Curating Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

This article discusses a range of pragmatic issues associated with curating intangible cultural heritage, including collection, preservation, interpretation, presentation and representation. It uses as a case study work undertaken with Lough Neagh eel fishermen in preparation for and at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2007, setting this in a much wider curatorial context.

Keywords

Ethnology, folklife, folklore, representation, tradition

The *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003) defines for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) the following domains:

- Performing arts (such as traditional music, dance and theatre)
- Oral traditions and expressions including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage
- Social practices, rituals and festive events
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- Traditional craftsmanship

It supplements this list with the following statement: 'The 2003 Convention defines ICH as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage'. The definition also indicates that the intangible cultural heritage to be safeguarded by this Convention:

- is transmitted from generation to generation;
- is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history;

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- provides communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity;
- promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity;
- is compatible with international human rights instruments;
- complies with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, and of sustainable development.

Intangible cultural heritage is traditional and living at the same time. It is constantly recreated and is mainly transmitted orally.

This succinct statement, while extremely useful (and used as terms of reference for 'curating intangible cultural heritage' as discussed here), presents challenges to the curator by the extraordinary range of cultural elements to which it relates. Clearly, curatorial responsibility must establish certain borders within this range, defining discrete areas of specialism, or at the very least, specific projects on which the curator can concentrate for a certain time. Nonetheless, certain elements of intangible cultural heritage are intertwined, some inextricably. Song and story, for instance, can only be expressed by means of language, while aspects of ritual or festival may rely on oral tradition. The approach taken to a given cultural manifestation by, for example, a linguist may differ substantially from that of an ethnologist, but whichever discipline may best characterise the individual curator, it is essential always to bear in mind the differing frameworks that may actually or potentially be applied. The act of curating ensures (or certainly should ensure) that intangible cultural heritage is preserved and made available to the widest range of scholarly analysis.

What does curating intangible cultural heritage actually mean? To find an answer, it is reasonable to consult *The Manual of Curatorship,* where Roy Brigden provides a useful insight, addressing it primarily as an adjunct to other aspects of curatorial work, and from the perspective of a social, agrarian historian (Brigden 1992: 550):

> The information associated with museum collections may be separated into three tiers....The second tier covers *oral information* about the object. The donor may have been responsible for its manufacture and so be able to describe the techniques employed. Further probing may reveal the tools and equipment used and the history of the business. If the firm is still trading, or at least if the

> premises have survived, then an accompanied tour may result in further material for the notebook, tape recorder and camera. The donor's colleagues and employees may also provide information. By asking them for the names of past and present business associates, before long a research project on a trade or occupation has developed and begun to generate its own momentum.

William Jones (1992: 571) takes a similar approach:

> The personal reminiscences of individuals are one of the richest primary sources for industrial historians, as for social historians. The value of oral history is that it allows the Curator to create his or her own sources of information on the subjects under study and acquire data and insights from a broad spectrum of society. It gives a voice to the mass of the population who have left few records behind them and who have rarely had anyone speaking on their behalf.

While it is true that oral history, one element of intangible cultural heritage, can provide important ancillary documentation for material objects in museum collections, the activity of curating intangible cultural heritage is precisely the same as for Material Culture, objects, things. It involves collecting, describing, classifying, research, interpretation and exhibition. Above all, it means understanding that intangible heritage is expressed through cultural manifestations that can be described as artefacts in the sense defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'Anything made by human art and workmanship', although their existence may be abstract and transient, or at least 'constantly recreated'. This is as true of forms of 'high art' as it is of 'folk art'. What is the relationship between, for example, a musical score, a specific performance of the concerto it represents, a simultaneous broadcast of this performance, the recording thus generated and preserved in an archive or as copied and held in private collections, and a transcript of that specific performance? R H Buchanan (1955: 11) comments on the need for 'intensive field study, for the thoughts that lie behind apparently superficial sayings and beliefs that cannot be interpreted without an intimate knowledge of the people themselves and the community in which they live'. This approach has been a fundamental dimension of curatorial work at the Ulster Folk Museum (later to become

