ethnographic collections specifically, and the papers in this volume comprise a limited selection of some of the main moments in this history. We divide papers into sections dealing with non-European collections first (Part One), followed by local ethnographic artefacts (Part Two). As we track both histories, their mutual relationships as neglected, forgotten or suppressed emerge.

Significantly, it is not the case that either kind of artefactual collection was actively hidden. There was no direct intervention that banished ethnographic holdings from Irish museums, no moment when they were deemed institutionally unacceptable. Instead they were simply neglected, ultimately left to languish in storage, in a preference for other histories. They were, in Frykman's terms, 'latent' (2005; see also Garvey and Drazin 2011). But, while latent suggests unobjectionable, Cooke (this volume) shows more disturbingly that an unreflexive Eurocentricism in the early twentieth century 'consigned (the) non-European collections . . . to the exotic and subaltern role'. The result is that a 'putatively post-colonial nation found itself reaffirming an essentially colonialist perspective on the material culture of "primitive" peoples with whom it had in some respects shared the experience of being the colonial subject' (*ibid.*).

In 2007 government funding was allocated for a new wing of the Collins Barracks complex of the National Museum of Ireland to house a permanent exhibition gallery of ethnographic material. This gallery is currently delayed but '[i]nitial display considerations were to be reflective and intended to reassess the Irish participation in, and reaction to, British imperialism, as well as the comparative nature of the material' (Hand, this volume). With this in mind, the final section of the book (Part Three) looks to the future. 'Ethnographic' directly implies the discipline of anthropology, and for some this term suggests colonial misadventure. It is not surprising that ethnographic exhibitions—as the public face of such ideas—are, according to Van Beek, 'on the way out'. If collections are indeed on the way out, with what are they to be replaced? Why should the launch of an ethnographic collection in Ireland come at a time when similar collections on the Continent are being downgraded or remodelled? Possibly we can find answers to these questions through comparison with European counterparts. These are some of the aims of the papers collected within this volume, which attempt to merge and compare different types of collections, primarily within the island of Ireland but also internationally.

The non-European ethnographic collections

The Republic of Ireland is identified as a formerly colonised country, but its rich holdings of international material heritage 'are witness to Ireland's part in "external colonialism" of empire when it was "internally colonised"', as Van Beek (this volume) puts it. This issue makes the work of remembrance and recognition all the more ambivalent, and draws attention to the particular kinds of work that material objects can do, being both witnesses to the past and social agents in the present.

Hand divides her detailed history of the non-European ethnographic collections of the National Museum of Ireland into four phases. The earliest ran from the late eighteenth century to the latter part of the nineteenth, and she focuses here on the collections of two institutions, the museums of Trinity College Dublin (TCD), founded in 1777, and of the Royal Dublin Society (RDS), first noted in 1797. These collections and the earlier 'cabinets of curiosities' of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy contained an eclectic mix of objects, spanning natural history, archaeology and ethnographic items. The process of collecting was part of the colonial endeavour, and most of the collectors were Irishmen serving in the British army or navy as colonial officials, or explorers.

With the establishment in 1877 of the Museum of Science and Art in Dublin, the collections of both TCD and the RDS were transferred to the new museum (including a significant group of objects from one of Captain Cook's voyages). The museum continued a vigorous programme of acquisitions—some 4,000 in the 1880s, 2,000 in the 1890s, and 940 in each of the first three decades of the twentieth century. The Museum of Science and Art, which opened its doors in 1885, was managed from London, was a state-run institution and aimed to foster commitment to the (British) nation. Its opening, too, coincided with the emergence of anthropology as a discipline, and its displays and classificatory practices reflected the social evolutionary ideas of the time, with their hierarchical ordering of the 'races of man'. Materials came from all parts of the world associated with the British Empire, notably the Pacific, North America, and Africa; many were the spoils of battle.

The turn of the twentieth century, however, marked a growth in nationalist feeling in Ireland, felt in the museum as elsewhere. It brought both a change of name—to the 'National Museum of Science and Art' (1908)—and the corresponding prioritisation of Irish archaeological material, now relocated from the first to the ground floor, to highlight its importance. Again, after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, the emphasis steadily shifted to other categories of artefact. Illustrative of this shift are the recommendations of the Lithberg Report in 1927, which argued that the museum's priority should be Ireland and that it should (in Hand's words) 'investigate past civilisation and present-day culture in three main categories of antiquities, folklore and applied art'. These latter were used to foster and

reignite a sense of pride in the Irish rural and artistic past—often idealised—while the foreign ethnographic collections reflected both a ‘primitive world’ and appeared to celebrate the involvement of Irish men and women in the British Empire (Hand). It is hardly surprising, then, to learn that, after a period of progressive neglect, the ethnographic collections were moved to ‘crated storage’ in 1979, the gallery having been closed already for some time. Today, according to Hand, the hope is that there can be a ‘renegotiated pride in an Irish past’, including a ‘recognition of the Irish role in the British Empire’, and that recognition will be given to the fact that objects are ‘message-bearing entities’ that have ‘multiple meanings’.

