From Acceptance to Assimilation: The Changing Role of
Travellers in the (Re)Creation of Irish National Identity,
1920s-1960s

by

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the place of the formerly nomadic Irish Travellers in the construction of a complex folklore-based Irish national identity in the mid-twentieth century. Using the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission, this thesis argues that as the Irish government constructed Ireland's new national identity following independence in 1922, the Travellers were included in this identity based on their community's possession of Irish folklore. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, as the importance of folklore in the creation of the national identity diminished in favour of modernization, the government gradually singled out the Travellers as a problematic minority that needed to be assimilated into the majority population. By challenging the existing historiography, this research highlights the importance of discussing the historical contingency, as opposed to inevitability, of constructions of the Traveller as 'Other' to encourage a more comprehensive and therefore less deterministic history.

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Introduction: The Irish Travellers

...a small group of brave people stood by the Travellers and literally put their arms around them as they sobbed with anger but mostly with sorrow that nothing was changing and that evictions continued to be a part of their life. - Sean Ó Riain¹

Referred to alternatively as Travellers, Tinkers, ‘gypsies’ and Pavee, depending on the source, the formerly nomadic Irish Travellers have lived as a distinct community in Ireland for centuries, perhaps longer. Once the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy was released in 1963, however, the Irish government began a systematic effort to assimilate Travellers into the larger settled population.² Using a complex mixture of social, economic and legal measures (including evictions), the government eventually succeeded in its overall efforts to end the Travellers’ nomadic way of life and by the twenty-first century, nomadism in Ireland had almost disappeared.³ The Irish government initially argued that the assimilation of the Travellers meant that once they were housed they would happily blend in with the majority. Despite the government’s efforts, however, the once predominantly nomadic Travellers continue to exist as a distinct community based on their shared history, customs and traditions and their reliance on a kinship-based structure.

The above quote is how Irish sociologist Sean Ó Riain described the 1984 evictions of Irish Travellers and their families at Foxrock Field on the outskirts of Dublin. Those individuals who rallied together to try to stop the guards from forcibly evicting the Travellers from the Field

¹ Sean Ó Riain, *Solidarity with Travellers: A Story of Settled People Making a Stand for Travellers* (Dublin: Colour Books Ltd., 2000) 4.

² It did, however, take a full year for the government to come up with a strategy for implementing the Commission’s recommendations. Eleanor Carey, “Public Policy and Irish Travellers: Exclusionary Policies and Approaches,” *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 86.

³ Martin Collins, “Travellers as an Ethnic Group,” *Travellers and the Settled Community: A Shared Future*, ed. John Heneghan, Mary (Warde) Moriarty, Micheál Ó hAodha (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2012) 4.

were, perhaps surprisingly to some, not Travellers themselves.⁴ They were members of the settled population who went against many of their neighbours in attempting to defend the Travellers from the authorities evicting them. Evictions such as this were commonplace in Ireland for much of the second half of the twentieth century.⁵ These evictions were part of the assimilation measures put in place by the Irish government, beginning in 1964, without consulting the Travelling community in any way. By the late 1970s, however, Travellers and settled individuals like those mentioned above began to create Traveller Rights groups who turned the conversation away from assimilation towards recognizing the Travellers as a distinct ethnic group within Ireland.⁶ Despite the desire to be recognized as separate group, Travellers like Pavee Point co-director Martin Collins argue that they remain an integral part of Irish society while simultaneously maintaining their distinctiveness as a community.⁷

Though there is documented involvement of some settled Irish in the creation and politicization of Traveller Rights groups, many insist that the relationship between Ireland's Travelling and settled communities has always been oppositional. The show of solidarity displayed at Foxrock Field and the joint creation of organizations such as Pavee Point and the Irish Traveller Movement, however, suggest a much more complicated situation.⁸ Arguably,

⁴ *Ibid* 4.

⁵ This is not to suggest that Travellers were never asked to move on before the 1950s at various points due to local mistrust of their community or specific conflicts with certain settled Irish over trespassing, theft or any other anti-social behaviour. This will be discussed in later chapters but it should be noted that though these earlier evictions did occur, they were never so systematic and supported by the national government as they became in the second half of the twentieth century. Aoife Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and the State, 1922-70* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2006) 100.

⁶ Carey 88.

⁷ Tony Ryan, "Irish Travellers and the Legacy of the Stereotype: Some Considerations," *Migrants and Cultural Memory: the Representation of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 57.

⁸ Carey 88. Both of these organizations still exist in Ireland and will be explained below. Essentially, they are organizations that fight for the better treatment of Travellers in Irish society as well as provide services for them

there can be no hope for reconciling different communities if the only relationship ever acknowledged is defined by conflict. While the historiography of Traveller studies overwhelmingly suggests that the Travellers have always been excluded from the rest of Irish society and therefore from the Irish national narrative, this thesis posits that such an argument is too simplistic.⁹ The Irish government and various related organizations spent much of the twentieth century creating a national Irish identity in the wake of achieving independence. The Travellers for a time made up a part of this identity due to their long-standing folkloric traditions and their co-dependent relationship with the settled communities of Ireland. The politicization of folklore led to the temporary inclusion of the Travellers within the dominant imaginings of the national identity in the mid-twentieth century and, as I argue, aided in their eventual exclusion as folklore's role in the creation of an Irish identity declined. This thesis argues that the Irish Travellers were not uncontested 'Others' in Ireland but rather one part of a complex folklore-based Irish national identity in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰

The period of the Irish Free State (1922-1937) followed by the early years of the Republic of Ireland (established 1937) was a formative moment in the development of the Irish national identity. This period is therefore crucial to an understanding of the Traveller's inclusion in, or exclusion from, the nation. After Ireland became a Republic in 1937, the government continued to reshape the national identity by 'recovering' pieces of national culture seen to be

(such as health care, education, and housing) that they feel are not being properly provided by the Irish government.

⁹ See Micheál Ó hAodha *Insubordinate Irish* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) and Bryan Fanning's *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ The concept of the 'Other' has a long and complicated historiography and will be discussed later in this introduction as pertains to the Travellers in Ireland.

purely Irish as opposed to tainted by colonial influence.¹¹ In order to achieve this recovery, the government created and funded organizations designed to find and collect what the government saw as disappearing troves of Irish folklore. The government and Irish folklorists alike saw folklore as the most tangible form of Irish history, culture and language wrapped into one, and therefore the best base for a constructed Irish national identity.¹²

The main organization in charge of collecting this folklore, the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC), was created in 1935 after the dissolution of the Irish Folklore Institute (established 1930), whose archives they inherited.¹³ These organizations and their agents, through the collection of folklore from various sources, included the Irish Travellers in the creation and archiving of Irish identity. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the IFC amassed folklore from various Travelling and settled Irish individuals simultaneously. Although the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy would ultimately recommend the assimilation of the Travellers into the larger settled culture – a recommendation echoed by the contemporary and subsequent Irish governments – the period demarcated above was one of contingency for the Travellers as members of the larger Irish community.¹⁴ A distinct community within Ireland, the Travellers were accepted in their ambiguous status as contested outsiders as opposed to ostracized ‘Others’ and even played a role in the national narrative as such. Far from being

¹¹ Micheal Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, ideology, methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007) 45.

¹² *Ibid* 61.

¹³ Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007) 36.

¹⁴ It has been argued that the Commission on Itinerancy had a pre-determined agenda in 1960: how to settled itinerants and find a ‘final solution’ for the ‘itinerant problem’ which did not involve consulting any Travellers in the process. The language used in the Commission’s report is significant considering the use of ‘final solution’ terminology during the Second World War. This is examined in Freyne Corbett’s chapter, “Life on the Margins: Representations of Irish Vagrancy in Early Modern England and Ireland,” *Travellers and Showpeople: Recovering Migrant History*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 18-32.

permanently ‘othered’ by a government that insisted on a ‘homogenous’ national identity, therefore, the Irish Travellers in the mid-twentieth century made up one part of what many settled Irish citizens understood as a complex and definitely heterogeneous Irish identity.

The Irish Travellers are a formerly nomadic population within Ireland, mentioned in various sources as early as the sixteenth century. Alternatively referred to as Travellers, tinkers, vagrants and itinerants among other names depending on the source, they are most commonly identified with the trade of tinsmithing which the men of their community practiced for centuries.¹⁵ In supporting themselves and their families largely as tinsmiths but also as horse dealers and as makers and sellers of small house-wares, the Travellers moved regularly from village to village so as not to exhaust their possibilities for employment. They did not, however, travel at random, as each family had a routine travel circuit (with the exception of extraneous travel for funerals or other family gatherings) so that local settled Irish could expect their return at certain times of year.¹⁶

Before Ireland’s rapid industrialization in the mid-twentieth century, the Travellers were often welcome in the communities they visited as they provided not only practical services such as repairing farm implements and attending to farmers’ horses, but they also brought with them news from other areas to which they had travelled. As rural Ireland was – and still is to a large extent – fairly spread out, this was often the only way rural Irish would hear news from outside

¹⁵ Some sources claim that much earlier forms of metal-working were also part of the Traveller’s repertoire, although others argue that Travellers only took up this form of work after failing as farmers for various reasons. Most of the scholarship, however, seems to agree that a large proportion of Travellers have long made a living through their proficiency in tinsmithing. For a detailed list of various occupations associated with Travellers, discussed in relation to gender, see Aoife Bhreatnach’s *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and the State, 1922-1970* (2006) 21.

¹⁶ The regular and expected nature of Travellers’ visits to certain areas is described at length in many of the responses to the Tinker’s Questionnaire (1952) which will be discussed in chapter two.

their community.¹⁷ The two communities, settled and itinerant, therefore interacted in many different ways, with the Travellers often providing some sort of service that the settled Irish required. Far from being completely removed from one another, a complete history of either community cannot be constructed without an understanding of the other.¹⁸ The two communities even have, to a certain extent, a shared culture especially in terms of their oral-based folklore.

As a community with a strong oral tradition, the Irish Travellers not only provided settled Irish with news and information but also entertained them with stories and songs. In pre-industrialized Ireland especially, news and stories were often considered valid currency in the rural-based society and so a Traveller's ability at storytelling not only helped to establish a relationship with the local settled Irish but also often led to reciprocation on the part of the settled Irish in the form of either food or money.¹⁹ In her memoir *The Turn of the Hand: A Memoir from the Irish Margins* (2010), Traveller Mary Warde described her community's storytellers as a part of Irish heritage, "The turn of the word! – And that is a special skill, a skill that was always prized in the older Irish culture of the past. It was a craft in itself! The Turn of the Word! [sic]"²⁰ Warde here made reference to the expression 'the turn of the hand' often used to describe the ability of Travellers to take on any task required of them. For Warde, storytelling in Traveller culture was a craft just like any other. Significantly, not only were Traveller storytellers remnants from a distant past, but the stories they told were usually versions of older Irish folktales that had long been circulated throughout the settled population, suggesting a long

¹⁷ Artelia Court, *Puck of the Droms: The Lives and Literature of the Irish Tinkers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 3.

¹⁸ Bhreatnach 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 33.

²⁰ Mary Warde, "Extracts from "The Turn of the Hand": A Memoir from the Irish Margins." *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 23.

history of interaction between the two communities. As an important part of both Traveller and settled culture, storytelling was often a way in which the Travellers and the settled Irish could interact in using a medium familiar to both communities.

Irish folklorist Artelia Court, who studies storytelling in Traveller culture, describes folktales as a significant aspect of the Travellers' way of life. That Travellers who practiced the art of imparting folktales took great pride in their ability and even found it a form of refuge is evident in her description of the importance of storytelling to Traveller Johnny Cassidy:

The petty incidents, the ups and downs of his life were, he felt, hardly worth [sic] of mention, but for his tales he showed the reverence that the pious feel for a religious tract. Feet fixed to the floor and his hands to his knees, Johnny delivered his stories with an intensity that made him seem to levitate as his voice grew high with excitement. Each tale, its precious form and language intact, made a perfect vehicle by which the gifted teller transcended and ruled his mundane surroundings.²¹

Cassidy's ability as a storyteller made him a figure worth noting and also identified him as a source for some of the nation's folklore in the form of various folktales. Significantly, the tradition of oral-storytelling in Ireland was also once considered a conduit for the larger national narrative. As historian Mary Helen Thuente writes, "Popular oral traditions, especially songs and legends, had been the main channel for whatever primitive national consciousness had existed in the native-Irish culture."²² Folklore therefore made up an important part of the idealized Celtic past that Irish nationalists from the nineteenth century onward tried to harness as evidence of a legitimate Irish identity separate from that of the British.²³ Although the term 'folklore' encompasses more than just *folktales*, a distinction often not made clear in literature on Irish nationalism, it was through their ability as storytellers that Travellers were seen as bearers of this

²¹ Court xiii.

²² Mary Helen Thuente, "The Folklore of Irish Nationalism," *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism*, ed. Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989) 42.

²³ Richard M. Dorson, "The Question of Folklore in a New Nation," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3.3 (Dec. 1966): 292.

ancient tradition.²⁴ As will be seen in Chapter One, it was their reputation as great storytellers that lead to the inclusion of certain representative Travellers in the IFC's archives and therefore placed them within the national community.²⁵

1.1 "Communities," Origins and National Myth

Despite the use of the word 'community' throughout this thesis to describe the Travellers, this is a word that assumes a coherence and homogeneity, thus possibly discounting the strength of individual identities.²⁶ Traveller education advocate Helen O'Sullivan describes the problematic nature of simplifying the Traveller community in the following statement:

Travellers, like the general population, come in all shapes and sizes, the good, the not so good and the indifferent. Just like the rest of us... There are Travellers who are traditional and who want to maintain that way of life, there are those who want to retain their Traveller identity but who want to complete their schooling and fully participate in the workforce, there are those who wish to move away from the Traveller ways and hide their identity. There are also those who do not fit in any of these categories. It is impossible and wrong to generalize and categorize.²⁷

Just like any other community, therefore, that of the Travellers is made up of various families and individuals who each bear their own identity in relation to that of the larger group, something that needs to be taken into account every time an argument is made about the community at large.

²⁴ Folklore is a much larger category of information, of which folktales make up only a small part. The two words are therefore not interchangeable. According to the American Folklore Society, folklore is, "the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioural example." "What is Folklore." *American Folklore Institute*, 2 January 2014 <<http://www.afsnet.org/?page=WhatIsFolklore>>.

²⁵ Folklorist Pádraig Mac Gréine cited the storytelling ability of the Travellers as an important factor in his decision to interview them as part of his folklore collection in the 1930s. This was indicated in his first article on them in the *Béalóideas* journal – "Irish Tinkers or "Travellers," *Béalóideas* 3.2 (Dec., 1931) 170.

²⁶ Bhreatnach 153 (in this passage she especially denounces the refusal of modern Irish society to recognize the individuality of members of the Travelling community).

²⁷ Helen O'Sullivan, "Reflections on Traveller Identity," in *Travellers and the Settled Community: A Shared Future*, John Heneghan, Mary (Warde) Moriarty, Micheál Ó hAodha (eds), (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2012) 12.

If the Travellers can be identified as a coherent community, albeit one made up of various individuals, so too can Ireland's settled population. Aoife Bhreatnach, one of the leading scholars of Traveller studies, has noted that though many have attempted to define what it meant to be a part of the Travelling community, no such attempt has been made to define what constituted the settled population to whom they are often compared.²⁸ Essentially, the settled Irish are simply defined as any Irish people who are not Travellers, though this may constitute several different distinct communities in and of itself – rural/urban, poor/wealthy, native/immigrant among others. In the creation of a national identity, however, it is important to emphasize some sort of homogeneity in the population, however unrealistic this definition may be. As Eric Hobsbawm writes, "The basis of 'nationalism' of all kinds was the same: the readiness of people to identify themselves emotionally with 'their' nation and to be politically mobilized as Czechs, Germans, Italians or whatever, a readiness which could be politically exploited."²⁹ Successful nationalist movements would convince future nationals that the nation was a part of their identity – an identity they all shared in common. Irish nationalists also perpetuated this idea through their creation of a myth of a homogenous Irish population so that they might encourage a sense of national unity. Especially in recent years, this homogeneity has been foisted on Ireland's nomadic community as well, although homogeneity based primarily on a, "negatively evaluated 'way of life'."³⁰ For the purposes of this thesis, the Travellers will therefore be referred to as a 'community' and one that has been alternatively included in and excluded from the larger national community in Ireland.

²⁸ Bhreatnach 1.

²⁹ E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (London: Butler & Tanner Ltd., 1987) 143.

³⁰ Jane Helleiner, *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) 8.

As a distinct community within Ireland, the Travellers possess their own language, history and culture, although emphasizing these distinctions can be problematic in terms of including them *as is* in the national identity.³¹ If the ideal national identity is expected to consist of one single language, history or culture, then any community distinguishable from the majority in any of these categories can be singled out by nationalists as outside the national community. The most contested aspect in Traveller historiography is their community's history, often labelled Traveller 'origins.' Although the term 'origins' is most commonly used in much of the historiography when talking about Traveller history, the issue remains that categorizing their history as an 'origin' story supports the position often held towards nomadic orally-based cultures that, "...literate people have history, while non-literate people have myth."³² Therefore the Travellers as a community do not, in this reasoning, have as long a history as the settled Irish do but rather construct themselves as a group based on an accepted mythology about their past.³³ This, according to some, leaves room for the majority literate culture to decide where and when this group actually originated and therefore when their myth-construction began.

³¹ Alternatively, some argue that it is these qualities that have made it possible for the Travellers to survive as a distinct community despite the government's efforts to assimilate them into the larger population. It is also these qualities that are cited by Traveller advocates as reasons for viewing them as an ethnic group. Although she emphasizes language in particular, a useful list of the distinct attributes of the Travelling community can be found in Zara Power's, "A Brief Exploration of Shelta and some of its Historical Functions," *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference*, ed. Michel hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 27.

³² Judith Okley, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 2.

³³ It is significant that these arguments are made against the possibility of nomadic history when nation-building is all about the creation of a national myth – a diverse community drawn together based on a supposed universally shared history, culture and language. The only difference, it appears, was that the majority group was largely literate whereas the minority, for many years, was not. That being said, while the history of literacy is complex and constantly debated, near-universal literacy is arguably a fairly new phenomenon that has been developing unevenly throughout the world since at least the eighteenth century. Therefore when the folklorists and politicians reached far back into Ireland's past to 'recover' its 'natural' identity it was actually reaching back into an era where it was more common to be illiterate than not. For a review on the history of literacy see: Carl F. Kaestle, "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," *Review of Research in Education* 12 (1985): 11-53.