the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum) since its inception. It is clear that while 'intangible cultural heritage' may provide a novel way of framing the concept, the concept itself has a lengthy history through which individuals have grappled with a variety of terms including 'folklore', 'folk art', 'folk life', 'ethnology', 'non material culture' and others. A century ago, Douglas Hyde (1910: xiii) referred to 'all the ... collateral information which the modern folklorist is sure to expect' by which he meant such issues as the precise, actual words spoken by a storyteller rather than edited for a more sophisticated appeal, together with details of the cultural context of both narrative and narrator. Inja Smerdel (2007: 111) writes of 'heritage in the context of spiritual traditions'. When applying a definition arrived at by UNESCO, it is salutary also to consider issues of the relationship between cultural manifestations and official or formal interventions that may, while being of the noblest intent, lead to unforeseen outcomes (Rogan 2007).

Applying the terminology employed by UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage, collected in a range of forms including manuscript notebooks, questionnaire responses, photographs and oral recordings, is as essential as is material culture to the curatorial remit of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum . Among the many individuals who have contributed to the collection of notebooks and questionnaires was Dr Francis McPolin, headmaster of Ballymaghery Primary School, Hilltown, Co Down, who was greatly influenced by his friend, Seamus Delargy, and who by the 1940s was contributing to the collections of the Irish Folklore Commission, later the Department of Irish Folklore in University College, Dublin. He may stand as a representative of the many people who in the mid-twentieth century prepared notebooks and responded to questionnaires to provide an important body of data that would otherwise have been lost, but which is available for research as part of the museum's archival collections.

'Intensive field study' of the type defined by Buchanan continues to be fundamental to the museum's curatorial activity. Work conducted during 2006 and 2007 with eel fishermen on the Co Tyrone shore of Lough Neagh provides an interesting example of a case study in curating intangible cultural heritage. While this work forms part of the collections of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, it was undertaken as part of the preparations to represent Northern Ireland in the 41st Smithsonian Folklife Festival held in Washington DC in the summer of 2007. While the field study conducted among the eel fishermen makes an important

contribution to the collections of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, a major motivation for conducting it at this time was because of a wish on the part of the Festival organisers to have eel fishermen represented at the event. Also present at the 41st Festival was Daniel J Donnelly, whose 1986 book *On Lough Neagh's Shores* provides an excellent study of the Lough Neagh fishing community. The reason for selecting this example is that it relates directly to the UNESCO *Convention,* demonstrates myriad facets of the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and tangible culture, shows that intangible cultural heritage is not confined to the role of providing background information and highlights certain aspects of the question of exhibiting intangible cultural heritage, on this occasion in a very highly profiled context.

Figures 1–4 illustrate essential preparations for eel fishing using a long line, the practice of 'running' the line into an eel box, with hooks and sinkers.

Figure 1, taken in the early twentieth century by W A Green provides vital historical evidence of this tradition. Donnelly (1986: 100) includes another photograph by Green, obtained from the family whose members are shown in the picture, and which the photographer must have sent to the family. This version, which did not survive in the collection of Green's work obtained by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, shows the girl sitting a little further back from the box and includes another member of

Figure 1 Early twentieth-century photograph by William Green, entitled 'Lough Neagh Eel fishers pegging the lines' (WAG 1962).

Figure 2 Eel boxes prepared with 'run' line, Derryloughan townland, April 2007.