Hart’s contribution follows that of Hand and he focuses on a significant collection in the broader National Museum assemblage. This assemblage of a British army surgeon—Brian O’Beirne—is noteworthy for a number of reasons. Firstly, the period from which it derived is significant; it was sent in 1824 from Fort Thornton, residence of the governor of the British colony of Sierra Leone. This is very early, and long before the colonial carving up of Africa, from which period many museum holdings derive. Secondly, the items in the collection are not those of the immediate hinterland but represent the more ‘cosmopolitan’ culture of inland Muslim élites (Fula and Mandingoes). While the collection is small, totalling 46 items, and is a typical mixture of natural history and artefacts, the latter are, again, not typical but consist mostly of weapons. Finally, O’Beirne, a ‘rather shadowy figure’, was an Irish Catholic; Hart draws attention to the presence of other Irishmen in the colony and is tempted ‘to stress the Irish connection; to invite people to see the presence of such objects in Dublin as a relic of a hitherto overlooked aspect of the Irish overseas and as a reminder of a fleeting ascendancy that Irish expatriates once enjoyed in the early days of the colony of Sierra Leone’.

There are parallels and contrasts between the history of the Ulster Museum’s (UM) ethnographic collections and that of the National Museum of Ireland. While, like the NMI, the UM is ‘primarily a museum of Irish antiquities’ (Glover), its collection of non-European ethnographic artefacts numbers 4,500, somewhat smaller than the NMI’s. The origins of the Belfast collection also lie in a private institution, in this case the Belfast Natural History Society (later the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society), which was founded in 1821 and opened a museum in 1831. At the beginning of the twentieth century its collection was transferred to the newly established Belfast Museum and Art Gallery. This, having moved to a new site on Stranmillis Road in 1929, reopened in 1972 as the Ulster Museum. Systematic display of selections of the UM’s ethnographic holdings began to take place from 1978 onwards (the year of the American Bicentennial). Since then the UM has mounted exhibitions drawn from its Native American materials and those from Polynesia, Melanesia and Africa; before that, ‘only certain objects were highlighted over the years’.

Rather than focusing on the various phases of the history of the UM's collections, Glover instead concentrates on who the collectors were. As curator, she came to recognise that the collection had a unique quality: 'About 90% of it had been donated by people who had been born in the north of Ireland'. It was this characteristic that was highlighted to create a bond with the viewing public. Artefacts came from the following groups and categories: missionaries, conflict situations, colonial officials, diplomats, businessmen and traders, returned emigrants, and Ulster travellers. And, while the exchange relationships varied, unequal—even violent—colonial relationships were common (the Ashanti Wars, the Indian Mutiny). Gordon Augustus Thomson's collecting, for example, took place 'at a time when the whole Pacific was undergoing massive and irreversible change . . . so that many of the objects were typical of the cultures still fairly intact although beginning to reel under the combined influences of traders, whalers, missionaries and adventurers'. Today, the museum still engages in an active acquisition policy. Reflecting on the history of the UM ethnographic collection, Glover (pp 66–7) comments:

'Ethnography has waxed and waned in the esteem granted it by institutions, and it is really only in the fairly recent past that there has been enhanced recognition of the unique part such collections have in the history of humankind. These attitudes were exemplified in the treatment of the Ulster Museum's ethnography collection.'

But even after institutional recognition was granted, regular displays mounted and the Ulster connection highlighted, public interest seems to have been mixed: 'public interest was fairly low-key', she remarks of the response to one exhibition, and, elsewhere, 'the general public was unmoved'.

The folklife collections

In the southern Irish state, while overseas assemblages were neglected from the 1920s, they were not replaced with a valorisation of Irish peasant or farming culture. Instead the study of folklife appeared, to some, too close to home for popular appreciation. Indeed, the Irish population was deemed by one authority not yet 'mature' enough to witness the stark realities of their lives in an exhibitionary setting.

Ó Giolláin provides a long-term historical overview of the emergence of folklife studies and folklife museums. The study of folklife, i.e. the study of peasant material culture, emerged later than folklore studies, whose main focus was on oral literature. Folklore studies contributed to the development of national literatures outside of literary capitals and among 'disadvantaged non-dominant' ethnic groups. Drawing on

the oral literature of the common people, intellectuals stimulated self-awareness and national awakenings. An important outcome of the concentration on oral literature was the creation of the folklore archive (those of Estonia, Finland and Ireland being the largest). The Irish folklore archives have their roots in the nineteenth century but institutionalisation took place in the twentieth. The Folklore of Ireland Society was founded in 1927; in 1930 the government established the Irish Folklore Institute, which became the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935 (its remit covering all Ireland).

In Ó Giolláin's words, 'If folklore is closely linked to efforts to create national literatures, a sustained interest in folklife is somewhat later and is closely related both to the development of museums of folklife and to the display of aspects of folklife in world's fairs'. If the earlier 'cabinets of curiosities' were proto-museums, though with limited access, museums themselves, when they emerged, aimed at universal access and the promotion of national identities. They did not initially contain folk materials.

'It was only after the middle of the nineteenth century that interest in folk culture, already existing at the literary level, was extended to its material aspects, and in that the role of the world's fairs was particularly significant' (Ó Giolláin).

