

## Introduction

My name is Áine Ní Neachtain, PHD Student of Folklore and Ethology, at UCC, and the following essay is based on my presentation entitled *Tradition as an Anchor: The Relevance of Michael J. Murphy's Legacy in 2015 and Beyond*, delivered at the Michael J Murphy Winter School held in Tí Chulainn, Mullach Bán, Co Armagh, on 21st November, 2015.

Following a brief outline of the work of the Irish Folklore Commission and Michael J Murphy's role, I will propose how this one extraordinary ordinary man can be an inspiration to us, today and in the years to come, as communities all around this country face very serious challenges to our way of life and our environment.

During the course of more than 40 years' service as a professional Folklore Collector, Michael J Murphy (1913-1996), of Dromintee, Co Armagh, amassed a collection of more than 30,000 pages, including some 4,000 pages of journal, and 1,100 photographs, now housed in the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin. His collection relates mainly to the Border communities, the Glens of Antrim, and Rathlin. He was a dedicated employee of the Irish State, living in the United Kingdom, inside a border he didn't recognise, and his work is the exquisite manifestation of one man's belief that his cultural heritage and that of his storytellers, and by extension, their entire communities, should take its place proudly amongst the variance of cultural heritages which exist throughout the island of Ireland. He worked like a detective, skilfully and sensitively piecing together the oral history of his people. Michael J Murphy presented the extraordinary ordinary people of his community to the world, and his life's work provides a resource and inspiration for communities who recognise the vital role cultural heritage can play in community building. Folklore Collection was only one aspect of Murphy's work. He was

also a prolific prose writer, dramatist, broadcaster, and correspondent. He was a political person with a highly developed sense of natural justice, and was never hesitant in speaking and writing about bigotry, inequality, and social injustice. Indeed, he was very often ostracised as a result of his outspoken-ness, a penalty he accepted with sanguinity.

Michael J Murphy was reared on talk. He had begun to take pleasure in the fireside conversation of his emigrant parents and their neighbours ever before the family returned home from Liverpool to Dromintee around the year 1920. After their return his exposure to the oral literature, turn of phrase, and courtesies of the people of Slieve Gullion intensified, and when he went to work for farmers in his teenage years, he was never without a notebook and pen, on which he jotted down items he liked from the conversation of the men with whom he worked.

There was a recognition in some quarters that the cultural imprint of a nation lay, not among the elite, but among the 'folk', coming from the German word 'Volk', meaning ordinary people. This way of thinking had at its core the belief that a rich deposit of oral literature and knowledge which had developed organically over hundreds of generations lay in the minds of ordinary people. The concern of the Irish Folklore Commission was that, with the failure of the Irish language, and the advent of modernity, this material would disappear forever. The collection campaign throughout the country resulted in one of the largest and most respected collections of oral and ethnographic material in the world, now housed in UCD.

### **The life of the collectors**

The brief of the collector was to find members of the community who were storytellers and raconteurs, arrange to visit them in their homes or elsewhere, and to record and transcribe

their stories and accounts of traditions associated with hundreds of topics. The material, along with an accompanying field journal, was then forwarded to UCD for archiving.

The work involved long hours of concentration, ingenuity, skill, and oftentimes considerable hardship, away from home, in damp, cold conditions. Michael J Murphy's most difficult task was convincing people of the value of their traditions, and all his life he suffered a certain amount of ridicule because of his interest in folklore and his occupation. People were quite reticent at times in parting with the material, especially if it was being recorded, or if they suddenly remembered that it was being submitted to a Govt. Agency. However, he had a knack for extracting material which people wouldn't normally dream of revealing to someone to whom they were not intimately connected. The following short extract from an article he wrote for the Irish Independent on 8 August 1946 entitled *Man Who Followed the Fairies* explains one of the ways he overcame the reticence of his sources:

But close as the fairies are to the feelings of our old people, they naturally suspect (for country folk are curious only after being cautious) the stranger asking about fairy tales. You might be a Pension Officer in disguise... until your idiom and sympathetic insight into the secrets of the social life of the Irish fireside assures them you're of their kin.