Although several different options have been suggested over the last century of research on Travellers, the most common explanation of their ‘origins’ from the 1950s onwards was that they had once been settled Irish who were forced into a nomadic existence by some sort of traumatic experience. The reasons given for their abandonment of the settled lifestyle vary from the widespread Cromwellian evictions in the mid-seventeenth century to the devastating Great Famine of 1845-1853.³⁴ It is not, however, only members of the settled population suggesting these ‘origin’ ideas. Some Travellers, especially from the mid-twentieth century onwards, have also argued that their community ‘originated’ in these periods of turmoil in Ireland. Aoife Bhreatnach has suggested that the reason the Travellers may have perpetuated these stories is that the idea of them ‘originating’ as a community in either of these events ties them to the national narrative in that they too suffered under British colonialism and therefore can identify with the troubled history of the settled Irish.³⁵ According to both settled and Travelling Irish, they were a part of the majority community at some point, making their acceptance and even perpetuation of this version of their history a way of inserting the Travellers more assertively into the national narrative.³⁶

According to Traveller rights advocate Michael McDonagh, the issue remains that those in support of assimilating the Travellers into settled Irish society in the 1960s and onwards used these ‘origin’ stories to argue a case for the naturalness of the re-assimilation of the Travellers

³⁴ American anthropologists George and Sharon Gmelch however have argued against the likelihood of both of these suggestions. They point out that the Cromwellian evictions were focused on wealthy Catholic landholders and therefore did not affect the smaller farmers. In terms of the famine, the Gmelchs reason that it would not be logical for people to take to the roads during this period as they would have had to rely on the generosity of small farmers to survive; small farmers who would have had nothing to spare considering the dire conditions in Ireland at the time. George and Sharon Gmelch, “The Emergence of an Ethnic Group: The Irish Tinkers,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, 49.4 (Oct. 1976) 230-231.

³⁵ Bhreatnach 40.

³⁶ Helleiner 30.

into mainstream society.³⁷ According to anthropologist Jane Helleiner, “the settlement program was promoted as the action of a benevolent state motivated by a national duty to ‘re-settle’ victims of colonialism.”³⁸ Whereas some Travellers saw this idea of their community’s ‘origins’ as proof of their natural place in the larger national development of Ireland, it could also be used to delegitimize the most distinctive attribute of their community: their nomadism. Others, however, have suggested that the issue lies in the term ‘origins’ itself as opposed to ‘history’; a common issue when studying oral cultures that, for some, have no real history due to a lack of primary literature.³⁹ Arguing against this supposed lack of history, it should be understood that just like the settled Irish, “Travellers did not originate from any one episode or period in history but were a dynamic group that grew and shrank as economic realities dictated throughout early modern history and perhaps before that time.”⁴⁰ While some may have joined the nomadic community during some of Ireland’s traumatic periods, there is evidence that the Travellers as a community existed long before this (an alternative history supported by many Travellers as well as settled Irish in the mid-twentieth century).⁴¹ Most of the hypotheses about Traveller history pre-Cromwell still argue that the Travellers were once a part of the larger Irish community, but maintain that they may have already been nomadic, as during this period nomadic Irish were given an important place in Irish society as scholars, itinerant workers and religious figures or druids.⁴² These ideas still manage to place the Travellers within the *longue durée* of the Irish

³⁷ Bhreatnach 41.

³⁸ Helleiner 30.

³⁹ Okely 2.

⁴⁰ Corbett 30.

⁴¹ Ó hAodha 8.

⁴² The ancient Celts, which was the group nationalists often referred to when speaking of an earlier form of ‘Irishness,’ had a professional caste that travelled between the tribes plying their trades because their services were not needed all the time anywhere. (Court, 9). By suggesting that the Travellers existed as far back as this period, this argument connects them to a period during which many members of the Irish population, even those

national narrative but without positing them as afflicted settled-folk who require the benevolence of the state to return them to their natural place.

The larger significance of this debate, however, is that theories of Traveller ‘history’ or ‘origins’ have a major impact on the Travellers’ inclusion or exclusion from the Irish national identity. In the 1970s, anthropologists George and Sharon Gmelch perpetuated the argument that Travellers were once settled Irish who were forced to travel for various reasons. These previously settled Irish constituted not only peasants forced off their land by forces beyond their control, but more significantly, “...occasionally individuals, who because of problems such as alcoholism or illegitimacy, were stigmatized by settled society, sought refuge on “the road.””⁴³ This definition of the origins of the Travellers is significant because it suggests that the ‘Travellers’ were a group of nomadic Irish who absorbed all of the deviant members of settled Irish society and created a community based solely on their shared nomadism. Although the Gmelchs later argue that the Travellers would develop their own identity in time based on their growing isolation from the settled Irish and their intermarriage within their new ‘community,’ their version of Traveller ‘origins’ suggest not so much a community with a long and complex history but rather one created suddenly and out of sheer desperation.⁴⁴

Some have argued that the Gmelches’ work set the Travellers back decades in terms of their legitimacy as a distinct community.⁴⁵ While this is debatable, the work of these anthropologists was used by proponents of assimilation to argue for the dissolution of the

who did not identify as Travellers per say, chose to lead nomadic lives. This argument provides support for the notion that Travellers represent one of the many complicated aspects of Irish history.

⁴³ George and Sharon Gmelch 225.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 225-226.

⁴⁵ Aoife Bhreatnach, “Fair Days and Doorsteps,” *Portraying Irish Travellers: Histories and Representations*, ed. Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006) 1.

Travellers' nomadic way of life.⁴⁶ The dominant position that Irish nationalists and advocates of Traveller assimilation both took in the second half of the twentieth century was that the Irish national identity was a homogeneous one with a single common history, language, folklore and culture.⁴⁷ As can be seen in both the historiography and the sources used for this thesis, however, in the creation of an Irish national identity many distinct communities were seen as part of the Irish whole in the early-twentieth century; until the Commission on Itinerancy, despite their many distinct features, the Irish Travellers held their own place as a community making up a part of the heterogeneous national identity.

In defining the Travellers as a community it is important to determine what does *not* constitute a part of this definition otherwise one risks blurring the lines between Travellers, Roma, itinerant individuals and any other Irish citizens without a permanent home and thus compromising the Travellers' distinct identity. In many of the early modern sources especially, it is often hard to distinguish between single 'vagrants,' as they are termed, and the Travellers themselves. Bhreatnach marks this difference by arguing that:

Some distinction should therefore be made between a single man or woman seeking shelter and a Traveller family, who possessed their own accommodations. Being independent of house-dwellers for shelter, Travellers were accordingly more distant from the family kitchen and the fireplace than individuals who sought lodgings.⁴⁸

In sources written during the colonial years especially, British authorities referred to any nomadic individuals as 'vagrants,' therefore overlooking any distinctions between different groups. As the British based their surveys of the population of Ireland on land ownership, any people not owning or renting land were placed in the landless category. These people, whether

⁴⁶ Collins 11.

⁴⁷ Fanning 8.

⁴⁸ Bhreatnach, "Fair Days and Doorsteps," 7.

Travellers or individual itinerants, fell victim to the various ‘anti-vagrancy’ laws put in place during British rule based simply on their nomadic lifestyles instead of their existence as distinct communities within Ireland. When looking at sources on the British Poor Law, however, one finds that the overall focus of the British colonial authorities was more on individual vagrants than on Travelling family groups.⁴⁹ Despite the lack of distinction in the available sources, therefore, even the British colonizers may have viewed the Travellers as a distinct group within Ireland.

Not only does Bhreatnach’s statement above emphasize the importance of distinguishing between the Travellers and individual itinerants but it also notes one of the most distinctive attributes of the Traveller community: the importance of family in their nomadic lifestyles. The Travellers not only moved in family groups but also seemed to identify with a larger clan, as seen in the huge gatherings upon the death of one of their family members.⁵⁰ Court argues that this emphasis on the importance of family was considered necessary for survival in the Travelling community as, “the loyal kindred was [a] safe harbour in a sea of other variables.”⁵¹ This reliance on the safety of the family unit suggests the structure of the Traveller community is similar to that of the earlier form of Irish society which the government attempted to recover for the purposes of creating a national identity. Like the Travellers, Irish society before colonization

⁴⁹ Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach, “Introduction,” *Portraying Irish Travellers: Histories and Representations*, ed. Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006) x.

⁵⁰ There are multiple references to the well-attended funerals of various Travellers throughout the Tinker’s Questionnaire responses. These responses suggest that family from all over the country would make the journey to be in attendance at each funeral, marking the importance of clan membership and loyalty in Traveller culture.

⁵¹ Court 3.

had itself been organized into family- or clan-based groups in which the authority rested with the head of the family with a heavy emphasis on the importance of honour and loyalty.⁵²

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Irish nationalists grasped onto the notion of the ideal Irish peasant especially as the most obvious remnant of Ireland's Celtic past. By simplifying the diverse rural population of Ireland into the idealized 'folk,' the nationalists arguably were reclaiming the debased Irish peasant satirized in British media and turning him into a symbol of Ireland as it once was.⁵³ For Ireland's nationalist literary figures especially, the Irish peasant was, "a romantic emblem of a deep, cultural, pastoral, and significantly anticommercial [sic] (or non-materialistic) Irish life."⁵⁴ The peasants symbolized the damages wrought on Ireland by British colonization and how the Irish were nonetheless able to endure – they embodied the country's history. In many ways, the Travellers represented part of this idealized folk culture: they were a community that had endured despite the turmoil of British colonization and subsequent Anglicization of Irish society.

1.2 Early Research and Representations

Because of the various similarities between the Traveller community and Ireland's earlier history, the Travellers attracted the attention of several organizations focused on the archiving and revival of Irish culture from the late-nineteenth century onwards. In the nineteenth century, England's Gypsy Lore Society (GLS) debated the history of the Travellers based on their relation

⁵² Christine Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2008) 11. This is not to suggest that Irish families were dissolved after the British colonizers arrived but rather that British systems of law and governance replaced the clan-based systems of authority that had previously existed in Ireland. Though this would create a more centralized form of government, it also caused tensions as it forced family groups that had long held their own independent authority within their own territory to submit to a centralized power (Kinealy 62).

⁵³ Edward Hirsch, "The Imaginary Irish Peasant," *PMLA* 106.5 (Oct. 1991): 1118.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 1122.

to other nomadic communities. Having ‘discovered’ the Travellers late in the century, the GLS paid enough attention to them to determine that they were indeed a nomadic people but one that was lower than the continental Roma on the Society’s fabricated scale of authenticity.⁵⁵ Due to the use of ‘Shelta,’ a cant largely derived from Gaelic and still used by some Travellers today, members of the GLS determined that the Travellers were indigenous to Ireland and therefore separate from the Roma communities they were studying in England.⁵⁶ Even today, however, there remains an automatic and incorrect assumption that by virtue of their nomadism the Travellers are therefore ‘gypsies.’⁵⁷ While scholars still debate how much the Travellers may or may not have intermarried with members of the Roma community over the past century in particular, most are in agreement that they share more history and culture with the majority of the Irish population than with the often ostracized Roma.⁵⁸ The most obvious similarities between the Travellers and the Roma are their nomadic lifestyle and their former practice of marrying only within their group, but the significant distinctions between the two are those of religion and language. While the Roma in Ireland are predominantly Protestant and still speak their own language, the Travellers are predominantly Catholic and their cant has been connected to both the English and Irish languages.⁵⁹ In the late- nineteenth century, however, they were

⁵⁵ Ó hAodha 12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 18.

⁵⁷ This term is problematic as it originally comes from ‘Egyptian’ which was used to describe the Roma on the European continent who were believed to have originated in Egypt centuries previously. More than just describing their apparent origins, however, this term was also meant to distinguish the Roma as foreign and therefore give consecutive governments (even today) a reason to ostracize them from mainstream society. That being said, some nomadic communities choose to identify themselves as gypsies. The issue truly lies when authorities outside these communities try to decide what to call them. Kalwant Bhopal and Martin Myers, *Insiders, Outsiders and Others: Gypsies and Identity* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2008) 30.

⁵⁸ Despite his argument about the ‘othering’ of Travellers from majority Irish society, Mícheál Ó hAodha consistently emphasizes that this does not stem from a popular belief that the Travellers belong elsewhere but is rather based on their nomadic lifestyles. They are, according to most researchers, indeed ethnic Irish.

⁵⁹ John Sampson, an early member of the GLS, was the first to note the difference between the Travellers and the Roma based on their language alone, with the Travellers speaking Shelta that, as mentioned above, was connected

viewed as indigenously and ethnically Irish, separate from the nomadic communities throughout Europe who were (and often still are) believed to have originated elsewhere. The conclusions of the GLS on Traveller language and ethnicity are significant as they would provide inspiration for twentieth-century Irish nationalists and folklorists to look to this community as bearers of Irish folklore – as a part of the Irish national identity, both new and old.

Within Ireland, the nationalist Celtic Literary Revival movement in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century used the correlation between the Travellers and early Irish culture to romanticize the former as emblematic of an earlier period in Irish history and therefore outside Anglo-Ireland.⁶⁰ As Revivalist and playwright John M. Synge wrote, “People like these...are a possession for any country. They console us, one moment at least, for the manifold and beautiful life we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe.”⁶¹ Synge, who wrote *The Tinker’s Wedding*, was but one of many Revivalists who saw the Travellers as holding some of the Celtic folklore and culture that they were trying to recover for the purposes of creating an Irish national identity. In the works of the Celtic Literary Revival members, Travellers and other ‘wanderers’ often represented a freer lifestyle which broke the constraints apparently imposed on the Celtic-Irish by their British colonizers. Essentially, “The mobile population represented in part a continuation of the Gaelic way of life in spite of a policy of ‘Anglicization’” that included the introduction of English systems of law and land tenure.⁶² The Travellers therefore were seen

to Irish and was believed to be native to Ireland (Helleiner, 38). Various historians have noted the religious difference between the Travellers and the Roma as have the Travellers themselves, when interviewed. Aoife Bhreatnach discussed this in *Becoming Conspicuous* (2006) starting on p. 15. The Travellers’ point of view can be found as early as 1931 in Pádraig Mac Gréine’s, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers.””

⁶⁰ Helleiner 40.

⁶¹ Synge qtd. In Helleiner, 40.

⁶² Helleiner 32.

by the Revivalists as a community that was fighting back, one that insisted on maintaining its way of life despite the attempts of the British authorities to Anglicize the entire country.

Additionally, the Travellers represented a lifestyle free from the constraints of modernity – however unrealistic this representation was, considering their dependence on the settled Irish for employment. This is a common theme found in research on nomadic cultures as it seems settled populations often romanticized the nomadic lifestyles as being representative of a ‘simpler’ era in which communities remained tight-knit and self-reliant, a lost paradise so to speak.⁶³ As an idealized community, therefore, to some Irish nationalists the Travellers represented a connection to Ireland’s pre-colonial past; they were a part of the country’s ‘pure’ identity.⁶⁴

1.3 The Travellers in Irish Society

The Travellers therefore have largely been defined by their relationship to the settled communities with whom they interacted. The fact that the Travellers have long depended on the settled population for their livelihood is not debated in the historiography as it was from the settled Irish that they received paid work, donations of food or alms and even places to stay (before the advent of carts or caravans).⁶⁵ What is less universally accepted is that these two communities were interdependent, with the Travellers providing often necessary services to the settled communities they passed through. Although begging became an increasingly important

⁶³ Bhopal and Myers 113.

⁶⁴ The Revivalist movement’s fascination with the Travellers, however, was not the first time this community had attracted scholarly interest. The earlier treatment of the Travellers by the Gypsy Lore Society, which was based outside of Ireland, would also have a significant impact on later discussions of their place in Ireland, as discussed above.

⁶⁵ Fionnuala Carson Williams, “Irish Travellers and “Country People”; Folk Narrative and the Construction of Social Identity,” *Migrants and Cultural Memory: the Representation of Difference*, ed. Mícheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 3.

part of the relationship throughout the mid-twentieth century, the Travellers still provided various necessary services to the rural populations of Ireland in particular. As tinsmiths especially, the Travellers were often seen as unrivaled in their ability to both produce and repair tin buckets, pots and other implements.⁶⁶ Their movements were cyclical, as described above, and so by the time they returned to an area there were tools to be replaced or repairs to be done, and in this capacity their visits were welcome. Even as the use of tin began to diminish in the mid-twentieth century, the Travellers continued to be adept for the most part at finding employment to support themselves and their families.

Their adaptive nature has been noted in the historiography especially by Bhreatnach, who writes, “Travellers were self-employed, selling skills, items and their labour in accordance with the demands of the market. They exploited niche economies, and tailored their works to local circumstances.”⁶⁷ As a nomadic population, once these opportunities had dried up in one area they could pack up their campsite and move on with assurance that further employment opportunities would be found in the next village. Anthropologist George Gmelch, mentioned above, described the Travellers as only useful as tinsmiths though this description appears simplistic when one considers how adaptive the Travellers were as a community.⁶⁸ Not only were they skilled at creating and repairing tin vessels but they could reputedly turn their hand to any task required by the settled population. This adaptive ability explains some of the willingness of some Irish nationalists and citizens alike in the mid-twentieth century to defend the Travellers as holding a distinctive place in Irish society. Though Ireland’s late industrialization would eventually make this position more tenuous it would take the intervention

⁶⁶ Bhreatnach, “Fair Days and Doorsteps,” 20-21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid* 20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid* 1.

of the government on the recommendations of the Commission on Itinerancy to establish much of the Travellers' lifestyle as obsolete.⁶⁹

The Irish Travellers, otherwise known as 'Tinkers,' can thus be described as a family-based community in Ireland that has had constant interaction with the settled majority in some capacity. The term 'Tinker' is believed to have derived from their most common form of occupation, that of 'tinsmithing' or 'tinkering'.⁷⁰ Gmelch suggests that it was this particular craft that made them useful to the settled population for centuries and therefore kept them safe from being ostracized entirely from society.⁷¹ The issue with this statement is that it suggests that they only held a place in society as 'tinkers' and in no other way. As Aiofe Bhreatnach has argued, Gmelch was, "responsible for bringing the popular belief that Travellers were useful as 'tinkers' but obsolete as 'itinerants' into the formal academic sphere."⁷² The significance of Gmelch's work and how it has affected even the current status of Travellers within Irish society raises another aspect of Traveller studies: most of the information available about the Travellers and their culture is written and held by scholars from the settled community, meaning that it is largely an archive of representations.

