Exploring the Food-Related Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bealtaine (May Day) within the Irish Folklore Commission’s Schools’ Collection Digital Archive

Exploration du patrimoine culturel immatériel lié à l’alimentation de Bealtaine (May Day) dans les archives numériques du Recueil des écoles de la Commission du folklore irlandais

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Abstract: In 1937-1938, the Irish Folklore Commission ran the Schools’ Collection Folklore Project, where 50,000 schoolchildren became folklore collectors. This paper argues for a better understanding of Irish food as intangible cultural heritage, and champions the application of a food perspective among Irish studies scholars. Using the online digitised Schools’ Folklore Collection (dúchas.ie), this paper explores food traditions associated with Bealtaine or May Day, one of the four quarter days of the Irish calendar year. Drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper finally champions the growing digitisation of archives for broader global accessibility.

Keywords: Ireland, intangible cultural heritage, food studies, folklore, Bealtaine, digital archives.

Résumé: En 1937-1938, la Commission du folklore irlandais a mené le projet de folklore Recueil des écoles, dans le cadre duquel 50 000 écoliers sont devenus des collecteurs de folklore. Cet article plaide pour une meilleure compréhension de l'alimentation irlandaise en tant que patrimoine culturel immatériel et préconise l'application d'une perspective alimentaire par les spécialistes des études irlandaises. À l'aide de la collection numérique Schools' Folklore Collection (dúchas.ie), cet article explore les traditions alimentaires associées à Bealtaine ou May Day, l'un des quatre jours marquant le début des saisons en Irlande. Tirant des leçons de la pandémie de COVID-19, cet article conclut en défendant la numérisation croissante des archives pour une plus grande accessibilité mondiale.

Mots clés: Irlande, patrimoine culturel immatériel, études sur l'alimentation, folklore, Bealtaine, archives numériques.

On 30 November 1937, a fifth-class student at Greenans National School in county Mayo, Brígidh Ní Rabhlaigh, collected folklore from her 80-year-old relative Seán Mac Rabhlaigh about Lá Bealtaine, or May Day, as part of a special national folklore project. Written in the Irish language, the transcript (fig. 1) notes that May Day marked the beginning of summer and lists customs such as decorating doorways with flowers for good luck; adults washing their faces with the May morning dew; the belief that fire, salt, milk or eggs should not be let out of the house; and that the good people – na sídheógha – are stealing young babies from their cradles and leaving changelings in their place.
In 2018, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire argued for food to be recognised as part of Ireland’s intangible cultural heritage (ICH), noting that in Ireland, unlike France,
tradition was mostly ignored by historians and it was left to the folklorists and the oral tradition to ensure dissemination. He also called for more engagement with sources in the Irish language to help historians and researchers paint a clearer and fuller picture of Ireland’s culinary heritage. In December 2015 Ireland ratified the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention – ICHC). Intangible cultural heritage refers to “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage”. Food traditions are among the many other forms of intangible heritage, which include language, literature, music and dance, games and sports, rituals and mythologies, knowledge and practices concerning the universe, know-how linked to handicrafts, and cultural spaces. In 2010, UNESCO first included food traditions from France, Croatia, and Mexico on their representation List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of humanity (ICH), and food traditions from other countries have been included in subsequent years. In 2017, Ireland’s uilleann piping tradition was the first Irish ICH to be recognised on the UNESCO List. Native Irish cattle breeding, winterage in the Burren, loy digging, beekeeping, and some fishery-related traditions were among the thirty cultural heritage elements inscribed on Ireland’s permanent National Inventory in 2019.

The aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly, it argues for a better understanding of Irish food as ICH, and champions the application of the food lens among Irish studies scholars. Secondly, using the online digitised Schools’ Folklore Collection (dúchas.ie), the paper will explore food traditions associated with Bealtaine or May Day, one of the four quarter days of the Irish calendar year. Finally, drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, we will encourage the growing digitisation of archives for broader global accessibility.