### **The field journals**

The function of the field journal was to contextualise the collected material, as well as keeping Head Office informed about the day to day activities of the Collector. A large portion of Michael J's journal is a highly personal account of what life was like for him, his family, and the community in which he lived. The journal often reads like a stream of consciousness, displaying beautiful turns of phrase, and the full range of literary devices.

Michael J acknowledged in the journal that he expected that someone, sometime, would access the journal. He made a conscious decision not to edit, not to re-read, and not to hold back. The result is that the reader comes to know him, and his storytellers, their personalities, their foibles, we can see them in our minds eye, seated by their fireside, or in a quiet corner of a pub.

The Field Journal reads like an Auto-ethnographic document, i.e., a document of self-reflection which describes and questions his personal experience, and connects his experience to the wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings of his community.

The following few lines from his journal, written early in his career, 1949, might explain what I mean. He is writing about harvest traditions, but it can apply to any tradition:

I know the tradition is dying, but I doubt if such a tradition, with such an ageless heritage can really die. A sound tradition is like a seed: It goes underground in apparent death, but bursts forth a thousand fold – in green, in stalk – and back to the original.

Somewhere there is a pattern shaping which will earth the seeds of the traditions I and others are collecting. A sower will arise – many sowers perhaps. One will be the inspired hand, and the old seed will produce anew.

If I thought that none ever would, I wonder would I go on with this work?

Nearly 25 years later, he is still questioning, thinking it out, as we can see in this extract from the Journal of 28<sup>th</sup> Sept 1974.

...some times when I retire into a corner to rest, I wonder and wonder about this quest on which I am engaged and it doesn't now seem quite real to me. Identity again? Theme for the philosophers today more than ever. And I feel it is a wonderful thing I've done, and then feel I've done nothing really.

### **Traditions as our memory bank**

Time was when tradition was quite a slowly evolving thing, and was shaped from within communities. If we take it that traditions are the memory bank of a community, its shared social traits, then we can say that our traditions hold the myriad pieces of information which are transmitted to us in our mothers milk, what is right and wrong, how situations should be handled, how we mark time and occasions, and how our community operates.

We are now part of a global community, and very much under the influence of outside forces. We are constantly challenged to decide what is good and for our good, and what is detrimental to our wellbeing.

For instance, one topic which concerned Michael J was the rural depopulation of the 1950s; he referred to it in his journal as an insidious seepage and a menace, because he could see that it killed local communities. He had advocated in an article that whole town lands should arise and descend like a flock of crows on municipal and parliament buildings and squat until something done. Effectively, he was saying that the solution lay among the local people, with a strong sense of place, demanding change. This is the very same type of peaceful protest which has been the genesis of so many instances of radical social improvement that have occurred throughout the world.

The threat from the loss of people to local communities is as strong today as ever it was in the 1950s. Yes, we still have a tradition of emigration, but we also have a form of brain-drain which results in our young men and women working extremely long hours in enormous, centralised corporations and government bureaucracies, the sizes of which, to our grandparents, would have been unimaginable.

### **The power of large centralised institutions**

For instance, it is considered a privilege to work in one of the high tech multinationals, sited in areas bearing nicknames such as Silicone Dock, and Silicone Cork. Having one of these corporations on one's CV is a sign of success. The perks are wonderful; free canteen, doctor, gym, laundry, entertainment, etc. One works in an environment where it is being suggested that individual ideas matter, that everyone is an innovator, where every possible distraction from production is removed, plus one has the possibility to acquire company shares – well, who would think of questioning that? After all, one doesn't have to think about where one's food is grown, have to visit the butcher nor the fishmonger, to cook a meal, sit down with family, suss out a good local gym, go to the local GP. One doesn't have to make many decisions really, other than how to innovate, i.e., create or sell new product for the company. Why, Harriet Minter reported in the Guardian on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2015, that at least two multinationals are offering to help towards the cost of their female employees freezing their eggs, in order that childbearing can be postponed indefinitely. What a perk!