International exhibitions were vital media for developing visual representation, or 'exhibitionary orders' (Mitchell 1989; Bennett 1995). Many museums arose from the need to keep together collections of artefacts first displayed at exhibitions and fairs. Containing as they did 'national pavilions' and 'ethnographic villages', the exhibitions stimulated national consciousness. Significant in the emergence of displays representing folk culture was Artur Hazelius (1833–1901), who, after many earlier contributions, was responsible for the establishment in 1891 of Skansen, a pioneering open-air museum in Sweden. 'His influence was widespread in the Nordic countries and beyond, and in many ways he created the model for the ethnographic museum devoted to the folk culture of the national territory' (Ó Giolláin). Open-air museums spread rapidly in the succeeding decades.

International exhibitions stoked interest in folk culture in the form of mock villages or live exhibits, and added to the furtherance of already thriving social and cultural hierarchies. A significant early ethnographic representation of Irish peasants took place at the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893 in Chicago, visited by some 28 million people. Chicago built on the existing practice of displaying 'exotic populations' at shows ('Nubians', 'Lapps', 'Redskins'). Though both 'peasant' and 'savage' were displayed, the representations, according to Ó Giolláin, were not to be equated: 'If ancestral, the savage was ancestral in an evolutionary sense. The European peasant . . . appealed genealogically, as it were, to the nostalgia and the relative rootlessness of an immigrant society and helped to legitimate the old country heritage of many Americans'.

Such moves preceded a variety of folklife exhibitions and wax museums throughout Europe (see Sandberg 2003). As they developed, folk museums had a specific identity largely separate from mainstream museums.

With this background context, Ó Giolláin sketches the emergence of the National Museum of Ireland's folklife museum in Turlough Park, Castlebar, Co. Mayo, and of the Ulster Folk Museum (later the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum) in Cultra, Bangor, Co. Down. He begins the NMI story with the assemblage of folklife materials gathered in the 1920s by Dr Adolf Mahr, later to become NMI director. There followed the first major exhibition in 1937 and a permanent exhibition in 1950. But it was not until 2001 that the NMI's collection of some 50,000 artefacts found a permanent home, at Turlough Park. This belated recognition of folklife Ó Giolláin attributes to the negative association with the poverty of peasant life, in contrast to the perception that through oral literature peasants were able to transcend their social condition. Significantly, both folk museums are located at a distance from metropolitan centres, underlying the duality of urban and rural, the bourgeoisie and the peasantry.

O'Dowd's paper concentrates on the twentieth-century history of the National Museum of Ireland's folklife museum at Turlough Park. She opens with what amounted to a false dawn, the exhibition in 1937, from which it might have been hoped that a permanent display would spring. But this was not to be and the collection of folk objects was to suffer what O'Dowd terms 'three disappearing acts'. The first of these was after the 1937 exhibition itself, when the collection was put into storage; the second was in the early 1960s, when the material was removed to the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham; and the third came in 1978 with its removal to the grounds of a former Reformatory School at Daingean, Co. Offaly.

Why the disappearances? There is perhaps an irony in this, given the ideological shift that brought about a rebalancing between different types of collections (downgrading those associated with empire and colonialism in favour of those deemed indigenous, namely Irish archaeological and folklife materials).

Yet, despite the ideological shift, ambivalent attitudes still remained towards folklife materials. This had to do with their associations with poverty and the past. One contemporary source referred to the perception of folklife objects as 'dry and dead'. Adolf Mahr opined that 'it seems to be extremely difficult to raise enough interest (interest meaning also money) for the proposal for which the country has not fully matured' (quoted in O'Dowd, pp 121–7). O'Dowd herself refers to

'a general public perception and belief . . . that the collection of objects being quietly and surely amassed by generations of museum curators . . . would show only the poverty of our recent past and not the ingenuity of our ancestors in being able to survive with the minimum amount of disposable income'.

Striking in O'Dowd's presentation, as in Ó Giolláin's, is the significance of Scandinavian support for and influence in Irish folklore and folklife scholarship throughout the years. One example is the Swedish Folk Culture Mission to Ireland (1934 and 1935). Another is the key role played by Professor Nils Lithberg (1927). In Lithberg's opinion, the ideal of any National Museum 'should be to give consecutive representations of the native civilisation of the country from the time when the human mind first showed its creative power until the present day, and it should embrace all classes which have been or are still components of its society'. According to Lithberg, the National Museum should be based on the two principles of (i) knowledge of Ireland's earlier culture and (ii) the present-day life of the people. Influence came from outside Scandinavia too, not least that of Adolf Mahr. Despite the efforts of such scholars and many within Ireland, there seemed little hope for the creation of a folklife museum until a group of committed ethnologists organised a conference in 1984 and began campaigning. The decision to locate a national folklife museum in Castlebar was taken some years later, in 1997, and it opened its doors in September 2001.