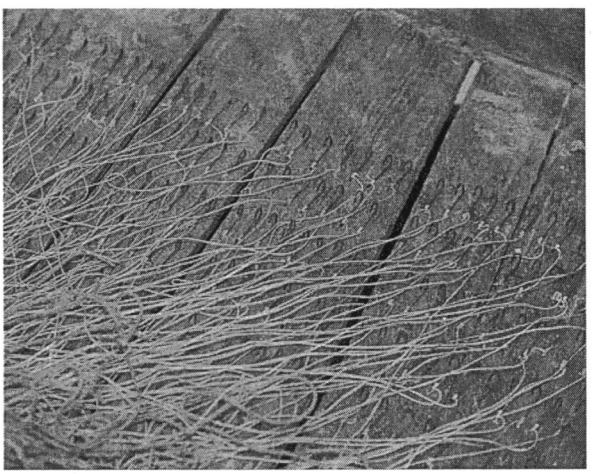

Figure 3 Detail showing run hooks, as above.

the family who shows that running the line is in fact an individual occupation. Green's intentions in composing his photographs are of course open to a wide range of interpretations.

Figures 2–4, taken by T K Anderson in 2007, provide a great deal of valuable detailed information that help interpret the earlier picture. Talking to my colleague, T K Anderson, also provided important insights into

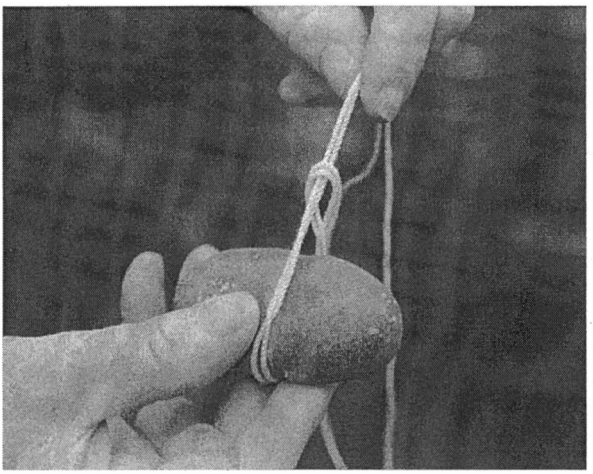

Figure 4 Tying a sinker, as above.

the approach of the photographer in the early twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, in terms both of similarities and of differences. Green's photograph, if taken totally at face value as a historical document, suggests that two people are involved in running the line into the eel box. However, Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate that it is at best unlikely that the girl featured in Green's photograph is actually contributing to the work. The hooks must be placed in the box with the greatest of care, aligned in rows and with a sinker being placed at the opposite end of the box for every ten hooks. It is likely therefore that the photographer has requested her to pose in this way; in reality, if she interfered with the sharp hooks she would destroy the work of the fisherman and quite possibly tear her hands. To interpret this photograph, we should explore the motive of the photographer. Green was a keen and scientific scholar and observer of all aspects of the geology, geography and culture of Ulster but he also had to make a living: it is very likely that a pretty young girl with a thick braid of hair added considerably to the attraction of this photograph, which was retained in his collection. Some years ago, I noticed a photograph that I knew to be by Green on the mantelpiece of a house in which I was recording. It was in the form of an old postcard, and when I asked how it came to be there, I was told that it was sent to the family by the photographer. It featured two embroidresses who had been photographed by Green, and were the older sisters of the lady with whom I was recording.

I was also told that one day when the sisters were visiting Belfast, they saw their photograph go past, mounted as an advertisement for linen on the side of a tram. Much later, when members of the family visited the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, they saw the photograph again in a very different context, illustrating one of the essential traditions of Ulster. The photograph acquired meanings depending upon the context in which it was displayed.

Figure 4 demonstrates the method of tying a stone sinker and attaching it to the line. Asking about this, I learned that suitable sinkers must have a particular shape and density, and are gathered on certain beaches known to the fishermen. Estyn Evans (1957: 242) illustrates that similar stones were used in an identical way in prehistoric times. The close relationship between the study of archaeology and intangible cultural heritage, characteristic of nineteenth century antiquarians, was maintained in Ulster until well into the twentieth century.