Food traditions, customs and practices relating to quarter days and other Irish festive days form part of the nation’s ICH, and are recorded in the abundant resources of the collections in the National Folklore Commission (NFC), housed at University College Dublin (UCD). However, to date, and with few exceptions, little food-related research has been carried out on these collections. The dúchas.ie repository provided an accessible alternative primary source for this paper, written during the COVID-19 pandemic when the NFC archives in UCD were closed. The specific findings reveal the intricate cosmology of our recent ancestors, highlighting the importance of cattle, milk and dairy in particular to Irish life. Folk belief in witches stealing the milk profit illustrates the precariousness

2. ICHC, article 2.
of a farming lifestyle, and the fear of a bad harvest and the potential hunger and hardship that would ensue. Cows and dairy still predominate Irish agriculture, and sociologist Corey Lee Wrenn recently argued from a vegan feminist perspective that “vegans are the butter witches of the modern day, an untrusted feminine force interfering with the livelihood of ‘farmers’”.5 We will briefly explore the growth of scholarship on Irish food history and the rise in the last decade of food and drink scholarship within the field of Irish studies. We will also outline the development of folklore collection in Ireland, with particular reference to the 1937-1938 Schools’ Collection, and discuss the key folklorists who have written on Irish food customs and traditions to date. Using the NFC Schools’ Collection as a primary source, and focusing particularly on Bealtaine (May Day), the paper explores the food-related traditions associated with this quarter day, before contextualising and discussing the findings. Food traditions incorporate customs, beliefs and superstitions, rather than simply listing ingredients, techniques and dishes. This paper is an exploratory study of the food traditions associated with May Day in Ireland, and does not claim to be comprehensive. It is hoped that this paper will raise awareness of Irish food as ICH and promote the further use of a food lens within Irish studies, whilst championing the continued digitisation and online accessibility of cultural archives.

Irish food history

In 2019, the Royal Irish Academy published A History of Ireland in 100 Words, which included a special chapter on “Food and Feasting” highlighting the importance of bread, milk, apples, and honey as iconic Irish foods, and including drinking horns, forks, cauldrons, and the champion’s portion “curadhmhír” as other important cultural elements within Ireland’s history.6 Food history has been gaining momentum globally for over half a century. In an Irish context, it is sixty years since A. T. Lucas’s seminal paper “Irish Food before the Potato” was published.7 Lucas highlighted the importance of cattle and “bánbhia” or white meats (milk, butter, curds, cheese, etc.) along with oats, wheat and barley as a mainstay within the Irish diet and culture prior to the introduction of the potato in the late 16th century. It would be a further twenty years, however, before the next seminal text appeared with Louis Michael Cullen’s The Emergence of Modern

Ireland: 1600-1900 which dedicated two chapters to food, diet and hospitality. Other individual researchers on Irish food history, traditions and customs included Kevin Danaher, Fergus Kelly, Bríd Mahon, Finbar McCormick, Katherine Simms and Patricia Lysaght, and more recently Regina Sexton, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, Darina Allen, Rhona Richman Kenneally, Claudia Kinmonth, Dorothy Cashman, Tara McConnell, Marjorie Deleuze, Brian Murphy, Marzena Keating, Elaine Mahon and John Mulcahy.

A notable sign of food history’s acceptance as a discipline in Ireland was the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C* special issue on food and drink in Ireland, published in 2015, covering an arc from the Mesolithic of Ireland to dysfunctional food consumption in 21st-century Irish society. Within the field of Irish studies, the special Food Issue of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2018 championed the importance of food in Irish scholarship, bringing it towards the mainstream. A five-year interdisciplinary project on food, culture and identity in Ireland circa 1550-1650, titled FoodCult., funded by the European Research Council, brings together history, archaeology, science and information technology to explore the diet and foodways of diverse communities in Early Modern Ireland.

A special 2021 thematic issue of *Folk Life* on Irish food ways, furthers collective insight into aspects of Ireland’s shared culinary and food heritage and, pertinent to this paper, includes two articles using the NFC Schools’ Collection as a source. More details of the rise of popular, academic and grey literature on Irish food history, customs and traditions are found in two recent publications charting the journey of gastronomy and food studies in Ireland “from the dark margins to the spotlight” and on the growing interest in food and beverage research within the field of Irish studies.