Buckley continues the thread with a discussion of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, but here he traces key personalities and shifting perspectives on Northern Irish culture. Civic reform, a championing of social critique or cultural diversity is frequently a role assumed by museum curators (Witcomb 2003, 17, in Message 2006, 26), but Buckley's chapter highlights the particular fragility of such a project in a politically sensitive Northern Ireland. The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum was set up by an act of parliament in 1958 and it adopted diverse roles in moving from representing a specifically shared or common Northern Irish identity in the early days to one that illustrated the different practices of the two main religious communities. These responses by the museum, the author argues, were driven at first by an early anti-sectarian mission and later by recognition of cultural diversity. The non-sectarianism of the folk museum was founded on the view that Northern Ireland as a whole was significantly different from anywhere else, including England and southern Ireland. In other words, non-sectarianism was founded on the idea of a distinct and shared culture of Ulster. In the portrayal of a common culture before and during the time of the Troubles, there were no Catholic or Protestant homes, no religion-specific agricultural practices or dialects, utensils or practices. Buckley states that 'it was possible to portray much of the way of life and traditions of Northern Ireland past and present in very great detail, but without mentioning the fact that there were two hostile ethnic groups'. In an era when 'blood was literally flowing down the streets of many Ulster towns' this approach was at once both misleading, he concedes, and pragmatic. Far from issues more common to ethnographic museums, where remote, distant or vocal minority groups contest their portrayal, in the Ulster Folk Museum in a period of intense sectarian violence 'it was not wise to become entangled in the politics of cultural diversity' (Buckley). Eventually, recognition of difference, defined

in religious, ethnic or cultural terms and manifested in diverse life practices, became unavoidable. The museum adopted an alternative policy and began illustrating those facets of culture not shared by Catholics and Protestants. The open-air museum began to build churches and Orange lodges; religious emblems began to find their way into the dwellings of the open-air exhibits.

Buckley thus reminds us once more of the sensitivities of museum display when the politics of cultural diversity has a direct impact on the community in which the display takes place. We are alerted to the fact that institutional celebration of cultural diversity is a multi-textured phenomenon and must continue to be analytically interrogated. Within a politically sensitive Northern Ireland the celebration of common culture came across as inadequate, occluding other key spheres of life. At that particular social moment, Buckley found that distinct cultural heritage as a bounded entity proved successful, despite being the theoretical bugbear of the discipline of anthropology. In the current climate, however, the common roots of Northern Irish identities may again re-emerge to bolster the delicate peace that prevails.

The challenge of the future

The central issue addressed by Van Beek is what he interprets as the state of crisis of museums housing non-European artefacts in his native Netherlands and in continental Europe. The Netherlands has had a long history as a colonising country and also has a strong tradition in the academic discipline of anthropology. From his background in anthropology and museum studies, Van Beek opens his discussion with the scenario of a once-vibrant ethnographic museum sector now in crisis; the 'bad news', as he puts it, is that 'ethnographic museums are on the way out'. Since the time of his own training in the 1960s, some have closed and others live a 'precarious existence'. Ethnographic museums are increasingly questioning their social role and reconfiguring their display practices. In a recent report by the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, for example, one question posed was: how can existing collections contribute to current social issues? More specifically, what role should a museum take 'as a facilitating instrument in a multicultural society, an advocate of cultural diversity, a "Kunstkammer" [cabinet of curiosity] for world culture, a knowledge centre for roots cultures, or an attractive, stimulating entertaining centre?' (Faber and Van Dartel 2009, 9). Ethnographic museums may be called upon to fill any or all of these roles, and some accomplish this task very successfully. But Van Beek also alerts us to 'a nervous introspection, a restlessness, an unease with the object of museal ethnography'. Part of the response to the unease has been for ethnographic museums to change names, yet, as he recognises, 'changing one's name is a sure sign of an

identity crisis'. The cause of the crisis is to be sought in the Netherlands' colonising past and the fact that the rich ethnographic collections are largely imperial 'booty', which have gradually become 'a burden rather than an asset'. Curators who defend them have themselves come to be perceived as part of the problem. Attempts to address the malaise have involved trying to 'decolonise' the collections by, for example, placing them in the new context of development cooperation or fashioning them to appeal to new immigrant communities. There is the moral pressure, too, to repatriate parts of collections.

But at a deeper level Van Beek recognises the impact of a canonical crisis in the concept of culture. Culture now is seen as 'decentralised, fragmented, contradictory and "personal" . . . culture as both objectification ("roots") and as a constant source of alienation'. Yet in trying to adopt a new ethos, museums have failed to attract significant numbers of either the young or new minority populations.

But all is not gloom for Van Beek. The 'good news' is that ethnographic museums are adapting in some positive ways. Firstly, there is what Van Beek calls 'the historic turn', where collections are reflexively presented to highlight the colonial context within which they were assembled. On a similar topic, Message, for example, cites the curatorial work of the Museum of Sydney as exhibiting the history of the Australian city while also directly challenging dominant historical discourses. Instead, key narratives were 'constructed from a series of sometimes piecemeal moments and broken stories: incomplete and enigmatic rather than comprehensive and neatly packaged' (Message 2006, 27). By such means contemporary museums are employing a perspective on the past to spotlight present-day ideologies and highlight current exploitative relations.