These companies make a big deal about only hiring the best and brightest. They are all about 'bringing our whole self to work' now, which, as I understand it, is a philosophy wherein one is encouraged to be themselves, to celebrate one's diversity, and not to hide one's vulnerabilities. For instance, Tim Cooke, the current CEO of Apple, recently spoke publicly about being gay, in the context of 'bringing your whole self to work'. The guru who expounds the concept of bringing your whole self to work, the American, Mike Robins, makes no secret that the reason this is being encouraged now is because it results in increased company profits. All barriers are down and personal and work lives merge into one.

But when one sees a few thousand people on the factory floor, clapping and cheering frantically for their CEO, as happened in Apple in Cork recently, one has to ask if there is another side to this 'bringing your whole self to work' business, and could it be possible that these huge corporations, by the sheer force of their acculturation, are swallowing our best and brightest whole.

It doesn't matter if you are being systematically deskilled, because everything is taken care of once you continue to produce for the multinational, once you stay ahead of the next brightest and best batch of workers being produced by our universities, who are getting better and better at tuning into the skillsets required by big business. You also probably won't continue the long commute to your rural community, doesn't make sense when you spend so little time there anyway. Your local GAA team will have to find another centre back, you don't have time for mundane things, and as a matter of fact you forget how to do mundane things. Your sense of place is now rooted in the huge organisation for which you work, your community is your colleagues, and that's great because even when you and your colleagues are having lunch together, or dinner in the canteen in the evening, which incidentally, you are only expected to partake of if you intend working late, or, when you are partaking of the free beer on Friday night, you can continue to exchange ideas for innovation – how convenient for your Multinational!

I would suggest that if we want to bring our whole self to work, then we should be bringing our tradition of rebelliousness, our tradition of healthy scepticism, our tradition of working to live and not living to work. The multinational will still make money, no worries about that, but they won't own our brightest and best, body and soul. One's identity as an employee will be just that, and that identity will not blot out every other possible identity.

One need only look at some of the promotional videos on *Youtube* expounding the wonders of working in Multinational world, to see the point. The ironic thing is that these videos commonly use the words and images of tradition and folklore to motivate their workforce. It makes perfect sense, and communities should take a leaf out of their book when they decide they want to achieve a goal – draw on our traditions, get together in community groups, and the most amazing things can be achieved. This would not represent regression; it would be doing like Michael J Murphy did; question ourselves, question what we're being told, open our eyes, and be nobody's fool.

### *Shell to Sea*

Why might it matter that huge centralised organisations do own thousands and thousands of people, body and soul? The fact is that they risk becoming more and more deskilled, and detached from the communities which are typical of Irish society, be it in rural or urban settings. Would it be surprising that they are too pre-occupied to defend their community, landscape, and environments from inappropriate development, from polluters, or from the effects of climate change? As a matter of fact, they may become part of that outside group, as an employee in a large Govt. department, or as a member of the Multinational community, who, when looking out over a rural landscape, sees only a wilderness. Why waste money out there on post offices, schools, local hospitals, health centres, and Garda stations? Why not put up a windfarm, or run a string of pylons, or maybe there is oil and gas under them der hills?

If we don't know the story of the mountain, the valley, the river, the bog; if we seldom engage with it; if we whizz past it at best, or have completely left the area at worst; how

likely are we to pit our best and brightest, most innovative ideas against challenges which would destroy it forever?