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Food in Irish studies

In 2007, Liam Harte and Yvonne Whelan mapped Irish studies in the 21st century. Their monograph *Ireland beyond Boundaries* included chapters on intellectual criticism, historiography, religion, gender, media, geography, music, sports and Irish culture, but made no mention of food. The omission began to be addressed in 2014 with the publication of “Tickling the Palate”: Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture. This edited collection focused a food lens on Irish authors such as Maria Edgeworth, James Joyce, John McGahern, and Sebastian Barry, along with exploring food and drink consumption in various segments of Irish society from the elite households of 18th-century Ireland to the Dublin tenements of the 1950s, the emergence of Ireland as a “foodie nation” with the proliferation of Michelin starred restaurants and the widespread exportation of Irish pubs. Further food-related chapters appeared in a number of other edited volumes within the Reimagining Ireland series (volumes 55, 66, 68 and 93), and in volumes 9 and 14 of the Studies in Franco-Irish Relations (SFIR) series, both published by Peter Lang.

One early crossover between food studies and Irish studies was an exploration of food-related placenames in Ireland which melded gastro-topography and *dinnseanchas*, with Brian Friel’s play *Translations*, the staging of which marked the real launch of Field Day in 1980. In 2019, the *Irish University Review* published a special issue on Food, Energy, Climate: Irish Culture and World-Ecology, where Sharae Deckard’s introductory essay noted that writing about nature in Ireland is confined almost entirely to writing about agriculture, and that the relationship to the land and nature has long been politicised due to Ireland’s colonial history. Post-colonial shame has arguably led to feelings of inferiority regarding traditional Irish foodstuffs and food preparation. Anke Klitzing has recently applied a “gastrocritical” approach to the poetry of Seamus Heaney, concluding that the detailed and multi-layered depictions of agricultural and culinary scenes within his *oeuvre* are “fuelled by his deep familiarity with rural and culinary activities as well as his knowledge of Irish mythology, history and culture”. 

19. *Dinnseanchas* is a class of onomastic text in early Irish literature, recounting the origins of placenames.
Food is a complex topic that is gradually establishing a foothold in Irish studies and expanding the collective understanding of Ireland’s intangible cultural heritage and identity. Food is to be found in every aspect of the Irish imagination, from our mythology, placenames, stories, songs, poetry and folklore. Furthermore, Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brien’s review of Irish studies scholarship, *Reimagining Irish Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (2021), confirms the increased interest in food within Irish studies since Harte and Whelan’s 2007 monograph, containing chapters on both food studies and beverage studies respectively.\(^{23}\)

**Collecting folklore in Ireland**

Folklore is an inherently interdisciplinary field, linked to the fields of anthropology and literature.\(^{24}\) From the 5th century, the Christianisation of Ireland witnessed the introduction of monasteries and monks, who recorded in writing local lore that would previously have been preserved via the oral tradition.\(^{25}\) There is some agreement on the timing of the popularisation of folklore in Europe through the folktales of the Brothers Grimm in the early 19th century and the adoption of the term “folklore” from 1846.\(^{26}\) The Celtic Revival of the late 19th and early 20th century increased folklore’s appeal in Ireland; however, its official structured collection was influenced by visiting Swedish and Norwegian professors who inspired Professor James Delargy\(^{27}\) of UCD to set up the Irish Folklore Society in 1926.\(^{28}\) A government grant enabled this to grow into the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930 and finally in 1935 the Irish Folklore Commission was founded.\(^{29}\)

**The Schools’ Collection**

The Schools’ Folklore Collection (1937-1938) was an oral history project, which collected handwritten essays (six thousand copybooks filled with folklore collected by over fifty thousand children) from sixth-class pupils in national schools around

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\(^{23}\) Brian Murphy, “Drinking Spaces in Strange Places: New Directions in Irish Beverage Research”, in *Reimagining Irish Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 91-110; Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, “Applying a Food Studies Perspective...”.


\(^{27}\) Better known as Séamus Ó Duilearga.


\(^{29}\) *Ibid.*
Ireland (outside the larger cities). Many of the texts within the Schools’ Collection are written in the Irish language and, in some instances, use the old Irish script (see fig. 1). In 1937, a guide book for teachers was published which set out fifty-five subject areas about which students could write, such as “the lore of certain days”, “herbs”, “local placenames”, or “festival customs”. Figure 2 shows a page from the guiding booklet highlighting festival customs, many of which resulted in rich descriptions of food related traditions. Patricia Lysaght recently charted the history of the Schools’ Folklore Collection and also comprehensively mapped the aims, achievements, and legacy of the Irish Folklore Commission from 1927-1970. Whereas the Commission initially set out to “collect the fragments”, principally in Gaeltacht regions of the western seaboard, an innovative agreement between the Folklore Commission, the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, and the Department of Education resulted in the schoolchildren of the Irish Free State (twenty-six counties) becoming folklore collectors in nearly every parish of the country. A similar project was later carried out in the six counties of Northern Ireland. In relation to the suitability of the Schools’ Collection as a primary source for research, Patricia Lysaght noted:

[…] all of the material resulting from these folklore-collecting schemes and competitions on the island of Ireland, rigorously evaluated, remains a resilient and pertinent resource for interdisciplinary national and international scholarly research.