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the process of setting the line during the early afternoon, and are part of a series taken on 14 May 2007 to document this stage in long line fishing. While taking this entire sequence of photographs of the eel fishermen, photographer T K Anderson discussed with me the contrast between his work and Green's. In the first instance, Anderson's motivation is entirely documentary, governed purely by the process of

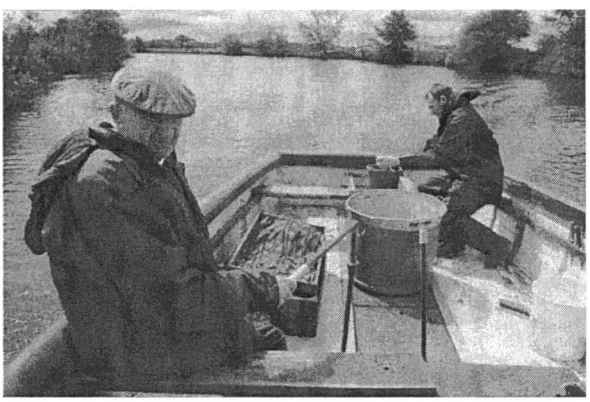

Figure 5 On the River Blackwater, approaching Lough Neagh to set the run line. Note the eel boxes covered with fabric, which is held in place with a pliable twig. There are three boxes of line, two containing 400 hooks each, the third 200. The lines of 400 hooks are each approximately one mile in length. Thomas John Quinn steers the boat while his son John baits hooks (May 2007).

Figure 6 Baiting hooks, Lough Neagh. The bait is stored in moss or 'fog'.

curating intangible cultural heritage. While the physical evidence of the process, the boat, the boxes, the fishing lines and other equipment, are all tangible pieces of material culture, it is intangible cultural heritage, the actual process of fishing itself that makes real sense of these pieces. The fishermen, with their knowledge of nature and their skill to exploit it, engage in a transient, demanding and often dangerous process, which both unites and transcends the physical, material evidence of their craft in the moments realised by the photographer. In the second instance, Anderson points out that he uses a digital camera. No longer bound by the realities of loading or processing film, he has much greater freedom than he himself had a decade ago, let alone than was available to Green with his necessarily cumbersome camera and glass plates. Listening to Anderson extol the achievements of his predecessor provided a salutary lesson in the history of curating intangible cultural heritage. An observer might readily add that the perception, insight and skill of the photographer are also essential and consistent elements in this curatorial process.

Figures 7 and 8 show the catch of eels being brought into the boat in the gathering light of a mid-May dawn. The lines are immersed in the Lough for some fifteen hours before the fishermen return to bring them in. The work must be completed in time to have the catch weighed and ready for collection by the Lough Neagh Eel Fishery, through which eels are marketed and fishermen paid, and by which issues such as the setting of

Figure 7 Bringing in the catch, 15 May(A). Note the position of the extremely sharp knife mounted on the barrel. A deft flick of the wrist will cut the line, allowing the eel to fall into the barrel, which is plumbed to circulate fresh water drawn from the Lough in which the live catch can swim.

quotas are determined (Donnelly 1986; Kennedy 2000). Fishermen must also obtain a licence from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland. Lough Neagh eel fishermen are subject to certain prohibitions in terms of the length of the season and of the equipment that may be used. Donnelly (1986: 235) observes: 'The organisation of fishing on Lough Neagh has undergone a complete transformation since 1971, when the Fishermen's Co-operative Society gained control of all brown eel fishing on the lough'. These points illustrate the ways in which the ancient practice of eel fishing 'is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history'(UNESCO 2003); and that this interaction may involve formally established groups and government departments.