As representations of the Travellers, however, these sources reveal much about the nature of the relationship between the two communities, albeit largely from the settled point of view. One should also take in to account, however, that the Travellers were not passive sources of

⁶⁹ Corbett 18. The Commission was ostensibly formed to look at the 'problems inherent in [the Travellers'] way of life' and therefore had the pre-determined agenda to provide options for their absorption into settled Ireland. It was the first government inquiry into the situation of the Travellers in Ireland and would prove disastrous for their chosen 'way of life.'

⁷⁰ Helleiner 132.

⁷¹ George and Susan Gmelch 227.

⁷² Bhreatnach, "Fair Days and Doorsteps," 1.

information for Ireland's settled majority. If one reads the sources while considering that the Travellers actively chose what information to impart to the folklorists especially, one can construct a sense of how the Travellers portrayed themselves. The collection of folklore was a combined effort between the folklorist collecting and the source imparting the information.⁷³ Although the transcripts may have been edited occasionally, one of the stipulations the IFC gave their collectors was that the folklore should be collected verbatim so that the information archived was as 'authentic' as possible. The sources used for this thesis, therefore, consist of both representations of the Travellers by settled Irish and the Travellers' representations of themselves using the settled Irish as conduits for their information.

This thesis draws on sources amassed by the IFC during a defining period of Irish history (1920s to 1950s).⁷⁴ As such, although some of the information was provided by Travellers, this is primarily a study of representations of Travellers within the national narrative by the majority settled portion of the population. Although it becomes increasingly difficult to find mention of the Travellers in primary sources the further back in time one looks, information about the Travellers has been both archived and researched within various disciplines for the better part of modern Irish history – from many different angles. In its discussion of the place of Travellers in the Irish national identity, this thesis draws on the complex historiographies of nationalism, post-colonialism and constructions of the 'Other'.

⁷³ Briody 235.

⁷⁴ For a detailed history of the Irish Folklore Commission itself, see Micheal Briody's *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, ideology, methodology* (2007) cited in full above.

1.4 The Nation and Irish Nationalism

Although nationalist movements existed in Ireland prior to the twentieth century, the post-First World War period was particularly significant for the growth of nationalism in Ireland as it was during this period that the country gained its independence, giving the new government the mandate to construct a new Irish national identity. This independence came after centuries of colonial rule, which places Irish nationalism within the related discourse of post-colonialism as part of the context in which Ireland developed as a nation.⁷⁵ As Travellers possessed a strong folkloric tradition, they were caught up in both of these dialogues and had a place in the construction of a post-colonial Irish identity. This place, however, was contested due to the distinctive nomadic nature of the Travellers which has led some scholars to suggest that, especially after independence, the Travellers were viewed as an ‘Other’ who did not belong to the larger Irish community.⁷⁶ The creation of an Irish national identity became a necessity in post-colonial Ireland and was driven by a nationalist government and its cultural agents. In basing the nation on this identity, the government emphasized their separation from the country’s former colonizers; they ‘othered’ the British much as the British had ‘othered’ the Irish during the colonial years.⁷⁷ As such, this thesis is situated at the intersection of discussions of nationalism, post-colonialism and the construction of the ‘Other’ – all of which had an effect on the place Irish Travellers were given within Ireland.

The efforts of Irish nationalists to collect folklore, that are the focus of this thesis, were directly related to the growth of Irish nationalism from as early as the nineteenth century but

⁷⁵ Emmet Larkin, “The Irish Political Tradition,” *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism*, Thomas E. Hachey & Lawrence J. McCaffrey (eds.) (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989) 100. The designation of Ireland as a post-colonial nation is still debated in the historiography but for the purposes of this thesis it will be defined as such.

⁷⁶ Helleiner 8-9.

⁷⁷ Ó hAodha 42.

especially after independence when the government began leading the project.⁷⁸ Historian Richard English argues that nationalism is an essential component of any study of Irish history as, “The shape of modern Ireland, for good or ill or both, has been sculpted largely by nationalism.”⁷⁹ Much of Irish history in the twentieth century in particular was driven by the determination of both politicians and many citizens of the island nation to gain independence from centuries-old British rule that many argued had been so detrimental to their country.⁸⁰ There were several instances where decisions by British political bodies had devastating and lasting effects on certain segments of the Irish population, such as the British parliament’s refusal to send adequate aid during the horrific Irish famines of the nineteenth century. However, other policies, such as the implementation of the plantation system and a central government, were arguably necessary for the growth of modern Ireland.⁸¹ The history of nationalism in Ireland is therefore connected to the history of the British Empire; it is arguable that neither can be fully understood without studying the other.⁸² The many different forms nationalism took in Ireland drew on different aspects of its colonial and pre-colonial history to support particular visions of the ‘new Irish nation’ and, arguably, the country could not have achieved independence without this multitude of efforts.

Irish nationalists from the various groups all struggled with the same problem: what would the nation of Ireland actually look like should it obtain independence? Before the Norman Conquest in the twelfth century, the Irish did not share anything close to a coherent identity.

⁷⁸ Thuente 42.

⁷⁹ Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London: MacMillan, 2006) 4.

⁸⁰ Larkin 101.

⁸¹ For a thorough discussion of Britain’s role in Irish history, see Christine Kinealy’s *A New History of Ireland* (2004), cited above.

⁸² Kevin Kenny, “Ireland and the British Empire: An Introduction,” *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 1.

Divided by various clan interests and feuds between different factions, identity was often tied to the clan or immediate community as opposed to some overall shared ‘Irishness.’ Even the Norman invasion itself failed to procure a united front on the part of the Irish as they initially arrived on the island by the invitation of one particular Irish leader to support his individual claim to leadership.⁸³ Examples of the divisions in Irish society would continue far into the twentieth century, visible even today as the six Northern Counties remain a part of Great Britain. The nationalist movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries therefore focussed less on a coherent identity based on actual shared characteristics and instead united behind one concept: Irish Freedom. Irish citizens may not have shared much in a national sense as each county had its own distinct identity, but they had at least one experience in common: they had all lived under British rule and were considered citizens of the British Empire as opposed to Irish. As historian Richard English writes, “...freedom has been a recurring melody within the nationalist symphony,”⁸⁴ and this was a battle-cry that would help unite the tenuously connected Irish people behind the nationalist cause. In a way, coming together behind one shared experience formed a sort of imagined community which nationalists argued all Irish citizens could feel a part of, despite their differences.⁸⁵ For a time, this included the Irish Travellers as the British colonial authorities had for the most part failed to distinguish them from the majority

⁸³ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, “Components of Irish Nationalism,” *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism*, ed. Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989) 1.

⁸⁴ English 19.

⁸⁵ This brings to mind Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). He saw nations overall as imagined communities who felt united due to shared features dictated by those in charge of the stipulations of nationalism in their country. This was certainly the case in Ireland as identity was previously tied to locality and family – hardly supporting the idea of national coherence. Irish nationalists, like other proponents of nationalism globally, would choose certain features such as language (Irish and English), history (especially pertaining to Celtic civilization) and folklore and emphasized how this drew the nation together under the banner of ‘Irishness’ in direct comparison to the division the British colonial powers perpetuated on the same lines (Anderson 15).

Irish society.⁸⁶ Until achieving independence the Travellers made up only one part of the native-Irish population ‘othered’ by their British colonizers.⁸⁷

Many historians, anthropologists and sociologists alike who make up the field of Traveller Studies argue that widespread discrimination towards the Travellers by the settled population in the twentieth century was a result of Ireland’s independence from the British Empire. In forming the identity of a post-colonial nation, the Irish government emphasized their own ‘civilized’ nature by separating themselves from an apparently ‘primitive’ culture within their midst. As Eleanor Carey argues, “... [The Irish state] transferred all the negative stereotypes which had been placed on the Irish by the British (that they were backward, nomadic, beggars, superstitious and were quick to violence) onto its own internal ‘Others’, the Travellers.”⁸⁸ The Irish state therefore perpetuated the self/other dichotomy used by the British to emphasize the ‘Otherness’ of the Irish as colonial people. Having obtained independence, the new state created its own self/other designation so commonly relied upon in the creation of a national identity; the Travellers were arguably the victims.

Viewing the Travellers as inferior, some argue, was also a way to unite a traditionally divided society consisting of several competing groups constantly at odds because of their differences, such as ‘native’-Irish versus Anglo-Irish and Catholic versus Protestant. Using the Travellers as ‘Other’ helped reinforce the tenuous definition of ‘Irishness’ being crafted by the

⁸⁶ David Tuohy and Micheál Ó hAodha, “Some notes on Johnny Doran – The Irish Traveller and Uilleann Piper Extraordinaire,” *On the Margins of Memory: Recovering the Migrant Voice*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) 90.

⁸⁷ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 41.

⁸⁸ Carey 85.

post-independence government.⁸⁹ It is curious, however, that the Travellers are posited as the constant ‘Other’ in Irish society as Irish nationalists already had an obvious community against which to form a national Irish identity: their former colonizers.⁹⁰ Citing history as far back as the New English domination brought by Oliver Cromwell’s forces in the seventeenth century, Irish nationalists developed the most vehement opposition to the British and it was therefore the British against whom the early proponents of Irish nationalism identified themselves – not against their own nomadic community. It should be noted, however, that this identity was formed largely against British colonial authority at first as proponents of Irish nationalism included both the Catholic Native-Irish and Protestant Anglo-Irish.⁹¹ Both of the main parties, however, had a ready-made ‘Other’ in the form of what they saw as their ‘oppressors’ and ‘colonizers’ and therefore arguably had no need to search for another, even after independence.⁹² Nineteenth century nationalists, as mentioned above, saw the Travellers as remnants of an earlier Celtic civilization that had existed before the intrusion of the British. Through the Gaelic League (which focused on recovering the Irish language) and the Celtic Literary Revival movement (which focused on the retrieval and revitalization of Celtic folktales), Irish nationalists began the

⁸⁹ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 51.

⁹⁰ This is not to suggest that a nation can only have one ‘Other,’ but rather than the Travellers were not the main ‘Other’ in the creation of an Irish national identity. As Irish nationalists in the twentieth century were trying to emphasize the homogeneity of the Irish national population it would have been counterintuitive for them to look inwardly for an ‘Other’ to define the Irish national identity against (at least in the early years of independence). This thesis therefore argues that the British were the most obvious ‘Other’ for Irish nationalists to define themselves against and therefore remained the focus of nationalist discourse during the period in question.

⁹¹ The growth of Irish nationalism, even just over the course of the late nineteenth century, is complex enough to be the subject of its own book. As it is too large of a subject to be given its due attention here see Richard English’s *Irish Freedom: the History of Nationalism in Ireland* (2006), cited above, for a fuller picture.

⁹² It should also be noted that not everyone in Ireland saw the Empire as ‘evil’ or menacing. British colonization had brought some economic advantages and modernity to Ireland as well as the devastation of the lack of famine relief and the imposition of the land tenure system (which both kicked some Irish off their lands and allowed others more security in their ownership of the land). For a more nuanced discussion of the complexities of the relationship between the Irish and the British see Joe Cleary’s “Post Colonial Ireland,” *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 251-288.

construction of an Irish national identity based on pre-colonial ‘Celtic’ Ireland.⁹³ In doing so, they positioned Irish nationalism within the related discourse of colonialism which would pave the way for later post-colonial nationalist reconstruction of Irish identity on similar terms after independence.

The Irish government’s decision to create a new national identity is a common theme in the study of nationalism. In the complex process of the creation of a new nation, nationalist forces have to fashion a national identity, something to unite their people as part of a new community. As Jim Mac Laughlin wrote, “Before nations can be built from the ground up they have to be lodged in the hearts and minds of the people.”⁹⁴ The government therefore had to find a way to convince its people, many of whom were of English-descent, of the legitimacy of the Irish nation. Once Ireland gained its quasi-independence with the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922, as in so many other countries in twentieth century, the newly independent government had to construct a national identity for a people who had developed for centuries under a dominating and divisive colonial rule.⁹⁵

Of what did Irish identity consist, and how far back did one have to look for its manifestation? Modern Ireland was the product of invasions; its diverse population was the result of centuries of the largely successful absorption of various groups from the continent.⁹⁶ Each of these groups left their distinctive mark, notably in the very existence of Dublin which was

⁹³ McCaffrey 1-19.

⁹⁴ Jim Mac Laughlin, *Reimagining the Nation State: The Contested Terrains of Nation-Building* (London: Pluto Press, 2001) 2.

⁹⁵ The term ‘quasi-independence’ is used here as Ireland did not gain full Republic status until 1937. When the Irish Free State was created it was understood as a country within the Commonwealth where the government still had to swear allegiance to the queen and most foreign policy decisions were still made by England (Kinealy 221-222).

⁹⁶ Larkin 102.

founded by Viking raiders in the ninth century as a temporary settlement from which they could launch their various plundering missions into the interior.⁹⁷ The Vikings, however, were not the only ones to leave a physical presence on the landscape; throughout the countryside one can peel back various layers of stone to find remnants of English, Norman, Viking and Early Monastic populations before even arriving at the legendary Celts (fairly late in itself as far as the full history of human life on the island goes).⁹⁸ Despite Ireland's checkered history, filled with raids, rebellions and almost constant warfare, the most obvious 'Other' Irish nationalists had in mind when modern forms of nationalism began to develop in the late-eighteenth century was the British. As the most recent, and some would argue most devastating, wave of conquest, the British colonizers – for that was essentially what they were – had earned themselves a primary place in the burgeoning nationalist rhetoric. The Irish government that inherited the already well-established, if slightly disorganized, national movement in the early twentieth century therefore had to contend with the legacy of British colonization in their construction of a new Irish national identity.⁹⁹

Up until its largely successful revolution, the Irish, as demonstrated above, had long identified themselves against the invading British. As Eric Hobsbawm wrote, "...there is no more effective way of bonding together the disparate sections of restless peoples than to unite them against outsiders."¹⁰⁰ And, for a time, this method of developing and encouraging nationalism in Ireland seemed to work, judging by the rapid growth of both the Gaelic League and the Celtic

⁹⁷ Donald H. Akenson, *An Irish History of Civilization*, vol. I (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005) 119.

⁹⁸ Larkin 102.

⁹⁹ For a good summary of the development of Irish nationalism in direct conflict with the remnants of English influence in Ireland see Thomas E. Hachey's "Irish Nationalism and the British Connection" in *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism* (1989) 121-138.

¹⁰⁰ Hobsbawm 91.

Literary Revival. They were Irish simply because they were *not* British and so much of their culture, history and traditions, at least in the public sphere, were defined based on how they were different from the British; an Irish-Ireland as opposed to British-Unionism.¹⁰¹ Arguably, however, as with any national identity, that of the Irish was extremely hard to determine as the island was divided into various rural communities each with their own distinct identities. Upon gaining independence from England, although Ireland as a physical entity had existed before the arrival of the British, the government was now faced with the challenge of (re)imagining its own standalone identity – taking the British largely out of the equation. Again, however, government did not initially position the Travellers permanently outside the national identity.

Many scholars do not consider the Irish Free State or the later Republic of Ireland as post-colonial states in the same way as they might consider India one, even though much of the colonization of India was actually based on the system that had already been in place in Ireland for centuries.¹⁰² According to historian Kevin Kenny, Ireland has often been completely ignored in the scholarship on England's imperial history even though, conversely, "[it] has often been described as both the first and the last colony of the British Empire."¹⁰³ There are, however, many arguments against the inclusion of Ireland in the category of 'post-colonial states' along with less controversial examples. For some, it is the fact that Ireland's experience was apparently not as violent or racially oppressed as others (arguable when one looks at the full history of British colonization). Some insist that seeing Ireland as a postcolonial nation relieves the Irish of responsibility for the myriad problems they experienced in the twentieth century. Finally, and

¹⁰¹ Cleary 264.

¹⁰² Cleary 251.

¹⁰³ Kenny, "Introduction," 1.

most oft-argued, some posit that as Ireland gained independence in the early 1920s, it therefore, “has long since had ample time to overcome its ‘post-colonial’ legacies and hangovers.”¹⁰⁴

Others, however, argue that looking at Ireland through a post-colonial lens is a useful way to be able to engage with the cultural and social struggles of the subaltern groups in Irish society (long ignored, as elsewhere) such as women, the working-class, immigrants and the nomadic community.¹⁰⁵ This discussion, therefore, becomes particularly useful when studying the Irish Travellers as a particular type of subaltern group within the larger Irish nation. This does not negate the role they play in Irish society but rather emphasizes that this role is both performed and experienced from a certain standpoint, that of a community that is both inside and outside the national identity. This thesis supports the view that Ireland in the twentieth century was indeed constructing its nation within the framework of post-colonialism and that this context encouraged the inclusion of the Travellers in the national identity due to the related designation of the British as the country’s comparative ‘Other’.

The construction of a national identity in a post-colonial nation is often done in comparison the new nation’s former colonizers.¹⁰⁶ With the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, Ireland became a post-colonial nation and, as such, “the development of twentieth-century Irish society has been most deeply conditioned by attempts either to preserve or to surmount Ireland’s centuries-old relationship with Britain and the British Empire.”¹⁰⁷ For centuries Ireland’s identity had been crafted and represented by its British colonizers and because of this, the Irish government saw the need to re-appropriate this identity. In order to

¹⁰⁴ Cleary 252.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid* 251.

¹⁰⁶ Briody 45.

¹⁰⁷ Cleary 254.

create a new post-colonial national identity, Irish Catholic nationalists especially strove to find Irish culture that they could claim was not tainted by centuries of British colonization.¹⁰⁸ By attempting to sweep away the influences of the British on Irish culture, “The ‘native,’ including native iconography and Irish ‘local heroes’, now belonged to Ireland.”¹⁰⁹ For Irish nationalists, a pre-colonial, and therefore ‘native,’ Celtic past would combat their colonizers’ reification of an inferior Irish identity.¹¹⁰ By tying the history of their new nation to an independent Celtic past, complete with a distinct language, folklore and culture, Irish nationalists constructed an identity separate from that ascribed to them by the British. As Briody wrote, “Great Britain was perceived as urban, English-speaking, and protestant. Ireland would go to endless lengths to prove itself to be the opposite: rural, Irish-speaking and Catholic.”¹¹¹ As a largely rural-based and predominantly Catholic community with knowledge of the Irish language, the Travellers were included in this form of the Irish national identity. Ireland’s identity as a post-colonial nation therefore was instrumental in not only the Irish government’s decision to create a new national identity but also on what basis this identity would be crafted.