Dúchas.ie: digitisation of the Schools’ Collection

It was the digitisation project dúchas.ie that provided access to such a rich archive for this research which was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the NFC in UCD was closed. The Main Manuscript Collection, one of the largest folklore collections in Europe, is currently in the process of being digitised. The Schools’ Folklore Collection, however, had already been digitised and indexed with approximately one thousand and seven hundred topics accumulating to form the Schools’ Collection Subject List. The Dúchas Project team amalgamated this subject list with the MoTIF (Pilot Thesaurus of Irish Folklore) to create a thematic browsing facility for users of the site. Although this research collated a sample data-set which included food references from the 649 transcripts in the “May” subset of the Events

33. Caitríona Nic Philibín, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, “An Exploratory Study…”.
34. Patricia Lysaght, “Collecting the Folklore of Ireland…”., p. 24.
for the major operation. This lame excuse gave rise to
the saying: "Making preparations as Tadhg na Spréach
was with the tooth." This tale is also told in other European
countries.

In almost every district such sayings have local origin
and application, and a small number of these will have
far more interest and value than a long list of proverbs
which have ultimately been derived from printed sources,
most of them imported.

FESTIVAL CUSTOMS

In most districts many feasts are observed in a special
manner as they occur each year.

To cite one: On St. Stephen’s Day boys, and in some
places grown-up men, gather together and go in procession
from house to house with decorated bushes, singing the
Wren-song. A detailed account of this, with the actual
words sung should be given. Is money gathered? How is it
divided and how spent?

Important festivals are: St. Brigid’s Day, St. Patrick’s
Day, Shrove, Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday, "Chalk"
Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Saturday
and Sunday, Whit Sunday and Whit Monday, May Day,
St. John’s Day, Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, Feast of the
Assumption (August 15th), Michaelmas, St. Martin’s Day,
St. Thomas’ Day, Hallowe’en, the Twelve Days of Christ-
mas, St. Stephen’s Day, New Year’s Eve and New Year’s
Day, the Epiphany ("Little Christmas"), etc.

All local customs and observances connected with these
feasts, commonplace though they may be in the district,
may be quite unknown in other portions of the country
and ought, therefore, to be noted down.

Any expressions, proverbs, or traditional stories con-
 nec ted with any of the feasts should be recorded.

THE CARE OF OUR FARM ANIMALS

Give a list of the farm and domestic animals at home.
Have the cows got names? What are these names

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Fig. 2 – A page from booklet distributed by Irish Folklore Commission (1937).
Irish Folklore Commission, *Irish Folklore and Tradition*,
theme, there are further food related themes that deserve future research, including “butter and churns” (3,324 transcripts), “potatoes” (2,723 transcripts), “Halloween” (957 transcripts), or “food in olden times” (1,604 stories; 284 transcripts). The fact that many urban schools were allowed to opt out of the survey thus under-representing urban or city food traditions within the collection, remains a limitation.35

Food in Irish folklore

Food permeates every level of society and every aspect of our lives from birth to death. Seán Ó Súilleabháin’s *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, published in 1942, contains fifteen pages on food and drink topics to ask potential respondents, ranging from terminology, appetite, hunger and thirst, fasting and abstinence, eating and drinking, and household beverages, to meals, luxuries (alcoholic drinks, tobacco and snuff), household vessels and utensils.36 Whereas Kevin Danaher’s *The Year in Ireland*,37 and more recently Marion McGarry’s *Irish Customs and Rituals*,38 chart the calendar of the Irish agricultural year including quarter days, the most comprehensive food related folklore publications are Brid Mahon’s *Land of Milk and Honey: The Story of Traditional Irish Food & Drink*,39 and Patricia Lysaght’s various articles ranging from milk magic and the boundary festivals of May to hospitality traditions at wakes and funerals in Ireland.40 Although Lucy Long41 is one of the most prolific scholars to combine folklore with food studies, only a limited number of her outputs have an Irish focus.42 Recently published articles on the food traditions associated with the twelve days of Christmas43 and with Imbolg (St. Brigid’s Day)44 highlight the rich resource that the Schools’ Collection provides, and also identify further areas for research for future food scholars within both the main and digitised folklore archives.