Figures 9–11 illustrate the sequence of processes necessary to prepare the catch for collection by the Lough Neagh Eel Fishery. The fishermen themselves make equipment used in these processes, including eel tanks and grading tables. Similarly, they construct their own lines, and each fisherman dyes his lines in a distinctive colour, which ensures that there can be no mistake over bringing in a catch belonging to another fisherman. Occasionally, one line may be crossed by and tangled with another while in the water, and the colour coding identifies the lines and their owners. In such a situation, the etiquette is that the fisherman finding the crossing will cut and then retie the

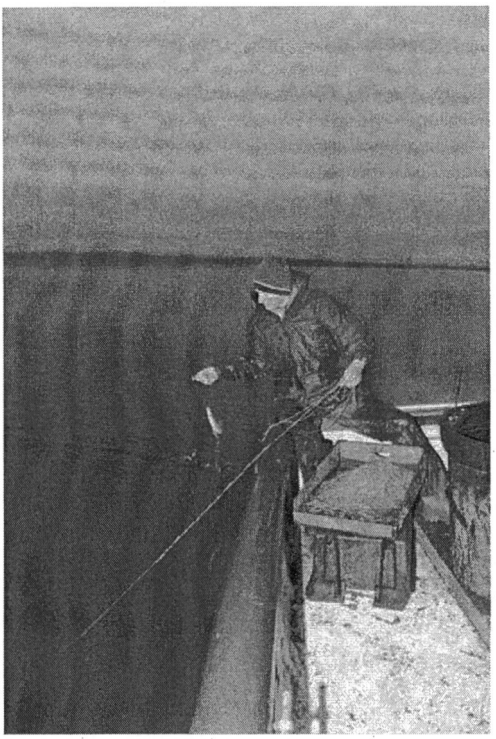

Figure 8 Bringing in the catch, 15 May(B). Note the way in which the main line is held as it emerges from the water. The line must be correctly manipulated and placed in the box so that it does not tangle.

line belonging to the other and return it to the water. Not to do so would mean the loss of a considerable portion of a catch and of the lines themselves.

Taken together, Figures 1–11 illustrate the processes involved in bringing in an individual catch of eels and hint at some of the necessary ancillary skills. It is clear that eel fishing with a long line is at once a contemporary and an ancient tradition, and that orally transmitted skills are combined with official or formal processes in the modern form of the craft. Knowledge of carpentry is useful in making items such as eel boxes and grading tables. Nowadays, fishing boats are equipped with satellite navigation systems, but the fishermen do not place absolute reliance on these. Like fishermen in coastal waters, they have knowledge of 'markers', local landmarks or small features of the landscape, which, when aligned, assist

Figure 9 Sorting eels at grading table. This has a small aperture that may be opened to allow eels below a certain size to be removed. Situated at the riverbank, it is very convenient for returning the eels to the water, but many make the journey unaided once a chance to escape presents itself.

Figure 10 Bringing eels from eel tank to supplement quota. A small number of eels can readily be kept in a wood and mesh tank, which is submerged in the river when not in use.

Figure 11 Preparing the catch for collection. The eels are placed in a mesh bag, which is then submerged in a tank filled with water from the Lough. The catch remains there for a very short time, awaiting collection. The corner of an eel box can also be seen. After use, boxes and lines are submerged in Lough water for a period of time to remove any trace of old catch or bait. The eels are believed to be sensitive to, and to avoid, any such scent.

with navigation. Such knowledge is also transmitted orally within families. As John Quinn, a young fisherman, remarked (UFTM 2007b): 'It takes a right while to learn all the different parts of the Lough, you know, different shallows and flats. I'd say I'm still learning yet'. The Lough can be a dangerous, treacherous environment, and fishing it a demanding way of life.

In practice, the various stages in the process of curating intangible cultural heritage are inextricably linked, but so far this case study has permitted a look in some detail at issues related to collecting. Work with the Lough Neagh eel fishermen was done in a particular context, that of preparing for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. This carried with it implications about exhibiting intangible cultural heritage in the demanding circumstances of a Washington summer, to an audience of one million people in the course of a fortnight and with the prospect of intense interest from the media. This is a daunting requirement, and not everyone who is prepared to work with a curator in the process of collecting intangible cultural heritage is necessarily prepared to take part in such an event. When Thomas and John Quinn accepted the invitation and travelled to Washington DC, BBC reporter Kevin Sharkey (2007) commented that 'the eel fishermen from the banks of Lough Neagh are going down a treat'. On the Mall, the fishermen engaged in activities similar to those involved in

the exposition of intangible cultural heritage in many museum contexts, talking to visitors about their way of life and demonstrating the skill involved in running eel lines (Figures 12–14). The exceptional nature of this event lay in the particular demands it made in terms of scale, but it was also noticeable that the fishermen were regularly visited by emigrants or the families of emigrants from their hometown land, a statement of the emblematic significance of intangible cultural heritage in situations of cultural 'displacement'.