Ireland’s history as a colony within the British Empire also contributed to the deep divisions within Irish society that made the creation of a national identity difficult for the Irish government in the twentieth century. Historian Alvin Jackson emphasizes this by describing how the British would switch their support between factions depending on how they calculated their

¹⁰⁸ Dorson 292.

¹⁰⁹ Mac Laughlin 144.

¹¹⁰ The British negative representation of the Irish during the colonial years is best represented in the following quotation by Charles Kingsley (186): “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don’t believe they are our fault. I believe there are not only more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful.” (Kingsley qtd. in Hirsch, 1119). The Irish were seen as inferior to the British and as such the British government constructed the Irish identity as being beneath that of the British and therefore in need of constant guidance – certainly not suited for independence.

¹¹¹ Briody 45.

own advantage in pursuing each relationship. As colonizers, using similar tactics to what would later be seen in the colonization of India, the British both depended upon and exploited local alliances for their own gain.¹¹² This effectively divided the Irish into privileged and unprivileged groups and kept them from uniting behind one single nationalist cause. These divisions did not disappear with the formation of the Irish Free State; in fact they contributed to partition in which the six Northern Counties remained a part of Britain, a situation that remains contentious today. These divisions would also serve to create confusion when trying to construct some form of a national identity; was this identity Catholic or Protestant? English or Irish speaking? Industrial or rural?¹¹³ With so many existent divisions, it is no surprise that the Travellers were not considered a particularly contentious subject until much later in Irish history (especially with the formation of the Commission on Itinerancy in 1960).¹¹⁴ As far as the new Irish identity was concerned, the years under colonial authority had left a legacy of division and tension – one which would have to be resolved before any further contested communities could be considered.

Not only was the Irish population divided by questions of language, history and religion but the Irish nationalist movements were as well. Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Irish Catholic and Anglo-Irish Protestant movements would compete to gain control of the trajectory of nationalism and, more importantly, national identity in Ireland.¹¹⁵ One of the most renowned Irish Catholic nationalist groups was in charge of the largely successful Home Rule movement (later replaced by other Catholic nationalist movements more focused on outright independence) whereas the Celtic Literary Revival was created by mostly

¹¹² Alvin Jackson, "Ireland, the Union, and the Empire, 1800-1960," *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 130.

¹¹³ McCaffrey 19.

¹¹⁴ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 100.

¹¹⁵ McCaffrey 13.

Anglo-Irish Protestant nationalists.¹¹⁶ Each of the nationalist movements in Ireland had an effect on the growth of Irish nationalism, and indeed contributed to the success of the fight for independence, but by 1922 the Catholic nationalist movements had become dominant. The position of the Catholic nationalists was solidified even more in the Irish constitution of 1937 which created the Republic of Ireland and designated it officially as a Catholic nation-state. As Jane Helleiner points out, “As the Irish nation was equated with Catholicism, non-Catholicism became a fundamental marker of ‘Otherness.’”¹¹⁷ Although, as noted above, earlier nationalist movements had been created, led and supported by Anglo-Irish Protestants, the dominance of Irish Catholic nationalism by the mid-twentieth century would have a significant impact on who was considered within the nation – and therefore part of the national identity. This designation of Ireland as a Catholic state added another positive dimension to the place of the Irish Travellers within the nation. Predominantly Catholic, the Travellers already subscribed to this part of the projected Irish national identity.¹¹⁸ Although it is unclear how their place within Ireland would have been defined had the Protestant nationalists won the battle for control over the national identity, the strong position of Irish-Catholic nationalism by the mid-twentieth century provided at least some support for the place of the predominantly Irish-Catholic Travellers within this identity; the Travellers already identified as Catholics and were therefore not ‘othered’ along with Protestants and other religious groups.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Helleiner 41.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid* 7.

¹¹⁸ Almost all of the responses to the Tinker’s Questionnaire (1952) looked at in Chapter 2 indicated that the Travellers were well-known to be Catholic, if to varying degrees. How long they have been a majority-Catholic community is unknown but I have yet to find an alternative posited.

¹¹⁹ Helleiner 7.

In the crucial post-colonial period of the 1920s to the 1950s, therefore, the Travellers were not the ‘Other’ in the creation of the Irish national identity. The problem remained, however, that despite their place in the national narrative, overall the Travellers are underrepresented in the sources from this period. It has been argued that their community was omitted from the archive because they did not constitute a significant part of the national narrative. There are, however, many reasons to explain why the Travellers are largely missing from these earlier sources of Irish history, suggesting that viewing the Travellers as ‘othered’ because of a lack of material is too simplistic.

1.5 Travellers in the Archive: Language and Folklore

Throughout their growth and expansion in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, each of Ireland’s various nationalist movements included the Travellers in their nationalist rhetoric in one way or another. One of the challenges when studying the role of Travellers in the growth of Irish nationalism, as mentioned above, is that the vast majority of the available sources about them are produced by members of Ireland’s settled population.¹²⁰ A far more significant challenge is that even with these representations, the Travellers overall are underrepresented in Irish sources until the period of the Irish Free State. While many historians have argued that this is because the English colonizers did not see the Travellers as a distinct community within the larger Irish one, there may be a far more practical explanation for the lack of sources. One of the most devastating consequences of the Civil War (1922-1923), in terms of the preservation of Ireland’s past, was the destruction of Dublin’s Public Records Office (PRO) during the worst of the fighting. The building was used as a munitions storage facility by the

¹²⁰ Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach, “Introduction,” xiii.

rebels and though it is unclear if its destruction was deliberate, in the ensuing explosion what was known as, “one of the finest medieval state archives in Europe” at the time was lost.¹²¹

According to several prominent historians, the historical discipline in Ireland is still reeling from the loss, although at least a small number of the sources were duplicated elsewhere. As historian David Edwards has exclaimed, “[it] has proved, in retrospect, to be one of the Civil War’s most lasting legacies, namely the handicapping of Ireland’s history.”¹²² The PRO had held sources of Irish history going back to medieval times, most of which were lost in the fire. In addition, people throughout the countryside personally burned their own folklore sources in case these might incriminate them on a visit from the Black and Tans.¹²³ One will never know, however, how many of these sources made reference to the Irish Travellers as very few of the sources that remain mention them at all. This may, however, account for the lack of sources on both Travellers and other minority groups within Ireland before the twentieth century.

It is not surprising that it was around the early twentieth century that more Irish institutions seem to take notice of the Irish Travellers as a distinct community within Ireland. Travellers became more visible as various groups took sides in the different conflicts, both during the initial revolution and during the civil war. In the rebellions against the British in particular, the Travellers participated regularly as information-runners for the Irish rebels as they were less likely to be suspected by the British and also more capable of moving freely throughout the country.¹²⁴ Despite, or possibly due to, the active participation of the Travellers in

¹²¹ Briody 44.

¹²² David Edwards qtd. in Briody 44.

¹²³ Briody 44. The Black and Tans were a part of the Royal Irish Constabulary during the Irish War of Independence. They were called the “Black and Tans” because of the colour of their uniforms and were widely mistrusted due to frequent attacks on civilians and civilian property (Kinealy 212-213).

¹²⁴ Helleiner 68.

Ireland's revolution and war, both sides of the conflict would occasionally see the Travellers as untrustworthy and some Travellers were even persecuted as spies (on both sides). This was exacerbated by their use of Shelta or Traveller's cant, which suspicious settled Irish people in times of conflict saw as a secret language designed to hide something from outsiders. This led to the discussion of Travellers in various newspaper articles and Dáil sessions and therefore the rare inclusion of the Travellers in Irish historical archives.¹²⁵ Despite this more negative aspect of the history, what is important to note is that the Travellers were just as caught up in this particularly violent period in Irish history as was the settled population. As citizens of Ireland, whether their exact position in relation to the majority was defined or not, the Travelling community also had to live through both the revolution and the civil war, both of these experiences would affect the further development of their culture and lifestyle.¹²⁶ It was also around this time that post-independence nationalists took note of the Travellers and added them to their list of possible sources of Irish culture and heritage. The representation of the Travellers as a pre-colonial Irish community by early nationalists was therefore subsequently reinforced throughout the mid-twentieth century; by viewing the Travellers as an older Irish community, these later nationalists included them in the construction of an Irish national identity.

Because of the havoc and devastation wrought on the Southern counties during the Civil War, on both sides, Irish nationals in the Irish Free State were forced to create their own mechanism for both collecting and producing Irish history. To this effect, they established the

¹²⁵ Ciara Bhreatnach, "Historical Sources Pertaining to Travellers, 1824-1925," in *Portraying Irish Travellers: Histories and Representations*, eds. Ciara Breatnach and Aoife Bhreatnach (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006) 27. The Dáil Éireann was the lower house of the Irish Parliament during the years of the Irish Free State.

¹²⁶ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 41.

Irish Folklore Institute in 1930 which would later be replaced by the IFC in 1935.¹²⁷ These organizations became the agents for the collection of folklore as the main cultural source for the national Irish identity. Both the government and its folkloric organizations argued that the most significant sources of Irish folklore were to be found in the largely rural populations of the Gaeltacht where Irish was still spoken as the native tongue.¹²⁸ As an illustration of this belief, Cormac Breathnach, a teacher and Gaelic League activist was quoted in 1926 as saying, “There are in the Gaeltacht – and there alone – special things, such as the culture and civilization and folklore and true genius of the Gaelic race.”¹²⁹ The IFC perpetuated this idea that the residents of the Gaeltacht possessed the largest amount of pre-colonial Irish-language folklore. The predominance of the Irish language in the Gaeltacht was what initially attracted the IFC to this region and the folklore of its people.

The importance of the ‘native’ tongue was certainly not a notion unique to Ireland; most studies of nationalism take language into account when discussing the most significant components making up any new nation. It was the development of an official language that brought the new nations’ citizens together through the ability to communicate, ostensibly, with all the members of their new larger community. Designating the national language was also a way to define the nation against those who did not belong, the perpetual ‘Others’ whose very otherness helped shore up the identity of the nation and its nationals.¹³⁰ Emphasizing the connection between language and national identity, Irish historian R.V. Comerford writes:

Those citizens who do not speak the national language are disadvantaged, not simply in a practical way but in the far more serious sense that they are cut off from the wellsprings

¹²⁷ Sean O’Sullivan, “The Collection and Classification of Folklore in Ireland and the Isle of Man” *Folklore* 68.4 (Dec., 1957): 449.

¹²⁸ *Ibid* 450.

¹²⁹ Cormac Breathnach qtd. in Briody, 52.

¹³⁰ Hobsbawm 52.

of the national being; they are shut out of the spiritual communion that embraces the contemporary nation and the generations that have gone before.¹³¹

Even if one spoke multiple languages, and arguably national identities never completely erase the multitude of other identities to which individuals cling, in order to be a part of the nation one had to learn to speak the official language used primarily in all but private business.¹³² Therefore, the designation of an official language not only enforced the idea of an ‘imagined community’ in which the members shared some sort of common identity but it also defined Ireland as a nation by what it was not and its ‘Others’ as those who could not communicate with them.¹³³

As a community that used both English and Irish, along with their own cant, the place of the Irish Travellers in the national identity was decided partially based on their use of language. Despite the best efforts of Irish nationalists, Irish never fully took off as the national and official language. It was enshrined in the constitution as such and yet the use of Irish for official purposes was never very widespread and the language continued its gradual decline as the century progressed.¹³⁴ There was an organized attempt as far back as the late-nineteenth century to bring the Irish language back into mainstream use, especially with the creation of the Gaelic League in 1893 by the renowned Irish folklorist, and later politician, Douglas Hyde.¹³⁵ Even the League, however, which existed purely for the salvaging and promotion of the Gaelic language, did not envision a completely Irish speaking population in Ireland’s future but rather some sort

¹³¹ R.V. Comerford, “Nation, Nationalism, and the Irish Language,” *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism*, eds. Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989) 20.

¹³² Hobsbawm 52.

¹³³ Hans Kohn, one of the fathers of the study of nationalism, saw this emphasis on language as a way of ‘othering’ those who do not belong as being developed as early as ancient Greek society – something Hobsbawm alluded to by the use of the word ‘barbarian.’ Kohn published a fascinating discussion of the ancient roots of nationalism as found in ancient Hebrew and Greek societies which was not addressed here for brevity’s sake but can be found in his *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company Inc., 1955).

¹³⁴ Comerford 41.

¹³⁵ Dorson 293.

of bilingualism which would not displace the dominance of English.¹³⁶ Despite this willingness to compromise, it is important to note that most, if not all, of those involved in the struggle for independence of the twentieth century took their first steps towards nationalism through their roles in the Gaelic League. Irish politician and historian Tom Garvin argues that, “The Gaelic League was in many ways the central institution in the development of the Irish revolutionary élite... [who] had been members of the League in their youth and had imbibed versions of its ideology of cultural revitalization.”¹³⁷ The Gaelic language movement also inspired certain Irish nationalists to try to preserve what they argued was the Irish people’s native tongue and in order to do so they turned to the collection of rural folklore.¹³⁸ Without the desire to salvage the remnants of Gaelic-language folklore, the vast archive of Irish folk traditions and culture held in University College Dublin (UCD) may have never been amassed.

It was in the process of collecting this folklore, ostensibly all in Gaelic but in reality comprising much in the English-language as well, that folklorists would turn to the more traditional sectors of Irish society to garner information.¹³⁹ This is, arguably, what led at least some collectors to the Irish Travellers. Although a few scholars have argued that Travellers were always seen as lower than the rest of Irish society, in the mid-twentieth century they were often viewed as representing an earlier and idealistic period in Irish history, as discussed above.¹⁴⁰ This was especially visible in the setting of the country fair, still a very important meeting place for both rural settled Irish and the Travellers until its place in Irish society diminished with post-Second World War industrialization. Within this setting, the Travellers were rendered

¹³⁶ Briody 39.

¹³⁷ *Ibid* 47.

¹³⁸ *Ibid* 54.

¹³⁹ Séamas Ó Catháin, “The Irish Folklore Archive,” *History Workshop* 31 (Spring, 1991): 145-146.

¹⁴⁰ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 25.

picturesque by the settled Irish as the contact between the communities was fairly limited and superficial. Nonetheless, the behaviour of the Travellers at these fairs, with the visible inter-clan feuds and their skill at horse-trading and performing songs and stories, provided an idealised and romantic image of their community for the settled people.¹⁴¹ They were certainly a community outside that of the settled Irish but by no means violently ‘othered’ in the way that much of the historiography of Traveller studies suggests.

1.6 Othering

Much of the work on Irish Travellers has taken for granted the ‘fact’ that this community has always been seen as ‘othered’ and therefore not a part of the larger Irish community or, more importantly perhaps, the constructed Irish national identity. In the more extreme cases, exemplified by both Bryan Fanning and Micheál Ó hAodha, the Traveller is argued to be the natural ‘Other’ against whom the majority of the Irish population identifies itself.¹⁴² Ó hAodha’s *Insubordinate Irish: Travellers in the Text* posits that the form Irish nationalism took in the twentieth century in particular was a monologic one which did not allow for any breaks from the accepted homogenous Irish identity.¹⁴³ Ó hAodha argues that being ‘othered’ means that simply by existing one inspires ambivalence in the majority community. According to Ó hAodha,

We live in the era of the Other, the era of “difference,” the era of migration – that “stranger” who waits silently at the border crossing, battered suitcase in hand. Travellers and Roma are the archetypical migrants. Perennial “outsiders,” they are the people who have lived for centuries on society’s margins.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ *Ibid* 27.

¹⁴² Fanning, *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland* (2002) ; Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish: Travellers in the Text* (2012) – both cited in full above.

¹⁴³ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, ix.

¹⁴⁴ Micheál Ó hAodha, “Introduction,” *Travellers and Showpeople: Recovering Migrant History*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008) vii.

In studies of nomadic culture, various scholars have argued for the perpetual ‘othered’ status of Travellers and other nomadic peoples. Kalwat Bhopal and Martin Myers, who research the ‘otherness’ of multiple nomadic communities, argue that these nomadic people are the constant strangers. Their power lies in the fact that they disrupt society simply by existing, they are never fully understood and yet they remain.¹⁴⁵ What complicates this argument in the case of the Irish Travellers is that they were never quite the ‘stranger’ described by Bhopal and Myers in the case of the Roma, or indeed immigrant Travellers in England around the same period. Individuals within the Traveller community were recognized by the settled Irish in the areas in which they Travelled and, perhaps more importantly, were seen as indigenous to the island (unlike the Roma in Western Europe). This is a significant point to note as this meant they were not ‘racially othered’ by the majority population of Ireland.¹⁴⁶

As Jane Helleiner, prominent scholar on the relationship between Travellers and Settled Irish, has noted, “Unlike many ‘Gypsy,’ Roma, and other Travellers in Europe who are attributed with collective origins outside of their respective ‘host’ nations, Travellers in Ireland have been constructed, and have constructed themselves, as an indigenous minority.”¹⁴⁷ This idea of Irish origins has had both positive and negative effects on the treatment of Travellers in Ireland, and indeed has influenced their inclusion in (or exclusion from) Irish society as a whole. Framed as indigenous, the Travellers have long been denied ethnic status within Ireland as they apparently belong in the ‘Irish’ category and therefore cannot be properly defined as a separate community. Conversely, their indigenous status has also been used to support arguments in favour of assimilation policies, as mentioned above, suggesting that assimilation will return them to their

¹⁴⁵ Bhopal and Myers 2.

¹⁴⁶ Helleiner 29.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid* 29.

‘natural’ sedentary place within the nation.¹⁴⁸ The fact that they are largely believed to be an indigenous group who cannot be racially ‘othered’ by the majority Irish has therefore complicated the relationship between the two communities. It has allowed certain individuals and groups some leeway when it comes to suggesting a place for the Travellers within Irish society as, after all, they are indigenous Irish. This argument therefore also drove the movement against the destruction of Traveller culture in mid-twentieth century Ireland and is the focus of this thesis.

Research on the position of Irish Travellers in larger Irish society and the developing national identity of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century is therefore contextualized by discussions of nationalism, post-colonialism and otherness, to name only the main frameworks. In the development of Irish nationalism, the qualities of both the nation and the ideal citizen were chosen, a process which would decide whether Travellers fit this particular mould or not. As a post-colonial nation, Ireland grappled with the difficulties of creating a new identity separate from that of its British colonizers who had left an undeniable mark on both the geography and the culture of the island nation.¹⁴⁹ Finally, in struggling with the creation of a new nation, and a post-colonial one at that, the new Irish national identity needed to be created in comparison to what it was not – the British had long been the ‘Other’ against whom the Irish identified themselves but this quickly became inadequate. The question remains, how soon were the Travellers displaced from their ambiguous place as ideal reminders of a simpler time in Irish history to the more problematic position of a non-modern community in need of assimilation? This thesis argues that this designation of the Travellers as ‘Other’ was not inevitable and that, in

¹⁴⁸ Okely 13.