35. Patricia Lysaght, “Collecting the Folklore of Ireland…”, p. 23.
41. Lucy Long, “Folklore”.
43. Stephanie Byrne, Kathleen Farrell, “An Investigation…”.
44. Caitríona Nic Philibín, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, “An Exploratory Study…”.
Quarter Days, Bealtaine, and food traditions

The four quarter days of the old Irish calendar year, Imbolg (1st February), Bealtaine (1st May), Lughnasa (1st August) and Samhain (1st November) gradually yielded with the arrival of Christianity to Easter and Christmas, with St. Brigid’s Day seeking to supplant Imbolg and St. Martin’s Day seeking to supplant Samhain. Frédéric Armao points out that despite the quarter days:

[…] the two main seasons lasted from Samhain to Bealtaine (winter, the “passive” season) and from Bealtaine to Samhain (summer, the “active” season, be it on agricultural, economic, religious, military, or even mythological terms). 45

Patricia Lysaght 46 notes that Bealtaine was also known as Cétsamhain or first Samhain. Bealtaine marks the beginning of summer; however, this quarter day represents a shift from the joy of spring. Both Bealtaine and Samhain are liminal times when the boundary between this world and that of the sidhe (otherworld) are loose. Fear and trepidation surround the beginning of the growing season played out through stories of ill luck, dairy thievery and loss.

Cattle and dairy have long been of utmost importance in Ireland since the Iron Age, widely illustrated in Irish mythology such as in the Cattle Raid of Cooley, placenames such as Drumbo (Droim Bó – ridge of the cows), Ardboe (Árd Bó – height of the cows), Clontarf (Cluain Tarbh – meadow of the bull), songs, storytelling, and descriptions by foreign travellers. 47 Cattle were traditionally moved up the mountains, a tradition known as “booleying” or transhumance, at this time of year, the opposite of Burren winterage. Fears of crop failure or loss of fortune appear to be prevalent in the literature, 48 including the theft of milk profit or butter, principally by women or witches, which could sometimes take the form of a hare; by the various actions of incantations; use of a buarach or spancel; dragging a cloth over the May dew; taking the first water from wells or where two or three rivers met, or other boundary points such as farms, townlands or parishes. 49 Traditions used to avert dangers to cattle and dairy included the use of holy water, tying rowan branches to cows’ tails, placing coloured eggshells on May bushes or under the doormat, and other prophylactics such as salt, iron and fire. Cattle, for example, were moved between two bonfires for protection at this time of year. 50

47. Sharon Arbuthnot, Máire Ní Maonaigh, Gregory Toner, A History of Ireland…, p. 47.
Data collection and analysis

An exploratory interview was held with Jonny Dillon, folklore archivist at the Folklore Department, UCD, on the 29 March 2021 to ascertain how best to navigate the NFC Schools’ Collection online (www.duchas.ie). Keywords and search tools were discussed, as was the development of a suitable convenient sampling protocol. Following this initial interview, a convenient sample of seventy-two transcripts from twenty-two different counties were identified which referred to both food and May Day within the data. This data set was subjected to thematic analysis following the six steps of data familiarisation, initial data coding, searching for themes, revising themes, defining themes and writing up. Two further post-analysis interviews were held, with Jonny Dillon (27 April 2021) and with Professor Patricia Lysaght (28 April 2021), both of whom offered valuable insights into the literature, the results of the analysis, and the Schools’ Collection.

The analysis of the sample taken for May Day or Bealtaine reveals abundant evidence of the importance of dairy in Irish cuisine around the month of May. In order to analyse the data in more depth, five themes were identified: “dairy and bad luck”, “dairy thievery or loss”, “dairy protection”, “salt and fire”, and “eggs”. While the separate analysis of the themes reveals certain nuances, they should be considered as a unit of customs and superstitions. An English language transcript from Cloonaghboy, Co. Mayo (fig. 3), includes a number of the themes and topics evident in the literature (bad luck, taking neighbours’ butter luck, May morning dew, fairies, protecting cattle, superstitions associated with giving fire or salt on May Day).