Direct exposition, interpretation and exhibition of intangible cultural heritage by actual practitioners is an ideal method of communication, but this may also be achieved in a manner that might be described as 'indirect'. This too is a facet of curating intangible cultural heritage. Among the skilled craftspeople representing Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival was master basketmaker, Bob Johnston, a member of the staff of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Unlike the Quinns, Bob did not learn his craft as the result of oral transmission of a family tradition. Exposure to artefacts in the museum collection inspired Bob to learn and excel in a craft once fundamental to local domestic, agrarian and commercial activity but now almost lost. Curating intangible cultural heritage involves the responsibility of ensuring that endangered aspects of

Figure 12 Thomas Quinn talks to Paul Clark, Ulster Television news presenter, on the Mall in Washington DC during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Some of the illustrations for this essay were featured as part of the exposition on Lough Neagh eel fishing, and can be seen in the background above.

Figure 13 Hospitality warmly and generously extended while recording in the home of Thomas and Lena Quinn.

Figure 14 Thomas Quinn demonstrates how to use an eel skin as a cure for a sprain.[1]

the domain are protected (UNESCO 2003): 'Many elements of the ICH are endangered, due to effects of globalization, uniformization policies, and lack of means, appreciation and understanding which – taken together – may lead to the erosion of functions and values of such elements and to lack of interest among the younger generations'.

One way of counteracting this is to permit the process of curating intangible cultural heritage to provide opportunities for 'relocation', for reuniting talented individuals and varied forms of cultural expression. This can happen in a variety of ways and can provide channels for endangered

skills to flourish anew. It can apply to a wide range of cultural expressions, from lace making to story telling. For example, the narrative archive maintained at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum is both a valuable source of research data and a repository of a particular art form. From this, new generations of storytellers may be given access to traditional repertoires not only from the printed word, but from actual recorded performances that provide evidence not merely of the narrative content itself, but of the individual styles of traditional storytellers who shared their tales in authentic, representative contexts.

Working with the Lough Neagh eel fishermen revealed substantial amounts of intangible cultural heritage relating to traditional beliefs and to narrative, some shared with the wider community, some related more directly to eel fishing. As an example, James Conlon explained to me the skill of Counting the Moon (UFTM 2007a). It is difficult to establish how widespread this tradition is, but at least some fishermen share with previous generations a belief or environmental observation that eels may be more plentiful at 'the Dark of the Moon'. They may also apply knowledge of the phases of the moon to other aspects of subsistence, including when planting small holdings of land with crops. Knowing a formula for forecasting the moon's phases is therefore of great value. Curating intangible cultural heritage demands that beliefs and knowledge of this sort must also be collected and recorded, and it is a curatorial responsibility to ensure that where possible, opportunities to record such information in a sensitive and appropriate way are maximised. This highlights the point that many aspects of curating intangible cultural heritage depend on relationships between individuals and upon respect for the individual, a matter that relates to the relationship itself, to the hospitality very frequently extended as part of the relationship, to the information imparted and to the right of the individual knowledge bearer to chose *not* to impart knowledge. Jay Mechling (2006: 349–50) provides an excellent synopsis of the ethical issues associated with fieldwork of this type, including an account of the dilemma faced by Barre Tolkein in relation to recordings made with Navajo of which 'informants believed that the recordings of words meant for oral performance among Navajos could be dangerous if wrongly used by others'.