¹⁴⁹ Cleary 254.

fact, the mid-twentieth century saw various attempts to include them as a distinct community within the national fabric, without the need for assimilation. This argument will be explored in the next few chapters to shift the discussion from ‘inevitable assimilation’ to a more contingent, and therefore less deterministic, history of the Travellers in Ireland.

As mentioned above, the sources used for this thesis are mostly derived from the archives of the IFC and its predecessors. A note about the terminology used in this thesis is necessary as Travellers have been referred to by many names in both the sources in question and the scholarship, depending on the period in which they were written. While the designations of Traveller and Pavee are the most acceptable today, in the past it was common to refer to these individuals as ‘tinkers’ due to their traditional occupation as nomadic tinsmiths. Like many other names based on their various occupations, the title ‘tinker’ is considered largely derogatory today unless used by an individual from the Travelling community.¹⁵⁰ That being said, it should be understood that in the sources used in the following chapters, written between 1927 and 1952 for the most part, ‘tinker’ was a more acceptable term, at least in the opinion of the settled population using it. Sean Ó Riain, quoted at the beginning of this introduction, remembers referring to the Travellers as ‘tinkers’ in his youth and mentions that this did not seem to cause any offense at the time.¹⁵¹ As this term is used freely by the individuals quoted from the IFC sources it should therefore be understood as a common designation for Travellers during a certain period, and not as a derogatory term for this nomadic community – at least not by those using it.

¹⁵⁰ Okley 18.

¹⁵¹ Sean Ó Riain, “The Story of a Traveller Support Group: A Local Resident’s View” in *Travellers and the Settled Community: A Shared Future*, John Heneghan, Mary (Warde) Moriarty and Micheál Ó hAodha (eds.) (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2012) 17.

This introduction has shown that the Irish Travellers have long constituted a distinct and recognized community within Ireland; it is rather the place of their community within the nation that is contested. This thesis posits, differently from the majority of the existing scholarship, that during the crucial 30-year period of Irish history between 1922 and 1952, there were efforts to include the Travellers in the national identity without resorting immediately to assimilation. Though the Commission on Itinerancy of 1960, the first of its kind, would eventually recommend assimilation as the only ‘solution’ to what they, by that time, deemed the Irish Traveller ‘problem,’ there was a period of time during which this outcome was far from decided.¹⁵² Some may argue that since the assimilation policies were eventually adopted by the Irish government, this possibility of a different outcome is irrelevant. As prominent historian of Irish Traveller studies, Micheál Ó hAodha, argues, however, “The past has consequences; it has consequences for the attitudes and approaches adopted with respect to cultural minorities; it also has consequences for the position which the cultural minorities themselves...occupy within modern Irish society.”¹⁵³ To suggest that the assimilation (or attempted assimilation) of the Irish Travellers was inevitable is to suggest that any other relationship between the two communities is and was unthinkable. The available sources, however, reveal a much more complicated relationship between the two communities. The period of the mid-twentieth century in Ireland is therefore significant in that it saw the possibility of the Travellers maintaining their way of life while simultaneously remaining a part of a more complex form of Irish identity.

Using the IFC’s archives, this thesis argues that the Irish Travellers were not designated as the nation’s ‘othered’ community in the twentieth century but rather as contested outsiders

¹⁵² Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 30.

¹⁵³ *Ibid* 8.

who were initially included in the national identity. Chapter one describes the work of the IFC from the period between 1930 and 1952 and how the Travellers were included in their efforts to collect traditional Irish Folklore as part of the government's attempt to create a national identity. The efforts of two particular part-time folklorists, Pádraig Mac Gréine and Sean Mac Grath are used to demonstrate how the Travellers were recognized not only as a distinct and historic group within Ireland but also as intrinsically connected to the larger Irish community – they had both their own identity and shared in the larger Irish one. Chapter two takes this thesis into the 1950s with the IFC's release of the Tinker's Questionnaire, more of an ethnographic than a folkloric tool that they hoped would garner as much information as possible from their settled Irish respondents about a community they saw as disappearing. Although the majority of the responses to this Questionnaire were positive and continued to demonstrate the Travellers as part of the larger Irish community, it is in these responses that one begins to see a shift towards the need to assimilate the Travellers into the majority population. Finally, the Conclusion will demonstrate how the Irish government of the 1960s designated the Travellers as a problem for which the only solution was full assimilation through the creation of the Commission on Itinerancy in 1960. This decision was directly connected to the economic, social and political modernization of Ireland during this period and the recommendations of the Commission (released in a Report in 1963) would decide policies on the Travellers for the next 20 years.

As this introduction began with a quote from Irish sociologist Sean Ó Riain on the contentious nature of the Traveller-Settled relationship by the 1980s it is perhaps fitting to conclude with his memories of the relationship between his own mother and one particular Traveller woman 30 years earlier:

While she came in the hope of getting food or money, I believe the relationship between my mother and Mrs Carmody was more mutually beneficial, much richer and more complex than the simple relationship of donor and beggar. The two women would discuss the ways of Travellers and settled people for an hour or more as they sat drinking tea at the kitchen table. Looking back now, I think that my mother gave the most valuable thing she had, her time and respect, to Mrs [sic] Carmody. My mother and Mrs Carmody were not unique, in the 1950s there were many such friendships. I fear that is not so anymore and that is one of the major changes for the worse in Traveller/settled relationships.¹⁵⁴

To say the overall relationship between the Travelling and settled communities of Ireland is complicated is an understatement and yet the details of its complexity are significant for understanding the constantly changing place of the Travellers in the nation. Ó Riain's personal experience with the Travellers was but one example of this complexity and, more importantly, how the relationship would change over time in conjunction with the development of Ireland as an independent nation. Despite the ever-fluctuating relationship between the Travellers and the majority settled Irish, in the constructive years of the Irish Free State, the Travellers were included in the Irish national identity, especially as sources of pre-colonial Irish folklore. By the 1950s however, increasing government involvement in the designation of the place of Irish Travellers in the nation would begin a shift from acceptance towards assimilation.¹⁵⁵ The next two chapters will therefore analyze this crucial period in the process of creating an Irish national identity as one in which the Travellers played a significant part in the national narrative. Although contested outsiders, the Travellers were not Ireland's 'Other within' and would not truly gain this distinction until the 1960s.¹⁵⁶ Instead, the Travellers were seen as one facet of an obviously heterogeneous Irish identity – a representation of one aspect of an independent Ireland.

¹⁵⁴ Ó Riain, "The Story of a Traveller Support Group," 17-18.

¹⁵⁵ The move towards assimilation is discussed thoroughly in Aoife Bhreatnach's *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and the State, 1922-1970* (2006) cited above.

¹⁵⁶ The term 'Other within' comes from Ó hAodha's *Insubordinate Irish*, x.

2 Chapter: Folklorists, Travellers and Irish Nationalism (1930-1952)

I appeal to every one [sic] whatever his politics – for this is no political matter – to do his best to help the Irish race to develop in future upon Irish lines, even at the risk of encouraging national aspirations, because upon Irish lines alone can the Irish race once more become what it was of yore – one of the most original, artistic, literary, and charming peoples of Europe.

- Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” (1892)¹

Despite what Douglas Hyde, early Irish nationalist and the future first President of the Republic of Ireland (1938-1945), argued about the apolitical nature of creating a unique Irish identity, this process has always been political – and no more so than after independence.² By extension, whether in terms of language, history or folklore, the tools used in the creation of this national identity were also infused with the politics of nationalism and thus became political themselves.³ Although all of these aspects played a significant role in Irish nationalism, this chapter will focus on the collection of folklore and how the government of the Irish Free State and its cultural agencies politicized both the collection process and the material amassed while attempting to determine what it meant to be ‘Irish’ post-independence. As folklore was collected by various organizations throughout the 1920s and 1930s, different communities in Ireland were approached as sources of this knowledge; they represented the original Ireland, free from outside influences.⁴ The majority of these sources came from the rural Gaeltacht (or Gaelic-speaking)

¹ Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” (speech, Dublin, November 25, 1892), History Muse, <http://historymuse.net/readings/HYDENecessityforDeAnglicizingIreland1892.htm>.

² Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) 298.

³ All of these different tools of Irish nationalism are discussed individually in Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey’s *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

⁴ As several historians (notably Richard English) have noted, there’s no such thing as a ‘pure’ Ireland free from any outside influences and this search was therefore for naught but the idea that such an identity existed suggests that one of the main goals of Irish Nationalism was to try to create a uniquely Irish identity to separate it from its recent and long-standing colonial past. Significantly, English questions the entire idea of the Irish ‘Celt,’ suggesting that this identity was only fabricated in the eighteenth century and, “contrary to the image so widely popular today, it appears that Celtic Ireland did not actually exist.” Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in*

areas of Ireland, notably in the Westernmost provinces, but it was also during this period that folklorists began to seek out other seemingly traditional and, they argued, untarnished sources of Irish folklore.⁵ While the rural Irish were placed in this traditional category, so too were Ireland's Travellers who were seen by some as a community representative of an earlier time in Irish history, uncontaminated by years of colonization.⁶

Between 1930 and 1950, two folklorists working for the government-funded Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) collected folklore from several individual Travellers and the results of their efforts are now archived in University College Dublin (UCD). This chapter will look at the IFC's role in the creation of an Irish national identity during this period and, more specifically, how the efforts of Pádraig Mac Gréine and Sean Mac Grath contributed to the inclusion of the Travellers in this identity.⁷ If the collection of folklore was arguably political in its role in creating a new Irish identity, then the selection of the Travelling community as a source base – and by extension their agreement to impart their folklore – was also political. The period of the Irish Free State was therefore a moment in which the Travellers were given, and to a certain extent actively took, a place in the construction of an Irish national identity. Far from

Ireland (London: Macmillan, 2006) 27. Of significance for this thesis, it is the notion of the idealized Celtic past and how it was used to support nationalist movements that is significant, not whether it actually existed historically.

⁵ Micheal Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1979: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007) 52.

⁶ Jane Helleiner, *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 41.

⁷ Michéal Ó hAodha also looks briefly at both Mac Gréine and Mac Grath in his study on the Tinker's Questionnaire (the focus of chapter two) and argues that their views as published in *Béaloidéas* embody the shift from acceptance to assimilation that slowly took place in the intervening years between their publications. For Mac Gréine the Travellers were a coherent community to be treasured and therefore left as is. Ó hAodha argues that Mac Grath took a similar position as the Gypsy Lore Society, mentioned in the Introduction, by stating that only some Travellers were authentic enough to represent an older Irish culture while others no longer maintained enough of their identity to be worth the folklorist's time. In making this judgement, Ó hAodha argues, Mac Grath was suggesting that the Travellers had become the responsibility of the settled Irish and therefore a community that they had the right to categorize and make judgement on. These arguments will be debated briefly below. Michéal Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish: Travellers in the Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) 29.

the ‘Others’ some argue they became by the second half of the twentieth century, the Travellers were viewed as but one of many sources of the Ireland’s rich folkloric tradition during this crucial period of reinvention.

2.1 Folklore, Language and Irish Identity

Up until now, many scholars have argued that the most significant use of folklore to support and promote the nationalist movements in Ireland occurred in the nineteenth century with the growth of the Gaelic League and the Celtic Literary Revival.⁸ While folklore indeed made up an important part of these movements, it was equally regarded as an important resource in the growth of the new nationalism of the Irish Free State (1922-1937). As Estonian folklorist Oskar Loorits wrote, cultural independence is, “of far greater importance than political freedom when the soul of the nation is enslaved.”⁹ Loorits’ statement suggests that political freedom is hollow if a nation’s government is unable to create some sort of unique national identity; the nation would be free on paper but its citizens would maintain their colonial mindset. This was essentially what Douglas Hyde was arguing in the quote which began this chapter; cultural independence was significant in the Irish case as nationalists from the nineteenth century onwards saw Irish culture as the bearer of Irish identity – especially in the form of folklore. As folklorist Richard M. Dorson wrote,

The cause of Irish nationalism resembled the Norwegian in the endeavor to forge a modern nation-state from material buried deep in the misty past. Ireland had to sweep

⁸ For a concise summary of this period in the history of Irish nationalism and especially the role of Douglas Hyde in the process, see Richard M. Dorson’s “The Question of Folklore in a New Nation” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3.3 (Dec. 196): 292-295.

⁹ Loorits qtd. in Briody 90.

away the incrustations of English culture, as Norway did the Danish, to find her own roots, and again folklore proved a useful tool.¹⁰

As head of a post-colonial state, the government of the Irish Free State had to construct, or reconstruct, an Irish national identity. This government had to define Irish identity against that of the British, not easy after centuries of colonial rule.¹¹ Even more challenging was government's goal to convince Ireland's citizens that their identity was different from how it had been long represented by the British colonial authorities. During colonial years, the British government had constructed a self/other dichotomy to explain Irish inferiority: while Englishness was associated with modernity and progress, Irishness had been associated instead with backwardness and stagnation. In the late-nineteenth century, Irish nationalists appropriated these constructions by depicting Englishness as materialistic (seen in a negative light) versus the Irish who were spiritual and imaginative.¹² These nationalists saw Irish folklore as the best tool to promote the creation of their new national identity based on a pre-colonial, spiritual and imaginative Celtic past.¹³

Folklore is one of the characteristics that historians of nationalism argue contributes to the creation of a new nation, whether post-colonial or otherwise. Along with a common language, history and culture, folklore acts as a way to bring an intrinsically disparate people

¹⁰ Dorson 292. The comparison Dorson makes to Norway's simultaneous construction of a national identity is particularly significant as Norwegian folklorists would be among the inspirations for the work of the IFC throughout the mid-twentieth century.

¹¹ Joe Cleary, "Postcolonial Ireland," *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 254.

¹² *Ibid* 262-263.

¹³ Both Norway and Sweden, two of the greatest centers of folklore scholarship from the nineteenth through to the late-twentieth century would host the leaders of Ireland's folkloric movement on multiple occasions and provide the most adamant encouragement of their work. Sean Ó Súilleabháin, the archivist for the IFC throughout its entire duration, worked closely with the renowned Norwegian folklorist Reidar Th. Christiansen of the University of Oslo to develop the collection and archival methods of the Commission and also to create the still influential work *The Types of Irish Folktales* (1963). Patricia Lysaght, "Seán Ó Súilleabháin (1903-1996) and the Irish Folklore Commission," *Western Folklore* 57.2/3 (Spring-Summer, 1998): 141.

together.¹⁴ Folklore in particular, or the ways in which people are first introduced to folklore, is also often connected to childhood memories and therefore to a defining period in an individual's life. If a large group of people can relate to each other in terms of their folkloric traditions, stories and expressions, they may feel more naturally connected – a feeling that nationalists hope to harness in order to strengthen their fledgling nations, the construction of which is neither natural nor organic.¹⁵ Like any other attribute of a nation, folklore is a hard concept to define or categorize. The American Folklore Society defines it as, “the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioural example,” a definition that is supported in most of the historiography.¹⁶ Even with this rather broad definition, work ostensibly on folklore is often limited to folktales and therefore includes only a very small aspect of the information available.¹⁷ For the purposes of this thesis, the American Folklore Society's definition will be used as the information the IFC collected from the Irish Travellers encompassed more than their folktales, although these did comprise a significant portion of the manuscripts.

The first phase of any national movement arguably often consists of an exploration of the available folklore.¹⁸ Often more accessible to the masses than history, folklore is a way for

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 11.

¹⁵ Dorson 277.

¹⁶ “What is Folklore.” *American Folklore Institute*, 2 January 2014 < <http://www.afsnet.org/?page=WhatIsFolklore>>.

¹⁷ A good example of the confusion of the terms ‘folklore’ and ‘folktale’ can be found in Mary Helen Thuente's essay, “The Folklore of Irish Nationalism,” *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism*, ed. Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989) 42-60. Although Thuente's discussion of the role of *folktales* in the growth of Irish nationalism is significant, and indeed was heavily drawn upon in this chapter, she defines folklore as, “traditional oral texts subject to variation and possessing a common stock of motifs and ideas,” (Thuente 43) which is essentially the definition of oral tradition or folktales. It is therefore important that these two terms be defined separately so as not to confuse the broad category of ‘folklore’ with the very specific ‘folktale’.

¹⁸ Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism* 12.

nationalists to demonstrate how long their newly and rather arbitrarily defined community has existed. Even more significantly, H.R. Ellis Davidson argues that, “Folklore can become history and history folklore,” suggesting that the two concepts are intricately intertwined and therefore elevating folklore to a more prominent place in the development of nationalism.¹⁹ In the Irish case, nationalism was framed as a revitalization movement: Irish nationalists argued that the Irish identity had existed pre-colonization and was directly tied to some sort of ancient Celtic civilization.²⁰ During the crucial period of change between the foundation of the Irish Free State and that of the Republic of Ireland (1922-1937), folklore was used by both the government and other proponents of Irish nationalism to help the nation’s people adjust to this period of rapid change. As Wendy Reich argues, “...in periods of rapid social change, folklore can be seen as an agent for change in that it provides a sanction and rationale for change.”²¹ By harnessing the nation’s sources of folklore, therefore, the Irish government was amassing support for the vast changes it was making in all sectors of Irish society. As this folklore was archived, it became part of the nation’s history and therefore solidified into a part of the national identity. In pushing for the collection of the remaining Irish folklore, the IFC was creating an archive representative of an Irish national identity.

Despite undergoing a period of such rapid political, economic and social change, the government of the Irish Free State agreed to fund and otherwise support the IFC. While the amount of funding allotted was always a point of contention between the IFC and the Irish government, the IFC was nevertheless able to run for an impressive 35 years and even managed

¹⁹ H.R. Ellis Davidson, “Folklore and History,” *Folklore* 85.2 (Summer, 1972) 73.

²⁰ Thunete 47.