We need look no further than the experience of the people of Ballinaboy, Co Mayo, an unspoilt and beautiful area of natural beauty, where State power and Corporate power have coalesced to trump the objections of local communities. We saw how Shell's private security contractors in tandem with the Gardaí Síochána oppressed the community for objecting to the destruction of their natural environment, and the threat to their traditional pastimes, by the imposition of a refinery and gas pipeline in their locality. The State agency, Caoilte, sold land tracts to Shell in a soft deal for the siting of a refinery, and Shell, by throwing beads to the natives, has divided the community irreparably for generations to come. The full reality can be appreciated on the ShelltoSea short video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liTG0Bs3zOY>

### **Climate Change**

Aligned to issues such as the Shell to Sea problem is the fact that, according to Laura Burke, Director General of the EPA, in Ireland we live as though we have 3.2 planets at our disposal. The global environmental crisis is as a result of developed countries' excessive consumption. Basic foods and goods are travelling vast distances. The reality is that we are consuming these foods and goods at a voracious rate; therefore we are all a part of the problem.

This is not a pleasant problem to discuss, and even though defining the problem is quite easy, taking the medicine is not one bit easy, not so much because we are individually unwilling, but more because we are being discouraged to take the medicine at every turn by

governments and big business, who we have to admit are in a very unhealthy co-dependent relationship, while at the same time we are being encouraged to trust them to cure all ills. After all, these big institutions provide the jobs which help to keep politicians in power, and the politicians in turn facilitate every excess of the big institutions in order to keep the gravy train rolling.

What would Michael J say about all this? I have no way of knowing, but there are some things I can say about him without much fear of contradiction which might inspire our future actions:

- He was deeply rooted in his community, and he appreciated their nobility.
- He questioned himself constantly
- He questioned authority constantly, and had a healthy mistrust of it.
- He recognised the disconnectedness of centralised institutions.
- He used his creative skills to make a social comment.
- He was prepared to be unpopular
- He valued meditation in the form of sitting by a fire talking, going up on the mountain to think.
- He recognised the value of the past to the future

Michael J might emphasise the notion of a sense of place; that feeling of belonging, and being connected deeply and personally with our social and physical landscape. That is the feeling which ultimately motivates us to protect what we hold dear. Intimate knowledge of what surrounds us is a prerequisite to loving our place.

### Tradition as an anchor

What we are being offered on the one hand glitters, with the lure of good wages, which enable us to consume all those lovely products. We can be part of a team which Changes the World by our contributions to technological advancements. And, if we hold out for another while, someone else will come up with a solution for global warming, and everything will be hunky dory.

On the other hand, should we not do, as Michael J did all the time, sit down, reflect, think things out, and realise that we are being coddled, and are coddling ourselves? We do see the train bearing down on us, and we have to act to save ourselves.

This is where tradition can act as an anchor: If we go back to our memory bank, we can identify our strengths, draw on our innate knowledge of social contracts with the world, which tell us that not everything is ours for the taking, that other people have age-old rights which we mustn't contravene; in this case the right to live in the community of their choice safely and long term. Our tradition informs us what is right and wrong, what has always been right and wrong, and pricks our conscience to do the right thing. Our tradition informs us how we should assert ourselves, how we should rebel against oppression, how we might imagine solutions, how we might sacrifice for the sake of others, how we might worship and respect nature.

These messages are all in our tradition, and Michael J Murphy spent his whole life tending to them lovingly, as one would tend to cherished elderly relatives, highlighting them as the repository of ancient wisdoms.

Now is the time when we must look to our heritage as a resource in combatting the excesses of the Money God, in accepting that each of us has our place in our community,

and we must act upon our responsibility to our community by questioning ourselves, questioning those who would shape our community, and by questioning the false gods put before us.

Our tradition abounds in stories of heroes standing up for what is right, overcoming impossible odds, outwitting giants, keeping ourselves optimistic and spiritually vibrant.

I would suggest that this is the time to draw on all of this surely.

I'd like to finish with an extract from an article which Michael J submitted to the Irish Press on Monday 16 June, 1942, Irish Press entitled:

*Method in their Myths.*

*'Tradition can be either a dead weight on a nation or an incentive to constructive thinking, and should be part of our education if only to make the spirit fight it. A convulsion of Time has shuffled our values; and our future depends on whether we do the sifting and allocation ourselves or permits others to do it for us, as before.'*

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