As a rule of thumb, I expect to spend approximately ten per cent of a working year in collecting, or field work. Most of this time, I work alone

in the sense of being unaccompanied by a photographer or audio recordist, but occasionally such specialist skills are required, sometimes both at once. It is essential that everyone involved in the curatorial process has the capacity to be sensitive to the nature of the relationships involved. This is also true of rare occasions when recordings take place not in the home or other familiar settings of the individual being recorded, but in the museum audio studio. It seems axiomatic that the possessor of the knowledge is and must be at the centre of the process. However, as Kockel (2007) points out:

> Denigrating tradition as invented is fashionable. Ethnology is charged with having essentialised tradition and its alleged bearers, the folk, who have been exorcised from contemporary academic concern, replaced by the populace. Simultaneously, places as ecological loci of meaning and social relations have been discarded in favour of the globalised spaces of postmodernity. Arguably, the contemporary obsession with proving the inauthenticity of tradition is itself an essentialising discourse, which tells us something about its protagonists. Folk and place are essentially linked in a corporate identity sustained by traditions in their respective ecological contexts. Should not the responsible ethnologist, rather than colluding in evictions of the folk from their place, cultivate a respectfully critical understanding of those contexts, working with the folk reflexively, to reclaim their place – and perhaps turn the world upside down?

This insight is of fundamental importance to curating intangible cultural heritage.

Exhibition through direct interaction, such as at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival or in other, less highly profiled aspects of museum work, is one conduit for making intangible cultural heritage accessible to audiences. Here, we might adapt Brigden's concept of tiers, or levels of information, using it to explore levels of access. Those who are prepared to be involved in direct exposition of this sort will make choices about what is shared with whom: craft skills and techniques may sit at one level of accessibility, belief systems and associated knowledge at another, perhaps shared on a one-to-one basis with a particularly interested and sympathetic individual, perhaps not at all. A number of tiers of access to intangible cultural heritage may be identified:

- direct interaction, through contact with tradition bearers who may have been 'reunited' with sets of skills or knowledge or who may have acquired these by transmission within the family or immediate, local community;
- exposition through the media, especially radio and television;
- conventional exhibition, through or in association with photographs and or artefacts, using recorded performances and articulations;
- publishing material in written form (from collections of stories, songs and other material to research based articles, books and conference papers).

Classification and cataloguing are essential for ensuring access to intangible cultural heritage, and are as important in this aspect of curatorial work as any other. Audio recordings are subject to basic cataloguing with a brief summary of content as the preliminary aspect of this process. Full access is aided by transcription, itself a subject of considerable discussion (Preston 1982; Lindahl 2004; Glassie 2006; Cass 2007). Transcriptions prepared for the narrative archive at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum are made using standard orthography that does not attempt to convey the sound of dialect or speech patterns, although certain forms used by the narrators, strong in place of weak past tenses such as 'knowed' instead of 'knew', for example, are not altered. The aim is to represent as accurately and clearly what is being said in terms of content. Recordings themselves are preserved, so a transcript may be read alone or used in conjunction with the original sound itself.

Historically, the *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, the *Types of the Folktale*, and the *Types of the Irish Folktale* have been used as classificatory tools for the narrative index, and changes in technology provide opportunities to refer to other indexes as well, such as *The Migratory Legends* (Thompson 1955–58; Uther 2004; Aarne and Thompson 1961; Christiansen and O Suilleabhain 1963; Christiansen 1958). This ensures that information is accessible to audiences and users at all levels and for the future.