²¹ Wendy Reich, “The Use of Folklore in Revitalization Movements,” *Folklore* 82.3 (Autumn, 1971): 243.

to win some hard-fought battles over its work and archival space.²² The constant, if sometimes reluctant, support of the Irish government can be explained by the idea that in prioritizing the collection of folklore over all else, the IFC's folklorists were also salvaging pieces of Irish history. In 1918 folklorist D.H. Moutrey Read gave an address to the Folklore Society about the importance of Irish folklore. In it he unknowingly predicted the role folklore would play in twentieth-century Irish nationalism when he argued for the significance of the intersection of folklore and history:

For folklore reflects history. It is the record of the life of the people. It is affected by contemporary events, even by the fluctuating politics of the day, in just so great or so little a degree as the folk themselves are affected. Where politics have a dominating influence on life, as unhappily has been – and is – the case in Ireland, politics mould, mar or make folklore.²³

Folklore, just like history, was therefore political and made up an important part of the nation's identity. As Read explained, whereas history during this period was essentially top-down and focused on great men and great deeds, folklore appeared to be created both by and for the people – it provided a glimpse into aspects of life ignored by history which focused on more “high political” subjects. Hidden aspects of Irish history could be illuminated by folklore just as folklore would be defined by its historical context.²⁴ Folklore was also a useful tool for remaking history in the image desired by Irish nationalists. As Irish historian Mary Helen Thuente argues, “Historical events may be distorted by folksongs and by nationalist songs, but their versions of history have been important historical forces, often more important than the historical events

²² Séamas Ó Catháin, “The Irish Folklore Archive,” *History Workshop* 31 (Spring, 1991): 145. The IFC's archives moved from place to place throughout the early years but finally came to be housed in the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin where they remain today.

²³ D.H. Moutrey Read, “Folklore and History in Ireland,” *Folklore* 29.4 (Dec. 30, 1918): 284.

²⁴ *Ibid* 283-284.

themselves.”²⁵ If folklore and history were so intricately connected, a theory apparently understood even before the creation of the Irish Free State, it is understandable that the newly independent government of the Irish Free State wanted to harness the power of both tools in the process of creating a national identity for its people.²⁶

Of the types of folklore used by early Irish nationalists, such as The Gaelic League and the Celtic Literary Revivalists, the most popular were folktales that had been passed orally from generation to generation over the centuries. As Thuente argues, “Popular oral traditions, especially songs and legends, had been the main channel for whatever primitive national consciousness had existed in the native-Irish culture.”²⁷ Oral tradition, according to folkloric theory, is passed on through the generations because, “it serves the interests of the society in which it is preserved.”²⁸ Much like history therefore, the power of harnessing folktales lay in the fact that it could be tweaked to emphasize whatever qualities nationalists considered important for the success of their particular nation. When shared widely, oral tradition evoked a sense of actuality thus lending credibility to the story through popular belief.²⁹ In Ireland, this often meant emphasizing the strength and independence of mythological Irish heroes such as Fionn mac Cumhaill.³⁰ Though mac Cumhaill and his Fianna were obviously mythological figures, their

²⁵ Thuente 41.

²⁶ Briody 61.

²⁷ Thuente 42.

²⁸ Davidson 73.

²⁹ *Ibid* 74.

³⁰ Fionn mac Cumhaill is a mythological Irish hero, categorized as a warrior-seer, whose exploits with his band of Fianna (or ‘soldiers’) have been the subject of numerous folktales told throughout Ireland and Scotland (known as the Fionn Cycle) since at least the eighth century (Ríonach uí Ógáin, “Fionn mac Cumhaill,” *The Encyclopedia of Ireland*, ed. Brian Lalor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 390.

Although there are many other Irish mythological heroes that could be cited here, mac Cumhaill (also known as Finn McCool) is particularly significant as the name of his band, *Fianna*, was eventually incorporated into the political part created by Éamon de Valera in 1926: *Fianna Fáil* or ‘Soldiers of Ireland,’ which demonstrates how

stories emphasized the bravery and fierce fighting spirit of the ‘ancient Irish’ and therefore supported the idea of the superiority of the Celtic race.³¹

Nineteenth-century Irish nationalists did not just recover these ancient tales, but edited them to use them as support for their own struggle towards Irish independence. As Irish nationalist Douglas Hyde said, “The old bricks that lasted eighteen hundred years destroyed, we must now set to make new ones if we can on other ground and of other clay.”³² These new bricks would be the original folktales edited slightly to support the nationalist cause. Whereas the older folktales could be categorized as fatalistic, passive and personal, the new nationalist versions were focused on larger ideas such as the nation and the martyrdom of Irish heroes.³³ In order to create the building blocks of the new Irish nation however, more than just folktales would have to be collected. Much of the groundwork for the methods used by the Irish Free State was laid during Hyde’s years as President of the Gaelic League (established 1893) and the work of such organizations would inspire later nationalists to bring the preservation attempts further than just a conservation of the language to encompass all of the remaining Irish folklore in its broadest definition.³⁴ The collection of folktales by these early nationalist movements created the blueprints, but it would be in the twentieth century that the power of folklore would be most effectively tapped for the exponential growth of Irish nationalism.

The greatest challenge to Irish nationalists in both the nineteenth and twentieth century was that every localized community with a supposed shared identity had a common folklore

much mythology has permeated Irish society and politics even in the twentieth century. Christine Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2004) 231.

³¹ Thuermer 60.

³² Hyde qtd. in Dorson 293

³³ Thuermer 47

³⁴ Briody 45.

from which they draw this identity, meaning the Ireland already contained multiple folkloric traditions.³⁵ In the historiography of nationalism, it is argued that those creating (or attempting to create) national identities simplified this complication by choosing certain folklore in conjunction with another significant aspect of nationalism: language.³⁶ The folklore existing in what had been deemed the national language was therefore harvested by supporters of nationalism and perpetuated as the national folklore at the expense of all others. While this might exclude minority groups from participating in the collection of what is deemed ‘national culture’, the act of collecting folklore from members of the population could also lead to the inclusion of groups who may have otherwise been given no place in the creation of a national identity. This was the case with Ireland’s Travellers whose folklore was collected beginning in the 1930s by the certain folklorists working for the IFC as part of an effort supported by the Irish government to amass what they saw as traditional Irish folklore that had apparently survived unscathed the centuries of British influence. Many of the Travellers in the earlier years of the IFC’s collection process did know some Irish but it was their community’s cant, known as Shelta or Gammon that first brought them to the attention of Irish nationalists.³⁷

As discussed in the introduction, the Travellers were previously looked at during early attempts to uncover the strongholds of the Irish language throughout Ireland, an effort that acted

³⁵ Edward Hirsch argues that this problem manifests itself when nationalist forces begin collecting folklore from their idealized ‘folk’ (usually those who live in rural settings) and in doing so aestheticize a complex group of people into one coherent community. Essentially, nationalists pick and choose from the folklore available to them and in the process overlook the distinct folkloric identities present in each individual rural community. He discusses this phenomenon in relation to the Irish peasant’s role in the spread of nationalism in Ireland: Edward Hirsch, “The Imaginary Irish Peasant,” *PMLA* 106.5 (Oct. 1991): 1116-1133.

The Gaelic League had already recognized the importance of language to the Irish national identity in the late-nineteenth century but they had largely limited their collection efforts to preserving the intricacies of the Irish language as opposed to folklore per say (Briody 45).

³⁶ Dorson 277.

³⁷ Ó hAodha 27.

as an inspiration to later folklorists searching for sources of Irish folklore. In the late-nineteenth century, members of the Gypsy Lore Society (GLS) ‘discovered’ what they argued was a centuries-old Traveller’s cant.³⁸ Initially, the excitement surrounding this discovery was due to the gypsiologists’ belief that Shelta was one of the long-lost Pictish languages, a remnant of ancient Celtic societies from the years before the Roman conquest of England.³⁹ Although this theory was eventually dismissed by the academic community, interest in Shelta continued for decades, eventually being used as part of the argument for the inclusion of Travellers within the new Irish nation. Mac Gréine later noted the various similarities between Shelta and Irish supporting the later (now largely accepted theory) that this cant developed out of the Irish language as a way of maintaining community solidarity against the English colonizers.⁴⁰

Whereas some scholars, notably Micheál Ó hAodha, argue that the definition of Shelta as a secret cant contributed towards the already virulent ‘othering’ of the Travellers in Irish society, this does not fit the discourse pertaining to the role of language within the nation. The creation of a nation-state, arguably, requires that the nation’s citizens speak what is designated as the ‘national language,’ not that they refrain from learning, or holding onto, any others.⁴¹ As most of

³⁸ Although the GLS was based in England, there were many Irish-born scholars working for them throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, including John Sampson who was the original scholar to insist on the pictish origins of Shelta. It was also the first major folkloric organization to take any interest in the Travellers as a community and though the GLS’s characterization of the Travellers was largely negative (they portrayed them as one of the lowest classes of ‘Gypsies’ on the GLS purity scale) they brought them to the attention of other folklorists who would go on to found the Folklore of Ireland Society and later the Irish Folklore Commission. See Micheál Ó hAodha’s *Insubordinate Irish* (2011) pp. 8-23 for more information.

³⁹ Ó hAodha 18.

⁴⁰ Pádraig Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” *Béaloides* 3.2 (Dec. 1931): 184.

⁴¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1987) 147. Hobsbawm argues that although ‘linguistic nationalism’ became increasingly important in the late nineteenth century as new nationalist movements cropped up throughout Europe, it was primarily in terms of reading and writing. As for verbal communication, citizens would learn the ‘national language’ out of necessity – to be able to take part in everyday life in the public sphere – but the government could not control what language was spoken at home. This therefore led to multiple identities within the nation – allowing a similar space for the Travellers within Ireland.

the scholars who study Traveller history note that the Travellers spoke English, though as a distinctive but intelligible dialect, and often Irish as well in the earlier periods, their additional use of cant therefore does not constitute absolute proof of their ‘othered’ status within Irish society. The significance of the GLS’s work on the Travellers, however, is that it inspired the IFC to look into cant because of its possible connections to the Irish language. This in turn would act as a catalyst for the collection of Traveller Folklore in the 1930s as part of the creation of an Irish national identity.

2.2 The Irish Folklore Commission: A Brief History

Following the establishment of the Folklore of Ireland Society (1927), the Irish government set up the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930, “to make a last-minute effort to save as much of the riches of Irish folklore for posterity before they were irretrievably lost.”⁴² The mandate of both the Institute and its successor, the IFC (established 1935), was therefore to collect as much folklore, history and general knowledge as possible from the Irish population.⁴³ As a part of the government’s larger goal to create an Irish national identity, the IFC was expected to save as much of this localized culture as possible so that it could be refined into something with which the entire nation could feasibly identify.⁴⁴ One of the challenges to this goal was that Ireland’s population was spread out and therefore organized into very small communities.⁴⁵ This not only made collection difficult but the distinctiveness of each community’s identity made the definition of a national culture extremely difficult to achieve. The

⁴² *Ibid* 19.

⁴³ Sean O’Sullivan, “The Collection and Classification of Folklore in Ireland and the Isle of Man,” *Folklore* 68.4 (Dec. 1957): 450.

⁴⁴ Jim Mac Laughlin, *Reimagining the Nation-State: The Contested Terrains of Nation-Building* (London: Pluto Press, 2001) 143-144.

⁴⁵ Briody 51.

IFC's board therefore decided to initially focus on collection of folklore before turning to the more difficult task of creating an Irish national identity.

Although the collection, classification, exposition, and study of folklore were all part of the Irish government's construction of a national identity, in the beginning the priority for the IFC was the collection of the folklore itself. As the social, economic, and political structures of the Irish Free State were in a constant state of flux, the government and the country's folklorists alike were concerned that much of their folklore was in danger of disappearing forever.⁴⁶ In the editorial address to the inaugural volume of *Béaloides*, Séamus Ó Duilearga made explicit the goals of the Folklore of Ireland Society – goals he would maintain in his later role as part-founder and president of the IFC. Addressing the appropriation of Irish culture discussed in the intro, he wrote, “The aim of our Society is a humble one – to collect what still remains of the folklore of our country. We are certain that the nonsensical rubbish which passes for Irish folklore, both in Ireland and outside, is not representative of the folklore of our Irish people.”⁴⁷ While Ó Duilearga was arguing for the need to re-appropriate Ireland's culture for the Irish in the wake of their partial independence from Britain, his most urgent call was that this information needed to be collected before it was too late to do so.

One of the traditions the IFC saw as rapidly disappearing, and therefore in need of salvaging, was oral storytelling. As in many other ancient societies, storytelling – and more specifically the oral tradition of the gifted storyteller – has long held an important place in Irish

⁴⁶ Bo Almqvist, “The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy” *Bealoideas* 45/47 (1977-1979) 9-10.

⁴⁷ Ó Duilearga qtd. In Almqvist 8. Ó Duilearga was instrumental in the founding of the Folklore of Ireland Society and carried this mission over to the IFC as well.

culture.⁴⁸ For most of its history, Ireland was a largely rural-based society and storytellers often appeared in the form of travelling bards who not only entertained the various audiences throughout their travels with memorized tales passed down from generation to generation, but who also brought unique news and information from the other parts of the country.⁴⁹ Travelling storytellers therefore provided various services, making them an important part of Irish society. Storytelling was also one of the ways in which Irish history was preserved – the famous Brian Boru was an historical character, yet the various legends of his deeds would be shared throughout Ireland for centuries.⁵⁰ These tales, among many others, were eventually entwined so tightly with the more historically accurate facts of the life of this great man that for many the line between history and mythology would be blurred almost beyond recognition.

Irish nationalists used this blurring of the lines between history and myth to their advantage. As Thuente argues, “In separating the myths in the folklore of nationalism from reality, we should not lose sight of those myths which represent higher truths, especially the call for a national unity transcending sectarian differences, which indeed deserve to become reality.”⁵¹ Although Brian Boru was a divisive ruler in his time, according to legend he was the

⁴⁸ Thuente 42.

⁴⁹ The spread of folktales in this way also led to the creation of ‘folk history’ as the oral traditions contained both history and myth. Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007) 5.

⁵⁰ Brian Boru was an early king of Ireland who styled himself ‘emperor of the Irish’ after defeating Irish, Viking and Norse opponents in the tenth century. Although his reign was contested, he successfully divided Ireland into two kingdoms: his own covering Munster, Leinster and Dublin while Connaught and Ulster were ruled by one Máel Sechnaill. Boru effectively took the High Kingship of Ireland through military strategy and treated it as more than the ceremonial title it had been previously, though his reign would end with his death at the battle of Clontarf in 1014. Thanks to various versions of his ‘legend’ however he is popularly seen as the man who unified Ireland’s regional leaders for the first time and rid the land of its Danish occupation (the Vikings). For the history of Brian Boru’s exploits, see Christine Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland* (2004) 35-41.

⁵¹ Thuente 60.

first High King of Ireland to truly unite the regionally divided kingdoms.⁵² This aspect, although based more in mythology than history, made him the ideal figure for nationalists to turn to when emphasizing Ireland's strong united past. The folklore collected by the IFC, therefore, often contained a strange mix of folktales and history (sometimes referred to as 'folk-history') that both supported their nationalist goals and inspired a sort of national Irish identity based on a heroic Celtic past.

More so than the folktales themselves, the storytellers who shared them had maintained an important role in Irish society for centuries, and indeed much of the urgency in the collection of these folktales was based on the fact that traditional storytellers were apparently 'dying out'.⁵³ Those who worked for the IFC understood that so much of Ireland's rich cultural history existed in this oral tradition under the guardianship of these storytellers – some of whom were carrying on the traditions of generations upon generations. Séamus Ó Duilearga made the imperative nature of collecting this cultural heritage in that specific moment known during his first meeting with Éamon de Valera, Ireland's first President. As he recalls the meeting, Ó Duilearga told de Valera, "The material is there, it's dying and you know it...I think it is about time that something was done to put on paper or to record in some way the oral tradition of a silent people."⁵⁴ To Ó Duilearga, the most important folktales for the Commission to record were those which existed in the Irish language, hence his characterization of the sources of this information as a 'silent people.' Many folktales at this point, however, were told in English – something that at least a few of the collectors realized. In fact, if one reads through the manuscript volumes of the IFC held in University College Dublin's folklore archives, a full one quarter of the information was

⁵² Kinealy 40.

⁵³ Briody 172.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 108.

indeed collected in English.⁵⁵ It is significant that the structure of the IFC allowed individual collectors to decide who they would look to for information, regardless of what language the people primarily spoke, albeit by first running their ideas through one of the board members.⁵⁶ Had this not been the case, much of Ireland's cultural heritage might have been lost due to the rather unrealistic argument that the nation's pure and unadulterated heritage only existed in its ancient Gaelic form.

While both The Gaelic League and the Literary Revivalists had sought out remnants of Irish-language folktales in the Gaeltacht regions in particular, up until the creation of the IFC, Ireland's folklore had not been collected in any systematic fashion.⁵⁷ In a lecture delivered to celebrate the achievements and legacy of the IFC, folklorist Bo Almqvist argued, "...the whole enterprise of collecting Irish folklore until well into this century can be compared to haphazard diving – in the process of which some gold coins were found more or less by chance – rather than anything like a systematic treasure hunt."⁵⁸ Soon after its inception, therefore, the IFC developed a process through which Ireland amassed one of the richest collections of folklore in Western Europe.⁵⁹ In devising this system Sean Ó Súilleabháin, the IFC's archivist for the duration of its existence, adapted the archiving and classification tools already in use at the Swedish centers of folklore at the Norwegian Universities of Lund and Uppsala, where he received his training. More importantly, he was instrumental in the development of the

⁵⁵ Ó Catháin 145.

⁵⁶ Briody 232

⁵⁷ O'Sullivan 450.

⁵⁸ Almqvist 7. Almqvist was also the former head of the Department of Irish Folklore at the University College Dublin, where the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission are stored and still in the process of being categorized. He therefore would have had an intimate knowledge of the collection and its contents.

⁵⁹ Briody 19.

Commission's collection strategies which would result in the extensive folkloric archives held at University College Dublin today.⁶⁰

Although funded by the government, the Commission had a significant degree of freedom in terms of their mode of operation. With Ó Súilleabháin's help, the Commission devised a system that relied on mostly volunteer, part-time folklorists to collect information from their local populations and send it back to the Commission headquarters in Dublin.⁶¹ Although the part-time collectors were more numerous, the main bulk of the IFC's archive was compiled by a small group of full-time collectors employed in strategic locations throughout Ireland.⁶² As the full-time collectors were paid by the Commission, the quality of their work was monitored by the small staff in Dublin – to the best of their ability. Collectors were expected to keep a regular log of their collection schedule as well as a diary for personal notes on each day's activities. They were also occasionally visited by representatives of the IFC, as budget allowed, to ensure that they maintained the highest standard of folklore collection as possible.⁶³

Part-time collectors, on the other hand, were given basic instructions on what the Head Office of the IFC was looking for, as well as a copy of Ó Súilleabháin's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* after its publication in 1942, and a list of questions with which to begin. Apart from these tools, part-time collectors were left largely to their own devices in terms of the logistics of their folkloric collection.⁶⁴ Despite the government's support, the IFC did not have the resources to set up full-time folklore collectors everywhere and indeed staffing such a large and diverse

⁶⁰ Lysaght 139-140.