Alternatively there is the 'aesthetic turn', under which ethnographic objects are increasingly treated as art. Despite the loss of context, Van Beek believes that 'constructing museum ethnography as art is . . . an emancipatory act, albeit, I should stress, within a Western debate of high art'. And, moreover, 'art is sexy, art museums are the ones that truly blossom in this day and age'. Keeping with his example of the Netherlands, a comparable discussion was ongoing in Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum in a symposium in 2007. The point was made by Mirjam Shatanawi that art museums and their ethnographic counterparts are increasingly overlapping. Collection policies for ethnographic material have traditionally underlined and created the parameters of cultural distinction, while art, she argues, makes universalist claims. Art, moreover, is by nature 'individual-based' (Shatanawi 2009, 64) and well positioned to challenge 'underlying paradigms' and 'fixed boundaries' that otherwise characterise traditional ethnographic assemblages. This point is significant: the aesthetic turn—or return, if one considers the modernist 'discovery' of tribal art in the early twentieth century—is also subject to considerable challenge. Clifford (2004, 639), for example, warns of 'the disquieting quality of modernism', which appropriated otherness through

'constituting non-Western arts in its own image'. He recommends that the twentieth-century taxonomic shift that redefined tribal goods as art, and which coincided with widespread subjugation of minority populations, 'requires critical historical discussion, not celebration' (2004, 641).

Since the beginning of the last century non-Western objects have found a home in discourses and institutions of either art or anthropology. While there has been regular traffic between both, by and large they have 'excluded and confirmed each other'. As Clifford (2004, 643) puts it,

'. . . [T]he aesthetic-anthropological opposition is systematic, presupposing an underlying set of attitudes toward the "tribal". Both discourses assume a primitive world in need of preservation, redemption, and representation. The concrete, inventive existence of tribal cultures and artists is suppressed in the process of either constituting authentic, "traditional" worlds or appreciating their products in the timeless category of "art".'

Indeed, it is noteworthy that, as well as her support of the 'aesthetic turn', Shatanawi observes that there appears to be a division between the type of art and artists featured in contemporary art museums and those shown in ethnographic or 'universal' museums such as the Tropen or the British Museum.

Nevertheless, Clifford notes, as Van Beek echoes, that the polarity between art and anthropology in housing non-Western objects is increasingly undermined. Science is aestheticised in ethnographic exhibits, while art is made anthropological. Reframing existing collections in contemporary museums does not, however, sidestep the burdensome truth that many of these objects were made for other purposes (see Küchler 1987) and that their recategorisation further abstracts from their human purpose or social role. He continues that, aside from this problem of definition, we are occasionally reminded by source communities that these objects belong elsewhere.

But other paths are possible, Van Beek continues, including trying to preserve objects *in situ* while making digital representations available to the European public. He finishes, however, with a final tension affecting ethnographic objects in museums. In the example he gives, the son of a former chief on the Torres Straits Islands journeys 'to the museums in Europe that harbour the unique Haddon collection from the islands. For the first time he sees the sacred objects that his ancestors used in the ceremonies that were forbidden by the missionaries'. The emotion of the occasion and his need to touch the objects meet the curatorial culture of protecting the items in order to preserve them for posterity. Van Beek here hints at the tension between the desire to touch and the museum's bias toward purely visual stimulation. This tension introduces a trend increasingly under focus that highlights the neglected role of the

senses in museum exhibits (see below).

Van Beek's final example leads us to Peers's primary concern: 'source communities', i.e. those formerly colonised communities from which the objects in Western museums derived. Her examples come from Native American communities and, more specifically, those of the First Nations in what is today Canada. She points out:

'At the time of collection, artefacts were embedded within conversations and relationships between peoples: relationships that resulted in diplomatic presentations, trade, marriage gifts, personal gifts and commissions, souvenirs, items made for sale and purchased by travellers and temporary residents overseas, objects confiscated under colonial rule or as part of assimilation policies. However stunted and one-sided the conversations between peoples were within such relationships, the objects collected represented them and their existence within complex local and imperial histories' (p. 157).

The objects transferred in such relationships were many and varied, including 'wampum belts, war clubs, tribal outfits, souvenir moccasins and baskets, and working items such as tumplines and canoes'. But, from once having had significant meaning for the source communities, they

'have—if they have survived at all—been reclassified as "ethnographic" rather than historical evidence and banished to museums, to be used as examples for children's educational activities, or as curiosities for family visits' (p. 158).

Over several centuries, the aboriginal source communities have experienced a catastrophic process of forced assimilation, 'pressured by church and state to give up their cultures'. Laws forbade the use of indigenous languages and the wearing of aboriginal costumes; residential schools, which operated in Canada until the 1970s, contributed to loss of culture and identity. The outcome today is the absence of heritage objects from many aboriginal communities, while rich collections are housed in museums in other parts of the world.

In common with indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, First Peoples have recently been experiencing a process of revitalisation. Part of the healing experience involved includes attempts to revive traditional knowledge, including crafts. It is here that material culture plays a crucial role. It is in this context that a new relationship has emerged between Western museums, the repositories of much of this heritage, and indigenous specialists. Experimentation with techniques of production and the close study of surviving artefacts have profound effects on indigenous craftspeople. The interactions become effectively conversations with the now-dead

makers and 'animate spiritual beings embodied by sacred objects'. The experience generates a range of emotions—grief, bitterness, elation. From the point of view of Western museum curators, the new relationship may challenge long-standing conservation practices (removing objects from protective bags, allowing them to be handled, even burning sacred herbs). Peers argues that making ethnographic collections available to source communities helps us 'to create new relationships and forms of knowledge around them, and indeed to rethink what museums are and who they serve':

'When you start looking at the historic contexts in which ethnographic objects were collected, the Irish seem to be ubiquitous: they were at the treaty signings, in the fur trade, in the wigwams, engaged in settlement and warfare. Metis coats, Iroquoian wampum belts, moccasins, and other "ethnographic" objects in the collections here thus reflect Irish histories as well as tribal ones' (p. 169).