Dairy and bad luck

The theme of dairy and bad luck is also prevalent within the current literature. Accounts from all of the transcript counties relate to bad luck associated with milking, churning and giving away of butter, however there are contradictions as to when it was safe or not to share butter, churns, etc. and on what particular day, be it May Eve or May Day. It is unclear to which extent the contradictions can be explained by county differences. Within the samples from Cavan, a saying was found that was supposedly repeated if someone entered a house where a person was churning: “good luck to the work and the workers too”. It is clear from all of the above references that a feeling of fear, or at least concern, was largely prevalent

Fig. 3 – Transcript describing May Day and May Eve (Cloonaghboy, Co. Mayo).

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about the dairy supply at Bealtaine and only one transcript from Leitrim\textsuperscript{55} contains a positive note on the production of butter, providing a solution to this concern: "If you do not mix the spring and the summer’s milk on May Day it leaves the milk easily churned for the rest of the year".

**Dairy thievery or loss**

Many transcripts come under the theme of dairy thievery and loss, describing the process of taking away the neighbours’ butter by magical means, or hares taking away the “luck from the butter”, and women and fairies stealing milk. This finding confirms reports within Irish folklore literature which suggest that the sources available in the dúchas.ie digital archive represent a useful mirror of Irish folk traditions pertaining to food production.

Similar to findings in relation to St. Brigid’s Day,\textsuperscript{56} references to wells are evident in the transcripts. However, within these, only three relate to dairy thievery. The first of these, from Killacorraun, Co. Mayo,\textsuperscript{57} states that “if a stranger brings water out of a well in the village […] he will bring the butter out of that village”. The second, from Mullagh, Co. Leitrim,\textsuperscript{58} stresses the importance of being the first to get to the well on May morning to ensure that your butter would not be “taken”. Sticks and wisps gathered at the well could also be used to protect livestock from disease for the coming year. The third reference to wells describes a Tipperary farmer who rushed out of his house and assaulted a woman who was making “rounds” of the local well. When brought before the District Justice he excused himself by saying that his dairy cows were not producing well, and that he thought the woman was working “pishogues” to take his produce.\textsuperscript{59}

A good explanation of pishogues is found in one of the transcripts from the Schools’ Collection (fig. 4), which mentions a number of the May Day beliefs, including burying eggs in neighbours’ crops to treble their own harvest, skimming the water from the neighbours’ spring well, borrowing churns, pulling grass from their neighbours’ field and placing it in their own field, or placing straw ropes in boundary rivers to steal the butter. However, there is also advice as how to protect yourself from pishogues by putting flowers around the byre, or by using a May bush.\textsuperscript{60}


\textsuperscript{56} Caitríona Nic Philibín, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, “An Exploratory Study…”.


\textsuperscript{58} NFC, UCD, Schools’ Collection, vol. 0199, p. 82-83, Mullagh, Co. Leitrim, online: https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4602758/4601750/4634182.


\textsuperscript{60} NFC, UCD, Schools’ Collection, vol. 0534, p. 456, Dublin Road, Co. Tipperary, online: https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4922136/4855741/4953999.
Exploring the Food-Related Intangible Cultural Heritage...

Fig. 4 – Transcript concerning *pishogues* or *pisseoga* (Ballingeary East, Co. Tipperary).


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This leads to a third theme wherein a further transcript from Tipperary claims that people can lay pishogues on their neighbours’ goods while repeating the incantation: “The tops of the grass, the roots of the corn, my neighbour’s milk both night and morn”. 61

**Dairy protection**

The juxtaposition of pagan and Christian beliefs is prevalent within this theme where, for example, protection from the pishogue can be obtained from holy water, as well as from flowers, fire or iron. This section also contains accounts of charms for protection, such as using the froth from the milk to make a cross on each hip of the cow to protect the milk, 62 or that a third-generation blacksmith can work a charm that protects the milk from theft. 63 Further evidence of the aforementioned juxtaposition between pagan and Christian beliefs is also found in the use of holy water or Easter water 64 to protect cattle from having their butter stolen or for crop protection. Pishogues were said to be set on November Eve and reaped on May Eve. 65 Rowan trees and berries were used for protecting dairy, or a red rag was tied to the tails of cattle. Another charm mentioned in a Galway transcript involved the farmer rising before sunrise on May Eve to “put a bundle of sticks […] where the cows passed, this guaranteed a good supply of butter for the year”. 66 In addition to using plants, salt and fire were also reportedly used as the main protection for dairy throughout the transcripts, but are discussed here as a separate theme.