⁶¹ O'Sullivan 451.

⁶² Ó Catháin 146.

⁶³ Briody 234.

⁶⁴ *Ibid* 242.

geographical area would have been a daunting task for any folklore organization regardless of the resources. As such the IFC had no other choice but to enlist the help of part-time collectors, to be paid according to their results, which could fill in the gaps in the collection system.

This is not to suggest, however, that the information collected by part-time collectors was not of good quality. As Micheal Briody, whose study on the IFC remains the most in-depth in the field, wrote, “Indeed, some of the most fascinating gems to be found in the Commission’s Archive were collected by part-time collectors.”⁶⁵ Because of the lack of supervision, it is from part-time collectors that the Commission acquired some of the most unique information – information chosen by people who had grown up immersed in the local folklore and therefore knew the kind of information that best represented their community. In addition to providing unique information, these part-time collectors were responsible for ensuring that large areas of the country were represented in the archive.

None of these collectors, of which never more than nine worked full-time simultaneously, were formally trained by the IFC due to time and resources restraints. They were, however, chosen based on their existing knowledge of folklore collection and, ideally, their fluency in the Irish language.⁶⁶ Additionally, the IFC’s collectors were expected to know their sources well, as demonstrated in this quote from Nioclás Breathnach, one of the IFC’s first and most prolific full-time collectors:

In order to collect folklore, it was necessary for the collector to know a large amount of folk literature, and to have experience of being in the company of old people as well as a

⁶⁵ *Ibid* 420

⁶⁶ Briody 232.

respect for them and their culture, for I do not think they would willingly bestow their knowledge on someone else.⁶⁷

Building these strong relationships with the sources of their information was one of the most important tasks of the IFC's collectors, both full- and part-time. If folklore was understood as being representative of a group of people, a reflection of both their private and community lives as it were, a sense of trust and rapport had to be built up between the collector and the imparter of folklore before the latter would provide anything worthwhile. This would ensure that in these tight-knit rural communities, "they would not be mistaken for tax collectors, gunmen on the run, or whatever else a stranger in an area can be mistaken for."⁶⁸ In order to speed up the process of developing this rapport, full-time and part-time collectors alike were usually recruited to collect folklore from their home counties as it was assumed that they would have a good base of the requisite trusting relationships in their own localities already. Not only would these pre-existing relationships boost their productivity but the fact that they usually grew up in the area in which they were collecting meant that they were already steeped in the local folklore (and the dialect) and therefore had a huge advantage over a folklorist sent from the IFC in Dublin.⁶⁹

2.3 The National Folklore Collection

Over the course of 22 years (1935-1957), the IFC recruited more than 200 collectors and many more in subsequent years.⁷⁰ During the 35 years of the IFC's existence, its full-time collectors contributed, with the help of part-time collectors and some 150 questionnaires sent out to various informants, to the 2,238 bound manuscript volumes comprising more than one million

⁶⁷ Nioclás Breathnach qtd. In Briody, 235.

⁶⁸ Almqvist 12.

⁶⁹ Briody 248.

⁷⁰ O'Sullivan 451.

pages of folklore now held in the archives at University College Dublin (UCD).⁷¹ The collection at UCD, whose folklore department took up the duties of the IFC upon its disbandment in 1970, includes the complete archives of both the Irish Folklore Institute and the IFC. This world-renowned folklore archive contains two extensive manuscript series compiled mostly during the IFC's existence: the Main Manuscripts Collection and the School's Collection, which amounts to another 500,000 pages of material. In addition to these manuscript series, the archive also holds sound recordings, photographs, films, plans, sketches, diagrams, and other pictorial representations of Irish folklore. Finally, the library of the Department of Folklore also contains 40,000 books, pamphlets and periodicals on Irish folklore and related subjects, including the entire publication run of the Folklore of Ireland Society's journal, *Béalóideas*.⁷²

Much of the research for this chapter made use of the English-language portion of the Main Manuscripts Collection as well as various issues of *Béalóideas*. This collection remains one of the largest folkloric collections in the world and is a testament to the efforts of the IFC and its predecessors.⁷³ More than simply holding the remnants of Ireland's folklore traditions, however, the archives at UCD represent what was deemed by folklorists and government officials alike to be the essence of Irish culture and identity. In a sense, they contain the blueprints of the Irish national identity that the government of the Irish Free State (and later Republic of Ireland) would create and re-create throughout the twentieth-century.

While the majority of the information in the UCD archives was collected from settled Irish, some intrepid collectors did venture to collect both general folklore and traditional tales

⁷¹ Ó Catháin 145-146.

⁷² *Ibid* 145-146.

⁷³ Beiner 36.

from the Travelling community.⁷⁴ It would be a mistake to assume that the only reason settled folklore makes up the majority of the collection is that folklorists largely did not believe Travellers had anything worth writing down. Travellers had long been established as talented storytellers, musicians and singers in Ireland, something which did not garner much attention in the Commission on Itinerancy's final report in 1963.⁷⁵ For a long time in Ireland, the Travellers' stories, news and songs were also considered, "legitimate currency in a society where entertainment was largely self-made and any diversion from routine gossip welcome."⁷⁶ The Travellers, therefore, were already well-known for possessing a wealth of folkloric knowledge, especially in their extensive collection of stories both traditional and modern. This made them an ideal source for the IFC in their search for Irish folklore, an attribute noted by at least a few of its collectors.

2.4 Pádraig Mac Gréine and Traveller Folklore

One of the most prolific part-time collectors for the commission was Pádraig Mac Gréine, a folklorist and later specialist in Traveller studies. Interviewed in 2004 by Pavee Point's Oral History Unit,⁷⁷ Mac Gréine fondly recalled his years collecting Traveller folklore. His interest in

⁷⁴ The two collectors highlighted in this chapter are Pádraig Mac Gréine and Sean Mac Grath, whose work will be reviewed below. Although other collectors may have variously approached Travellers for information these are the two noted in most of the historiography for the sheer amount of Traveller-related information they collected. Ó hAodha 29.

⁷⁵ The Commission on Itinerancy has been accused of refusing to see the Travellers as having a distinct identity by grouping them under the general term 'itinerant,' even though most of the Commission's recommended policies focused on the Travellers as a group. In refusing to see the Travellers as possessing a distinct identity, the Commission was able to portray them as 'vagrants' who posed a problem to Irish society at large and therefore needed to be remedied. Martin Collins, "Travellers as an Ethnic Group," *Travellers and the Settled Community: A Shared Future*, ed. John Heneghan, Mary (Warde) Moriarty and Micheál Ó hAodha (Dublin: The Liffey Press Ltd., 2012) 4-5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid* 33.

⁷⁷ Pavee Point Traveller and Roma centre was founded in 1985 as the Dublin Travellers and Education Development Group. It is a human rights organization made up of Travellers, Roma and members of the settled community who work together on programs to improve the lives of minority groups in Ireland (focusing on

the Travellers and their folklore began when, as a young man, he drove past one of their encampments and struck up a conversation with a woman named Oney (or Annie) Power. He asked her about the Traveller's cant and in the process sparked a friendship which would result in several manuscripts of Traveller folklore, a few published articles in *Béalóideas*, as well as a lifelong passion for the preservation of Traveller culture. He later brought Power's stories to the IFC and they requested him to collect as many of her tales as possible.⁷⁸ As he recalled, "She had an immense collection of stories...dozens and dozens of stories."⁷⁹ Mac Gréine faithfully recorded as many of her folktales as possible while also managing to collect information about Traveller history and traditions. Significantly, unlike later scholars, Mac Gréine made no effort to separate the Traveller from the settled folklore and most of the time both are found in the same manuscript.⁸⁰ He did, however, write at least two articles for the Folklore of Ireland Society's publication *Béalóideas* specifically based on the information he collected from his Traveller sources.⁸¹ The collection of Traveller folklore, with the blessing of the IFC, is significant as it is evidence that the Travellers were categorized, for a time at least, as Irish citizens who held their share of traditional Irish folklore. Their knowledge of Irish folklore was a contribution to the larger picture – it had its place in the development of Irish identity.

Mac Gréine also recognized the value of the Irish Travellers as a source for traditional folktales. As early as the 1930s, anthropologists noted that, "traditional Irish storytelling was

Travellers and Roma). "Who We Are," *Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre*, March 10 2014, <<http://www.paveepoint.ie/who-we-are/>>

⁷⁸ Winnie Kerrigan, "Celebrating Cant," *Pavee Point Newsletter* 16 (May 2004): 10.

⁷⁹ Mac Gréine qtd. in Kerrigan, 10.

⁸⁰ Bairbre Ní Fhlóinn, "In Memoriam: Pádraig Mac Gréine: 1900-2007." *Béalóideas* 75 (2007) 289.

⁸¹ Pádraig Mac Gréine, "Irish Tinkers or "Travellers,"" (1931) cited above ; Pádraig Mac Gréine, "Further Notes on Tinkers' "Cant": Together with Some "Travellers" Tales, Customs, Beliefs and Prayers," *Béalóideas* 3.3 (June 1932): 290-303.

associated with the custom of night visiting (*ar cuairt/cuaird*) and evening gatherings in *céili* (visiting) houses.”⁸² Often viewed as familiar storytellers, the Travellers were a part of this Irish tradition – earning their living as nomadic storytellers and news gatherers as well as artisans and craftsmen.⁸³ Mac Gréine was very clear about the value of one of his most prolific sources in particular, the Oney Power mentioned above. After one of the stories he took down from her, a traditional tale about an Omadhaun Laois, or a foolish man, who overcame several obstacles and succeeded in improving his lot in life, Mac Gréine wrote a short piece about the ‘woman of the roads’ from whom he collected this story. He described her as, “a very intelligent old woman and a very fine story teller” who had passed her talent on to her son John.⁸⁴ Significantly, Mac Gréine emphasized that Oney’s natural gift for storytelling had only passed to her son to a certain extent. Even by the mid 1930s, when these stories were recorded, Traveller culture was being changed by the settled majority of the population. As Mac Gréine noted, “[John’s] interest in storytelling is somewhat less than it otherwise might be, owing to the fact that he has learned to read in a laborious fashion.”⁸⁵ The oral folkloric traditions in Ireland, it seems, were indeed dying out to a certain extent – even in Traveller culture. Mac Gréine seems to have understood, therefore, the importance of collecting Traveller folklore along with that of the settled as both traditions were quickly disappearing and therefore both required saving.

⁸² Beiner 83.

⁸³ Aoife Breathnach, *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and the State, 1922-70* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2006) 33-34. Various respondents to the IFC’s Tinker’s Questionnaire (1952) also described memories of joining Travellers around the fire in the evenings for storytelling and songs. This will be discussed in chapter two but a good example can be found in the following: National Folklore Collection (henceforth NFC) MS 1256:143, Information collected from various unidentified people in the area around Kiltyclogher, County Leitrim, Collector: Lorcán Ó Rúanaidhe, 1952.

⁸⁴ NFC MS 80:182, Balinalee, County Longford, Collector: Pádraig Mac Gréine, 1929-.

⁸⁵ NFC MS 81:1, County Longford, Collector: Pádraig Mac Gréine, 1929-.

Mac Gréine had been involved in the collection of Irish folklore, comprising that of both settled and Travelling peoples, even before the creation of the IFC. His first article on the folklore of Irish Travellers was published in *Béaloidéas* in 1931. Entitled simply, “Irish Tinkers or ‘Travellers’,” it was in this article that Mac Gréine included all of the information he had collected from Travellers up to this date.⁸⁶ Much more than the folktales highlighted in his work for the IFC, his article contained over a dozen pages on Traveller culture, language, history and livelihoods, therefore adhering to the broader definition of folklore cited at the beginning of this chapter. Mac Gréine began his article with the statement that everyone was familiar with the Travelling community and yet they still seemed to know very little about them. One of the common misconceptions he hoped to combat in this and subsequent articles was the idea that Travellers and Gypsies were one and the same, just different levels of the itinerant class in Ireland. After speaking to the Travellers themselves about this matter he found that they did not interact with the Gypsies at all and indeed saw this other community as completely separate from themselves.

One of the most important differences between the two communities was the all-important aspect of religion: the Travellers were Catholic, whereas the Gypsies were apparently Protestant. In fact, Mac Gréine’s sources were quite vehement that they did not associate with the Gypsies precisely because they were not Catholic.⁸⁷ By including this information Mac Gréine was, whether consciously or not, highlighting how the Travellers exhibited one of the most important traits of the homogenous Irish culture emphasized by the government of the Irish Free State: they were Catholic and apparently identified enough with this religion that they did

⁸⁶ Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 170-186.

⁸⁷ *Ibid* 170.

not associate with similar itinerant communities who adhered to another one.⁸⁸ In doing so, he situated the Travellers as part of the dominant Irish-Catholic community and therefore within the Irish national identity under construction.

What Mac Gréine wrote next suggested something else, however. After explaining the aversion of the Travellers to the Gypsies based on the question of religion, Mac Gréine wrote, “Religion does not seem to give the tinkers much thought. They are all Catholics, however, being baptized in the church nearest where they are born.”⁸⁹ Mac Gréine’s argument here is unclear as his wording is vague. Is he suggesting that the Catholic religion did not take Travellers into consideration or that the Travellers did not concern themselves overly with religious matters? If one takes the latter perspective, it would suggest that religion was in fact not such a significant part of Traveller life as one might guess from the way in which Mac Gréine’s sources rejected the Protestant Gypsies. Why then, would the Travellers emphasize their religion and its importance in determining who did and did not belong in their community – much as Irish nationalists would use it to determine who did and did not belong in their nation? This appears to be a case of the Travellers carefully choosing how they identified themselves to outsiders in order to protect their community from interference.⁹⁰ Although the Travellers were probably not aware of the use of collected Irish folklore for the creation of a national identity, Mac Gréine’s interviews allowed them a medium through which they could control, at least in part, how they would be represented in the archives. By emphasizing their distinction from the Gypsies on the

⁸⁸ It should be remembered that by this point the Catholic nationalist movement had achieved dominance in the Irish Free State although it was not until the new constitution was created in 1937 that Catholicism became the state-religion of the new Republic of Ireland (Helleiner 6).

⁸⁹ Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 175.

⁹⁰ Aiofe Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach, “Introduction,” *Portraying Irish Travellers: Histories and Representations*, ed. Ciara Bhreatnach and Aiofe Bhreatnach (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006) xii.

apparent sole basis of religion, the Travellers conveyed an image of themselves as possessing an Irish identity, thus declaring that they belonged to the larger Irish community, not an exclusively itinerant one outside the larger national community.

Another misconception that Mac Gréine addressed in his article was that the Travellers were an immoral and dishonest class, a stereotype that recent scholars such as anthropologist Jane Helleiner, have used to argue that Travellers have always been ‘othered’ by the majority settled population of Ireland through a constant debasing of their community and lifestyle.⁹¹ In speaking to the Travellers, Mac Gréine confronted them with such stereotypes, giving them the chance to respond. He cited specifically their strict code of sexual morality in which, “Early marriages are the rule, and parents do not tolerate long courtships; in fact I might say they do not tolerate courtships at all.”⁹² The Travellers to whom he spoke told him that if a young man was seen to be paying too much attention to a young woman, he was asked outright if he planned to marry her. If not, he was told to move on so that her chances of marrying well (that is, to the right people within their community) were not spoiled. Marriage, performed by a Catholic priest according to his sources, was treated very seriously within Travelling communities, as both a form of economic and social stability and also because hell posed a very real threat in their belief system.⁹³ By dismissing the stereotypical description of Travellers as immoral, Mac Gréine was essentially removing one of the elements that allowed some to see Travellers as inferior to the rest of Ireland’s population. The moral code the Travellers perpetuated in imparting this information to Mac Gréine placed them within the larger Irish population based on religion,

⁹¹ Helleiner 45.

⁹² Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 175.

⁹³ *Ibid* 176.

family values and marriage practices, therefore identifying them as sharing a part of the Irish national identity the Irish government was constructing.

Mac Gréine also attacked the problematic assumption held by some settled Irish that the Travellers were a naturally dishonest community when he wrote, “Some of them are dishonest; many of them are not. I am inclined to the view that they do not steal from those who give to them; or from people in a district where they frequently visit. At all events, their depredations are not very heavy.”⁹⁴ In essence, Mac Gréine was emphasizing the importance of continued good relations between the settled and Travelling communities in Ireland. As in the settled community, there were both dishonest and honest Travellers; it was an individual trait as opposed to a communal one.⁹⁵ Significantly, Travellers appeared more likely to be honest with those they knew and trusted; those with whom they had built relationships. Mac Gréine often argued that a better relationship between the two communities would be advantageous to both; he believed the tensions in the relationship arose mostly from misunderstanding and he used the process of collecting Traveller folklore as a way to combat this.⁹⁶

Again, through Mac Gréine’s interviews, the Travellers were able to influence the way in which they were represented in the archives. Whereas settled sources may have turned up very different information about Travellers and their folklore – and so they did as we will see in the following chapter – Mac Gréine treated the Travellers in much the same way as he did his settled sources. Their own folklore was collected from them, in their own words, and was included in the national project of salvaging what remained of Irish folklore overall. Although these

⁹⁴ *Ibid* 177.

⁹⁵ Helen O’Sullivan, “Reflections on Traveller Identity,” *Travellers and the Settled Community: A Shared Future*, ed. John Heneghan, Mary (Warde) Moriarty, Micheál Ó hAodha (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2012) 12.