These classificatory tools may be applied to narrative collected from eel fishermen during 2006 and 2007, in the context of preparing for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, although not presented at the Festival itself, where the focus was on the activity of eel fishing and where narrative

was presented by other tradition bearers. Among the fairy lore collected from fishermen on the Lough shores are examples of motifs F321.1 (changeling), F321.2 (charms against theft of children by fairies), F361.4 (fairies take revenge on trespassers on ground they claim as theirs), F361.2 (fairies ride mortal's horses at night) and F366.2.1 (fairies plait manes and tails of horses). While these are readily identified as widely known narrative motifs, it is important to note that many were told not as narrative, but as expressions of belief by a storyteller (UFTM 2007a) who distinguished between the accounts he was prepared to record and 'as the old people said, a lot of real good stories, well made stories" Not a credulous man, he spoke of 'the fairy fort, a real big fort. But it has been stubbed out in my time, and nothing has happened' (although the fairies were expected to avenge such interference). However, he recalled early experiences of his father when, as a hired labourer 'the men of the house would send him out to catch the mare. And he told me, when the fairies, he could n't see them, but when the fairies rode that mare, there wasn't life in her. When they got that mare, she wasn't worth catching, for she wasn't fit to work'. When he and his siblings were babies, their parents protected them from fairies by placing tongs across the cradle when leaving them alone for any time. It is clear that traditional beliefs in the fairies and in the power of 'blinking' were still very strong in the eel fishing community in the 1930s, and traces of this belief system still survive today. Formal systems of belief may also apply: a new boat is likely to be blessed either by a priest or by the owner pouring Holy Water on it (UFTM 2007b). Tucked away in the wheelhouse of one fishing boat I observed a holy picture of Padre Pio, placed there by the fisherman's wife as a means of protection. Formal and informal systems intertwine. If a Lough Neagh eel fisherman meets with a drowning accident, his peers will not carry the body back to shore on board the boat, but will tow it behind (UFTM 2007b). In common with many fishing communities, boats must be turned with the sun, and once a journey has been commenced, a fisherman should not turn back for any reason.

Curating intangible cultural heritage involves addressing both continuity and change. A fisherman's wife, Lena Quinn's (UFTM 2007b) account of domestic life when she arrived as a bride to her new home in 1961 tells of how she cooked all the food on an open fire, using equipment including a crook crane. She describes how there was

> no running water, no washing machines, no nothing like that. When the children came along you had a big tub and a washboard and you just washed the clothes on this washboard. I still have the washboard yet, I still kept it.
> LB: Did you tell me you didn't like going down to the river?
> LQ: Oh aye, that's right. I always thought it was very dangerous, it was so wide. So then, for to get water, I'd put a wee string, a wee bit of rope on the bucket and throw it away out in the middle and pull it back up, so I wouldn't fall in.

Her way of life closely reflected patterns of domesticity on which change had barely registered, although her home has since been extended and modernised so that she and her family can enjoy the comforts of late twentieth and twenty-first century life. The life Lena knew as a young woman relates closely to that reflected in the rural dwellings preserved in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, but her memories help to remind new generations of the reality of past experience. The crook crane is now so distant from the experience of everyday life that it has become an emblem of the past. For example, it can now be enjoyed as a tourist experience in the Mourne Mountains, where one of the cottages in Hanna's Close offers 'living room and dining area with open fire and traditional crane and crook', together with 'fully equipped fitted kitchen with quarry tiles, one double bedroom, one bunk bedroom, bathroom with bath, over bath shower and WC' (Mountains of Mourne 2007).

In terms of traditional culture, in many respects curating intangible cultural heritage corresponds to any other facet of museum-based curatorial activity. While there are obvious differences between abstract and material cultural artefacts, the responsibilities are parallel, the differences of degree. For instance, curating textiles is in its specifics not the same as curating wood: the two require different environmental conditions, different particularities in terms of storage and gallery conditions. The unique factor in intangible cultural heritage is that the focus is always on people, the holders and constant recreators of the cultural artefact and practice. The role of the curator is to identify, preserve and act as a conduit to these elements, in a context of respect for the culture itself and for the people through whom it is expressed.

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Note

1. Eel skins are regularly cited as a means of curing sprains. Both Thomas and John Quinn are skilled musicians, one playing the accordion, the other the flute. I could not help noticing that their hands, although frequently immersed in water for prolonged periods, appeared in wonderfully supple condition, and wondering if this might in any way relate to the fact that they also handle the eels.

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