This revisitation of the material collections, not as isolated artefacts but as 'nexuses for relationships', promises to cross cultural and generational divides. In keeping with a trend that acknowledges the sensorial component of knowledge, Peers's subject-matter mediates between institutional demands and indigenous rights. Highlighting the sensorial presentation of objects for indigenous communities in ways that do not violate museum practice, Peers traces different routes in the retrieval and production of cultural knowledge. Much of this restoration requires that the museum adopt a more flexible approach to its collections. And this flexibility, in conjunction with a sensorial approach to the material artefact (Edwards *et al.* 2002), may represent the harbinger of future museum displays.

If museum displays of non-European ethnographic collections are today in crisis, it is arguable that folk collections, too, are not without their problems. Van Beek points out that while in Germany folklife studies stood 'squarely in a German Enlightenment tradition' and were 'part of a distinctly emancipatory project', in the 1930s they 'became deeply embroiled in right-wing ideologies' and 'for many years . . . remained synonymous with the study of irrelevant knowledge that was ideologically dangerous'. Only in the 1990s, he suggests, did they emerge from this by refocusing on 'local traditions of consumption'. And, when O'Dowd tells of 'young folklife graduates' in Europe brutally dismissing 'the work of the previous generation of folklife scholars', one assumes that the cause was a similar perception of the discipline's conservative aspect.

More recently, Buckley describes the emergence of a philosophy of 'managerialism' and the creation of a federation of museums, the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI). This change, Buckley argues, is equated with administrative rationalisation, with saving money and with 'putting bums on

seats'. Part of this is highlighted by Macdonald as the increasing appropriation of the metaphor of the shop in reconfiguring the relationship between museums, their public and the state (1998b, 118). She links this development to declining state support and consequent emphasis on branding exhibitions and establishing niche markets (*ibid.*). A more hard-hitting assertion by Cummings and Lewandowska (2004, 618) contends that the

'. . . convergence between museum and the store is just part of a dissolution of the previously clear demarcation between the cultural and the economic. Indeed, any notion of the two institutions being radically opposed can now only be supported as an ideological proposition, rather than by reality.'

Interestingly, a recent advertisement for the National Museum of Ireland placed in a broadsheet newspaper runs: 'Beautiful. Disarming. Whimsical. Ornamental. Useful. Affordable. In a Word — Shopping' (*The Irish Times*, 27/11/08).

'Partnership', in this new world, indicates cooperation with business or government institutions. There is no pressure to form partnerships with local organisations, or with the buffs, the amateur curators, who know about railways or their sports team or the history of their locality (Buckley). Both Van Beek and Buckley refer to the peripheralisation of museum curators in the process of change. This would seem unfortunate in the light of the pivotal and dynamic role of curators in establishing innovative ethnographic collections in Ireland, as documented in this volume.

And, just as Peers describes the crucial role that curators play in the increasing cooperation between museums and source communities, so Buckley tellingly recounts the important links with Northern Irish 'source communities', specifically with local buffs and historical societies.

Ó Giolláin argues that while the crisis of representation in folk museums is not as intense as in those devoted to other cultures it exists nonetheless. Folklife studies in the nationalist tradition, originating as they did in an ideology of romantic nationalism, exaggerated the homogeneity of the population in their stress on national unity. This included an occlusion of class distinctions, a privileging of the Irish language over English, and of the rural (especially the rural west) over the urban. We must, Ó Giolláin suggests, now ask the question of 'whose voice, i.e. who is being represented in folklore archives and folklife museums? . . . It goes without saying that the frame of reference was not that of the communities concerned.' Rather it was those of the collectors, and their representations conveyed 'a certain cultural pessimism', of cultures as degenerating rather than being dynamic. The unitary framework, he suggests, can no longer stand. 'In the light of the pluralisation of viewpoints experienced by and in the West, this is no longer tenable.'

Cooke's contribution, the last of our papers, goes some way towards juxtaposing routes taken in the past with recommendations for the future. Firstly, his analysis concentrates on the changing fortunes of the three types of collection in the National Museum of Ireland in the early days of the Irish Free State, namely Irish archaeology, folklife and non-European ethnography. His specific focus is the 1927 report on the museum, commissioned by the government. The context in which this took place, according to Cooke, was one of tension 'between the desire to assert a coherent and homogeneous nationhood and a recent history that saw many Irishmen and women willingly or enthusiastically involved in building and sustaining an empire'. This tension was 'crystallised' both in the institutional history of the National Museum (an imperial museum, subordinate to London) and in the 'composition of its collections' (which included a significant collection of non-European artefacts brought back from various corners of the empire). The 1927 Committee of Enquiry actually produced two reports, a shorter one by its Irish members and a longer one by its one foreign member, Professor Lithberg from Stockholm. The Irish members came out strongly in favour of prioritising Irish archaeological materials:

'The main purpose of the National Museum of Ireland should be to accumulate, preserve, study and display such objects as may serve to increase and diffuse the knowledge of Irish civilisation, or the Natural History of Ireland and of the relations of Ireland in these respects with other countries' (quoted in Cooke, p. 173).