**Salt and fire**

Salt and fire appear together and separately in many of the transcripts. An account from a transcript in Galway assigns the etymology of “Lá Bealtaine” to the “the day of the sacred Beal [Baal?] fires because in olden [days] on May Eve the Druids lit the great sacred fire at Tara and as the signal flames rose up high in the air and then a fire is to [be] kindled on every hill in Erin”. 67 This account continues to highlight the significance of fire: “It’s also a custom among the Irish people that fire, salt

65. Ibid.
and milk are the three most precious things that a man could have. If any man gave away these three things on May Day or May Eve he would give away luck”. 68

Fire could be placed under the churn to increase butter supply on May Day, 69 and a Galway transcript notes that a man would not be allowed to light his pipe from a piece of coal in case the butter was taken. Again, the importance of fire is highlighted in the protection of livestock. Instances of the practice of driving cattle through a bonfire or hot cinders for protection are also mentioned. One account from Mayo says that “The first three days of May were considered dangerous to cattle and fires were usually kindled in the fields to protect them”. 70

Eggs

The final theme, “eggs”, describes the only non-dairy food, although hens and eggs were considered woman’s work in the Irish tradition. It was believed to be unlucky to give away a setting of eggs on May Day, but “The luck of the world is with anyone who could get a clutch of eggs on May Eve”. 71 Other references are made to placing duck eggs on a neighbours’ crops on May Eve thus giving the power to take the produce, or the use of egg shells to decorate a May bush that would be placed outside people’s homes on May morning for protection.

Conclusion

While the analysis of the data sample from the Schools’ Collection mirrors the literature, certain nuances are highlighted which reveal a rich and often neglected food culture, with regional differences. 72 Bealtaine has fewer specific foods associated with it than other quarter days – Imbolg (boxty, poundies, champ, rice pudding, sowans), Lughnasa (fraughans or bilberries, new potatoes, cally or colcannon, geese and fowl), or Samhain (colcannon, barmbrack, apples, nuts). Nevertheless, the milk, butter and eggs traditions form a strong element of Ireland’s ICH. Post-colonial shame explains certain historic feelings of inferiority regarding traditional Irish food traditions, which are gradually dissipating with increased awareness and interest in our culinary heritage.

Frédéric Armajo has discussed the conflict between young maidens and witches around the boundary festival of May, which could be theorised as representing

68. Ibid.
the hope of a full life to come (active time of the year – summer), or the fear of
death (passive time of the year – winter). Whereas hope dominates Imbolg and
Lughnasa, fear is the most powerful force evident during Bealtaine. The data points
to a complex cosmology where ancient pagan and Christian traditions, such as
holy or Easter water, salt or fire are juxtaposed. Cosmologies alter with time, and
today’s fears of global warming may have transplanted our ancestors’ fears of bad
harvests. Vegans may indeed be the “butter witches” of the present day, yet the
Irish cattle-based economy, identity and heritage remain constant.

The rich archives of the NFC at UCD have been underutilised from a food
studies perspective to date. The failure of some researchers\textsuperscript{73} to include Irish language
transcripts in their analysis potentially limits a fuller understanding of Ireland’s
culinary heritage.\textsuperscript{74} However, the available analysis testifies to the importance of
archival material for the unveiling of lost traditions and food culture, particularly
in extraordinary times when traditional archives are inaccessible. Other digitisation
projects for placenames (www.logainm.ie), Irish traditional music (https://www.itma.ie),
the 1901 and 1911 census reports (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie), as well as various online newspaper archives also provide wonderful resources
for Irish studies or food studies scholars. By applying a food lens to Irish studies
and utilising the dúchas.ie archive, this paper speaks to a broad range of scholars,
championing the significance of Irish food as ICH and promoting its further study.
Hopefully, it will not be long before an Irish food tradition such as Burren winterage
or Boxy-making joins uilleann piping, hurling and Irish harping on UNESCO’s
List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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\textsuperscript{73} Stephanie Byrne, Kathleen Farrell, “An Investigation…”.
\textsuperscript{74} Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire, “Recognizing Food…”, p. 94.