The priority was to be spatially symbolised by moving the archaeological collection to the Rotunda and Central Court of the museum. If the archaeological collections were to be accorded first priority, the choice of Professor Lithberg revealed another line of thinking, according to Cooke:

'If this was an explicit pointer to the Free State's determination to reorientate the policies, practices and collections of the Museum along nationalist lines, the inclusion of Professor Lithberg indicated that the field of Irish folk culture had already been identified as one that might have a particular role to play in realising this goal.' (p. 172)

Both Lithberg's and the Committee's reports advocated creating a folklife collection, or a collection 'of objects connected with phases of the daily life of the Irish people in the earlier times of our period' (Cooke). Moreover, the Committee set clear time boundaries for the materials to be collected: 'the collection of furniture and implements of everyday life should be confined to the period "before these objects became denationalized by the machine-made mass production of foreign countries"' (*ibid.*). An inevitable consequence of this boundary was that 'it foreclosed the

possibility that the museum would engage in a substantive way with the Irish experience of urbanisation' (*ibid.*).

At another level, both Professor Lithberg's and the Committee's reports left the future of the non-European collections in limbo. Neither contains 'an explicit description of the non-European ethnography, nor any clear recommendation on its precise positioning within the new scheme . . . their thinking in relation to this material has to be inferred from other aspects of their reports, but particularly from the thinking on native ethnography or folklife'. Moreover, their justification of the importance of folklife materials as being due to their illustrating continuity of tradition and habits in the native culture had the effect of undermining the comparative significance of non-European artefacts. The practical effect of these approaches was the steady marginalisation of the ethnographic collections.

If the effect of all of this was to convert the non-European ethnographic artefacts into 'objects of wilful forgetfulness', there is an opportunity today to reverse the neglect. Cooke writes:

'The museum possesses a formidable inertial capacity to retain in the face of even the most resolute ideological projects the heterogeneous character of its temporal accumulations. Ignored and largely forgotten, the non-European ethnographic holdings of the National Museum "sat out" the first century of independence, so that they are now available to fresh interpretation in times much altered from those contemplated by the 1927 Committee.' (p. 182)

While the specific papers in this volume stand on their own, as testament to the recent recognition of both categories of ethnographic assemblage in Ireland and as biographical explorations of the specific stories of the collections, as a whole they add up to something more. Previously existing as disparate and separate collections, there was never until now such an opportunity to conceive of these things together, the folk alongside the colonial, the different parts of Ireland, the manifestations of internal and external others. Folk collections are a relatively recent addition to Irish museums and plans are afoot for the future display of non-European objects. Why now is ethnographic material emerging from the figurative and literal shadows into the limelight of the Irish museological present? As Miller argues, we cannot either 'know who we are, or *become* what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us' (2005, 8; emphasis added). Ethnographic artefacts are not mere objects but are the materialisation of practices, the nexuses of relationships (Peers) and the objectification of individuals and groups. The past evaluation of these objects has formed one strand of Irish museology. But this history did not stop somewhere in the twentieth century: it is ongoing and continues to evolve around the stories we tell about the ethnographic object and subject in Ireland.

Reflections

We propose that heritage in Ireland offers a very particular instance in terms of its sociopolitical past and present, and the role that ethnographic objects play in these. Echoing Van Beek's characterisation early in this introduction of Ireland as 'internally colonised', we can firmly locate in the Irish experience the ruptures of the colonised alongside something of the sense of immanent obligations of the imperial collector. The recent intertwined histories of both types of ethnographic collection across Ireland, and in particular the display and concealment of these collections, have been active in manifesting and addressing these ambiguous conditions.

In charting the history of museums we are also mapping the history of state institutions. And the Ireland of the early twenty-first century, north and south, is very different from that of the early twentieth. In the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, both parts of the island have experienced major patterns of social and cultural change. Since the 1960s these have included entry into the European Community and increasing engagement with global issues (in trade and development aid, for example). The Republic experienced that form of rapid economic growth dubbed the 'Celtic Tiger', followed by deep recession. Accompanying economic growth was the dramatic reversal of the traditional pattern of emigration. The Irish population had shrunk from about 4.4 million in 1861 to 2.8 million in 1961. That pattern continued until the 1990s, when a reversal took place: 'Ireland experienced dramatic increases in immigration flows (which include returning Irish citizens) from the mid-1990s but most markedly after the 2004 EU enlargement. Flows peaked in 2006–2007 at well over 100,000 immigrants per year before dropping off in 2008.'¹ In addition, from the late 1960s the island as a whole, but in particular Northern Ireland, was deeply affected by the trauma of 'the Troubles' (decades of bitter conflict that integrally involved both the Republic and Britain). The political settlement of that conflict involved a rebalancing of the political and cultural relationships between the two communities in Northern Ireland, between north and south, and between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain.

In addition to these developments, and as Macdonald reminds us, politics is not restricted to institutions, policy statements or events but is at play also in 'minor' details such as 'the architecture of buildings, the classification and juxtaposition of artefacts in an exhibition, the use of glass cases or interactives, and the presence of a voice-over on a film' (Macdonald 1998a, 3). So, for example, as the nationalist movement grew in Ireland during the early decades of the twentieth century, non-European ethnographic collections, with their Anglo-Irish associations, remained latent objects, largely unseen by the general public and generally neglected by curatorial policy. Instead, archaeological exhibits were given the highest visibility as exhibits of prehistoric wealth and culture. In contrast, by mid-century, when these

collections in the National Museum of Ireland were neglected, the Ulster Museum showcased its holdings with regular exhibitions. But here too one can see the reminders of class and religion, not only in the artefacts but equally in the designation of the museum audience: that is, the specifically 'Ulster' identification of this museum collection raises questions about the divided nature of the northern community. Do northern nationalists and Ulster unionists view these collections as equally identifiable? Does the emphasis on 'Ulster' continue to suggest past alliances with Protestant Ulster?

In other words, various interests impinge on the politics of display and the politics of neglect, and curators often find themselves reacting to several, often conflicting, social, political and financial agendas. The museum, in all this, 'effaces itself to become an invisible frame for the art or artefacts it appears merely to house, conserve, and exhibit' (Pollock 2007, 1; see also Miller 2005). For example, although exhibits are deeply temporalised, the museum appears as ahistorical. The exhibition floor may appear more readily as a space to illustrate past action and culture rather than being recognised as an active site of contemporary culture-building.

Curatorial choices, then, are always situated within 'wider historically located cultural logics and political rationalities' (Macdonald 1998a, 4). The result is that such choices may have assorted consequences. In the papers in this volume we have seen, for example, that folklife material tended to be consigned to the pre-industrial past. Emphasis on oral culture (folklore) rather than material culture (folklife) facilitated the necessary means to transcend 'the peasant' in the constitution of 'the citizen'. While these early distinctions worked to homogenise Irish nationhood, they also worked to efface the urbanisation and modernisation that characterise much of the last century. In addition, however, they also disavowed any connection with other colonised countries (see Saris 2000; Cooke, this volume).

But if, since the turn of the millennium, the ethnographic object has been recategorised as 'of interest' to the population at large, what is envisioned as its social contribution? Does it represent past 'heritage' or the medium for a multicultural celebration? Cooke comments that, without a permanent anthropologist on staff, museums such as the National Museum of Ireland may lack sensitivity to the realisation of Irish identities in new media—implying that this represents the role of the museum. To many, ethnographic objects, categorised as national or international heritage and housed in museums, imply a notion of culture as static and fixed in definitive chronologies. Their role is to illustrate the past, not to speak to the present. Cooke endorses a different view, contending that overseas collections may speak to 'New Irish' populations and new Irish life practices and values. Heritage, by this logic, can also be seen as a contemporary resource that is shifting and continuously emergent. This coincides with Butler's (2006, 476) argument that heritage must relinquish its historical approach to become instead 'an essentialised resource for

“creating a future” in the contemporary global context’. In this respect, the pertinent considerations for heritage are ‘constituencies’, which include displaced, diasporic, transnational and indigenous cultures and cultures in conflict (*ibid.*, 476). And in addition to the displaced and marginal, the settled and the normative can also claim heritage as ongoing practice rather than as historical narrative.

Moreover, rethinking the role of the museum and its accretions involves critically examining the audience to whom these assemblages speak. Macdonald (2003) argues that the traditional role of the museum as providing the breeding ground for nation-state identities is currently being challenged. Can museums, she asks, provide the context for alternative articulations of group identities? Significantly, however, the home crowd is not always the sole focus for an exhibition. Cooke argues that early decisions regarding the categorisation of the ethnographic were made as much in cognisance of an external audience as of a local one. Again, McVeigh and Lentin (2002, 18) argue that ‘[t]hrough much of their history Irish people have necessarily made sense of the world through the filter of other people’s perceptions of that world’. We see this still in institutions that deal with heritage, such as when the Irish Heritage Council stated in 2003 that ‘[t]he material culture of this country has contributed enormously to our image abroad and our own self-image as a nation’ (Heritage Council 2003, 8). Culture, it is implied, as well as its specific materialisations, is a resource for the positioning of Irishness *vis-à-vis* others. Here one is reminded of Lawrence Taylor’s (1995, 215) reference to ‘the continuing construction of Ireland, a process with its own symbolic geography that defines Ireland internally and externally in relation to a limited number of significant and changing “others”’. Taylor draws attention to the particular way in which the ‘significant others’ of Ireland have been both internal and external but always very present in the construction of Irishness.

National assemblages of ethnographic objects are one such category of ‘significant others’; they do not stand apart from the social scripts that are written about and through them. Instead they enable, expand or obfuscate the means through which we know ourselves. In this volume we follow the threads of a museological perspective following who we are. The counterpoint, however, the exciting possibility of what this new materiality enables us to become, is still a point of conjecture.

Note

1. Martin Ruhs (updated by Emma Quinn), ‘Ireland: from rapid immigration to recession’, *Migration Information Source* (September 2009), www.migrationinformation.org.

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