⁹⁶ Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 170.

interviews make up a small portion of the overall archives, the fact that the voice of the Travelling community was given any place at all is significant and would remain largely an exception until the development of Traveller Rights movements after the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy came out in 1963.⁹⁷

The information Mac Gréine collected and published in *Béaloides* served not only to illuminate aspects of Traveller folklore, but also to include them in the larger category of keepers of the disappearing folklore of the Irish nation. Before listing the various Shelta terms he had garnered from his Traveller contacts, Mac Gréine made it clear that he considered the Travellers to be a part of the Irish identity, if a somewhat separate one:

Taking them all in all, they ought not to be judged too harshly. They have a hard life, yet they are happy and care-free. To those people who seek to “civilize” them, who refer to them as “a national problem” ; “a nuisance to farmers” ; and so on, I would say: Leave us our wandering tinkers. House them and they pine; they have no outlet for their restlessness. Why cage a bird? Why civilize a tinker?⁹⁸

While at first glance this may seem to be a simple plea on the part of an interested folklorist to leave a unique and tradition-rich community alone, in its components this statement is much more complex. One of the aspects about folklore that most attracted nationalists was that it tended to hearken back to an apparently simpler time when the identity of a nation’s people was more traditional and therefore ‘native’. This was especially the case in post-colonial nations where advocates of nationalism were constantly searching for folklore that appeared unsullied by

⁹⁷ In the first 50 issues of *Béaloides* (1932-82), nine pieces in total were written on the Travellers comprising about 130 pages of material. Fionnuala Carson Williams, “Irish Travellers and “Country People”; Folk Narrative and the Construction of Social Identity,” *Migrants and Cultural Memory: the Representations of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 7-8. However, Traveller folklore does turn up in quite a few of the IFC’s manuscripts, as in those compiled by Pádraig Mac Gréine and Sean Mac Grath used in this thesis.

⁹⁸ Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 177.

colonial influence.⁹⁹ In his statement, Mac Gréine posited the Irish Travellers as a community which might hold this sort of information. He described them as happy and carefree and liable to get restless if one tried to change their ways too much – they thus represented a ‘simpler’ period in Irish history free of the myriad constraints of modern life.¹⁰⁰ It is insignificant that this idyllic period could never have existed; the idea that it may have was often enough to infuse the image of communities like that of the Travellers with enough nostalgia to make their way of life something worth preserving. That this preservation was done through the collection of folklore as part of the construction of an Irish national identity, and involved the Travellers in this national project, demonstrates that it therefore included them in this archive of ‘Irishness’.

The other significant aspect of Mac Gréine’s conclusion was his acknowledgement that even in these early days of Irish independence there were some who believed the best course of action was to force the Travellers into a more settled way of life. Notably he referred to this as the idea of ‘civilizing’ them, foreshadowing the ‘uncivilized’ categorization the Commission on Itinerancy would impose on the Travellers in the 1960s and which would be so detrimental to their future in the Irish nation. In fact, modern Anti-Traveller discrimination, “is rooted in the belief that the contemporary Irish lifestyle is the only acceptable form of living and that the lifestyle of Travellers is a throwback to uncivilized times in Irish history, and is best forgotten in

⁹⁹ Briody 45. He makes this clear in the Irish case in particular by writing, “In keeping with other nations emerging from colonial rule, not surprisingly, the new Irish state was anxious to establish as soon as possible a distinctive national character, one as different as possible from that of its erstwhile ruler. Great Britain was perceived as urban, English-speaking, and protestant. Ireland would go to endless lengths to prove itself to be the opposite: rural, Irish-speaking, and Catholic. A significant aspect of this construct of identity was the belief that Ireland’s national identity was rooted in a Golden Age; that is the ancient Celtic past...Reconnecting with and restoring that past would provide the ground upon which a sense of national self could take root and flourish.”

¹⁰⁰ Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,” 177.

modern society.”¹⁰¹ The idea of the Travellers as representing an earlier Irish society therefore cut both ways, even during the period of the Irish Free State. While not much evidence exists of early calls for assimilation, Mac Gréine’s work suggests that by the 1930s some already believed this was a necessary step in the process of modernizing Ireland. Mac Gréine argued that this was not the right course of action, by comparing the idea of settled Travellers to that of a caged bird, but he did not suggest that leaving them to their ways would therefore exclude them from the nation. Instead, he asked his readers to “leave us *our* wandering tinkers,” designating the Travellers as a unique community based on their nomadic lifestyle but, most importantly, as still a part of the larger Irish community.¹⁰² They were *their* ‘tinkers,’ who were to be allowed to continue in their role as bearers of a folkloric tradition that made up a part of the national narrative.¹⁰³

Mac Gréine was not alone in his understanding of the Travellers as important sources of the precious Irish folklore. At the end of his compilation of Shelta terms, the staff at *Béalóideas* included an editorial note congratulating the folklorist for having produced, “to our mind, one of the most important contributions made to this journal during the five years of its existence.”¹⁰⁴ In those five years, the journal had published all kinds of papers on Irish folklore, in both English and Irish, but all of this had been collected from settled members of Irish society. The editors praised the innovation of Mac Gréine in seeking out the folklore of the Travellers and expressed a hope that others would soon follow his lead, as this sort of information constituted an important

¹⁰¹ Tony Ryan, “Irish Travellers and the Legacy of the Stereotype: Some Considerations,” *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 60.

¹⁰² Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 177.

¹⁰³ *Ibid* 177.

¹⁰⁴ Editors’ Note, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” *Béalóideas* 3.2 (Dec. 1931): 185.

part of the larger field of Irish popular tradition. In order to demonstrate perhaps the place of Travellers in Irish folklore, the editors offered the following explanation,

These “travellers,” the *bacaigh* of an earlier time, the poor scholars – the Irish *scolares vagantes* – have been the medium for the spread of folk tales and all manner of traditions. That none of these has been the subject of serious investigation and study causes no surprise to those who know something of the real Ireland, where the lore of the commonplace has little or no attraction, and where deeds are few, and fine words are many.¹⁰⁵

Not only did the editors of this early edition of *Béaloidéas* place the Travellers within the larger historical context of Ireland, but they credited them for having long been the bearers of both folk tales and other folkloric traditions. In addition, they saw the lack of collection of Traveller folklore not as a unique issue in relation to this nomadic Irish community but rather as a symptom of a systematic problem in Irish society up until that point. According to the editors, the folklore of Ireland had not yet captured the much deserved attention of the nation, and the lack of Traveller folklore was but one indication of this.

What differentiated this call for collection of Traveller folklore from the later attempts by the IFC to amass information on the Travellers was that at this point the main argument was not that the Travellers were rapidly disappearing as a community, but rather that they constituted yet another rich source of Irish folklore that had not yet been tapped to its full potential. The editors’ statement is more declarative than desperate; the moment in which it was almost ‘too late’ to amass this information had not yet arrived.¹⁰⁶ Continuing his well-lauded work, Mac Gréine published another article on Traveller folklore in *Béaloidéas* in 1934, just before the creation of

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid* 185. *Bacaigh* = a historical Irish term for beggar. *Scolares vagantes* = vagabonds.

¹⁰⁶ Seámas Ó Duilearga would make this moment clear in the introduction to the Tinker’s Questionnaire of 1952 which is the focus of Chapter Two. By the 1950s, it was felt that the Travellers as a community were on the verge of disappearing and therefore the Questionnaire was sent out as a last ditch attempt to collect their folklore, before it was too late to do so. NFC MS1255:3, “Irish Folklore Commission Tinkers: “Travellers,” Seámas Ó Duilearga, February 1952.

the IFC.¹⁰⁷ It was through his work as a part-time collector for the IFC, however, that the Travellers were included in the Main Manuscript Collection now held at in UCD's archive, and therefore available as a resource for the creation of an Irish national identity.

Following the publication of his articles in *Béaloides*, Mac Gréine began his work as a part-time collector for the IFC which entailed travelling throughout the east of Ireland, but especially his own home county of Longford, collecting different pieces of folklore from Irish citizens. What made Mac Gréine different from the numerous other amateur and professional folklorists working for the IFC was his interest in the Travellers and the place they held in the nation as a whole. As he travelled from village to village collecting anything he could from local knowledge on how to make the strongest coil of rope to ancient folktales, Mac Gréine simultaneously collected from both the settled and Travelling portions of the population.¹⁰⁸ The local reputation of both the collectors and the sources had an impact on the completeness and usefulness of the material collected. Briody argues that, generally, folklore collectors were warmly welcomed wherever they called in their search for stories. As much of the information was collected from people in rural areas, sometimes a folklore collector would be the only unfamiliar, and therefore intriguing, face for miles.

While the folklorists primarily collected information, they also provided a service of sorts to their sources as, "In the rather dull world of rural Ireland in the 1930s and later, visits from one of the Commission's collectors, however inconvenient such visits might at times have been, would have been a source of news, and have helped relieve some of the drabness of everyday

¹⁰⁷ Pádraig Mac Gréine, "Some Notes on Travellers and their 'cant.'" (1934) cited above.

¹⁰⁸ Ní Fhloinn 289.

life.”¹⁰⁹ In this manner, Mac Gréine was regularly well-received by his Traveller sources.¹¹⁰ This was significant as Travellers at the time were slowly becoming much more wary of the settled population and often reverted to speaking in their cant as a defense mechanism.¹¹¹ As well, Mac Gréine had managed to earn the trust of Oney Power who was well respected by both the Travelling and settled community alike. Power was a renowned storyteller and, according to Mac Gréine, upon her death in 1937 her funeral was attended by Travellers from all over the country.¹¹² Although it was usual for different members of the Traveller clans to come together for the funeral of one of their own, Power’s funeral was large enough to attract attention from the larger settled population’s media, an event that would be mirrored at Mac Gréine’s own funeral 70 years later, which would attract attention from the Travelling community.¹¹³ It can be argued that this evidence of Power’s renown in both the Traveller and settled communities posited her as an ideal representative for the Traveller community. In his manuscripts, Mac Gréine represented Power as a figure that bridged what some saw as a gap between the Traveller and settled communities; as a well-known storyteller and respected individual, Power played a significant role in both communities and her identity was therefore tied to them both.¹¹⁴ Over the better part of the twentieth century, therefore, Mac Gréine collected various stories and bits of information from the Power family, always copying them down faithfully so as to give the reader a sense of the distinctiveness of Traveller English. In most of his writing on the Travellers, in

¹⁰⁹ Briody 259.

¹¹⁰ Upon his death in 2007 (at the age of 107!) Mac Gréine’s funeral would be distinguished by the presence of an considerable number of Travellers – contacts he had built up through his years of collecting folklore and later advocating for Traveller rights (Ní Fhloinn 289).

¹¹¹ Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach x.

¹¹² NFC MS 1498 :1 County Longford, Collector: Pádraig Mac Gréine, 1932-1937.

¹¹³ Ní Fhloinn 289.

¹¹⁴ NFC MS 1498:1

fact, Mac Gréine emphasized their gift for storytelling and their value as a resource for the old Irish tales, infused with their own distinct culture after years of oral inheritance.

Although it might seem curious that Mac Gréine spent so much time recording the stories of the Travellers – a fact that would overshadow his equally impressive work on settled folklore, in the less-valued English language no less, it was the very nature of the storytelling that revealed the Travellers to hold a significant place in the grander and much more ancient traditions of Ireland.¹¹⁵ As mentioned above, folktales – and the oral tradition of storytelling in particular – were not simply the telling of fairy tales and heroic myths. For many centuries the perpetuation of folktales was also a way to disseminate Irish history and culture throughout the population in a way that the people would understand and, more importantly, remember.¹¹⁶ This worked not only for nationally focused histories but also personal histories – a tradition not unique to the Travellers. Aoife Bhreatnach emphasizes that this is particularly true, however, for the Travellers’ understanding of their own history. For many Travellers, the line between folklore and history is blurred not out of an aversion to accuracy but rather out of the adherence to a different set of priorities. Bhreatnach summarizes this unique form of personal history in the statement, “That Travellers’ understanding of their own history may not accord with a linear, conventional verifiable narrative does not imply that they lack a sense of historical consciousness or have no history.”¹¹⁷ Mac Gréine understood this aspect of Traveller culture as early as the late 1920s and, in understanding, saw the need to preserve as much of this unwritten history as possible.

¹¹⁵ Ní Fhloinn 289. She argues that Mac Gréine’s work with the Travellers overshadowed his collection of settled folklore because there were so few examples of folklorists maintaining such a strong relationship with the Traveller community throughout the twentieth century.

¹¹⁶ Davidson 74.

¹¹⁷ Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach, “Introduction,” xiii.

The only ‘personal’ history found in Mac Gréine’s portion of the Main Manuscript Collection was told to him by the same Oney Power, and took the form of a traditional folktale. She began the story by saying, “Well, this is only a few words I’m going to tell ye about the beginnin’ o’ me life.”¹¹⁸ And she proceeded to tell him a tale about a mission to collect straw for bedding that ended in a fairy’s house. By the end of it, she had outsmarted the fairy who tried to trap her and her friend and they both returned to the campsite with the required straw. When the straw was found to have disappeared by morning, the group of Travellers quit the area in search of a safer place to camp.¹¹⁹ Although the tale was wonderfully entertaining when understood as a fictional folktale, it also contained a great deal of information about the Traveller’s way of life. Power described the early years of her marriage as being very poor and the story was therefore filled with descriptions of ways in which the Travellers knew how to make money. It also gave the reader a glimpse into the community-oriented nature of Traveller life and how they viewed their interactions with the settled Irish.¹²⁰ Power, therefore, successfully wove part of her own personal history and that of her community into what was by all appearances a folktale. In this way, Mac Gréine was able to collect the type of information that many of the collectors found most difficult – the personal folklore that many rural Irish held carefully guarded.¹²¹ This information was then stored in the larger folkloric archives. Thus Oney Power, on the part of the Travelling community, had inserted a part of Traveller history in the national story of Ireland.

It is also important to note that Mac Gréine made no effort to correct Power’s speech in any of her stories. This was particularly important for Mac Gréine as he saw the faithful

¹¹⁸ NFC MS 1498:2

¹¹⁹ NFC MS 1498:13

¹²⁰ NFC MS 1498:2-13.

¹²¹ For more about the type of information sources were usually willing to share, see Briody 234-240.

representation of a storyteller's language as the only way to accurately collect the folklore of any community, Travelling or settled, thus supporting the broader theory that language and folklore are intricately connected in the creation of a national identity.¹²² This effort to preserve exact speech patterns applied to both Traveller and settled sources of folklore. Even as the importance of folklore for the national identity waned in the second half of the twentieth century, the IFC's folklorists would continue to attempt to collect what remained of both Travelling and settled folklore in the most accurate form as possible.

2.5 The 1950s: Seán Mac Grath and the 'Authentic Irish' Traveller

Throughout his manuscripts, Mac Gréine emphasized the significance of Traveller folklore and gestured to the links between it and folklore considered to be traditionally Irish. He did not see the Travellers as an un-Irish community and indeed wished their culture to be celebrated as one of the many facets of Ireland and its people.¹²³ Twenty years later, in the 1950s, folklorist and part-time collector for the Commission, Seán Mac Grath, attempted a similar feat by visiting Travellers and collecting their folklore. Ó hAodha sees Mac Grath as, "an important forerunner of the new orthodoxy of colonial dispossession and the drop-out theory, which was adopted in official Irish discourse as the explanation of Travellers' origins from the 1960s onwards."¹²⁴ By attributing this theory, later cited as one of the arguments for assimilation, to Mac Grath, Ó hAodha paints Mac Grath as a controversial figure in the collection of Irish Folklore. Although intriguing, his criticisms of Mac Grath's methods do not discount the fact that the folklorist spent the majority of the 1950s collecting Traveller folklore, at a time when the relationship between the Travelling and settled communities was starting to

¹²² Dorson 277.

¹²³ Mac Gréine, "Irish Tinkers or "Travellers", " 177.

¹²⁴ Ó hAodha 28.

deteriorate.¹²⁵ Even more than this, Mac Grath spoke about his research on the Travellers on Raidió Éireann and his work therefore would have reached potentially more people than the manuscripts compiled by Mac Gréine.¹²⁶ Ó hAodha notes the difference between the collection methods of Mac Gréine and Mac Grath, most likely intensified by the intervening 30 years, in that, “While Mac Gréine had promulgated the value of all Travellers as a repository of an older Irish traditional culture, Mac Grath saw only a few of the Travellers as worthy of investigation...” Apparently those worthy few were the ‘true’ Travellers or ‘old-style’ Travellers who were to be considered the heirs of an older Ireland.¹²⁷

While this distinction between the work of Mac Gréine in the 1930s and that of Mac Grath in the 1950s is demonstrative of the gradual souring of the relationship between the two communities over the decades, as well as the growing surety that the Travellers were dying out as a community, this aspect of Mac Grath’s work was not immediately obvious in the manuscripts he compiled for the IFC. Instead, Mac Grath’s work showed an enthusiasm for the Traveller’s way of life and an insistence that this way of life be allowed to remain a part of the Irish national identity *as is*, with no forced alterations.¹²⁸ Similar to Mac Gréine, Mac Grath made a concentrated effort to record the voices of his Traveller sources as faithfully as possible as a way of maintaining accuracy and credibility. This was notable in the sources he quoted in his work as they all spoke in a similar form of English to that used by Oney Power, again reinforcing the significant connection between language and folklore, as well as supporting the identity of the Travellers as a coherent community.

¹²⁵ This deterioration will be discussed further in chapter two as it pertains directly to the Tinkers Questionnaire responses of 1952.

¹²⁶ Ó hAodha 29.

¹²⁷ *Ibid* 29.

¹²⁸ NFC MS 1391:40, Kilrush, County Clare, Collected by: Seán Mac Grath.

Supporting the well-established connection between folklore and history, Mac Grath's manuscripts also included a focus on Traveller history – especially on how they categorized it. Significantly, by the time Mac Grath began collecting Traveller folklore, the way in which the Travellers understood (or at least told) the history of their people had completely changed. Unlike Oney Power, who cleverly wove some of her own personal story into an entertaining and traditional folktale so as to protect her privacy, and that of her family, Mac Grath's sources very clearly wove their own histories into the larger Irish narrative.¹²⁹ By doing so they explicitly declared their place in Irish society; their reputation amongst settled people had changed enough by this point that they felt the need to remind, or rather inform, the larger population of the fact that they were indeed Irish and deserved to be treated as such. Significantly, they did this by suggesting that they had not always been a Travelling people, unlike the Powers who were very proud of their long Travelling heritage. One Traveller in particular, Pat McDonogh, gave a particularly colourful account of his own family's history that is worth quoting in full:

I know me own grandfather and his father and the family before them agin, was on the roads of Ireland. They started travellin when they was chased off their two-acre farm above in County Mayo when they couldn't pay their way. Course people like yourself (refers to journalists who have tried to solicit information from him) have axed us about we having any connection to Gypsies. We have no reckonin with 'em at all, at all, and they came from foreign places, and they're not Catholics." Some people dont want us in the place at all, but sure we are every bit as entitled to be roamin as what people who live in houses have a right to do so.¹³⁰

When taken at face value, in this excerpt McDonogh supported the theory that Travellers were once settled Irish who were forced into a nomadic lifestyle during one of Ireland's many traumatic periods under British colonization. While Ó hAodha insists that Mac Grath was

¹²⁹NFC MS 1391:28

¹³⁰*Ibid* 28.

responsible for perpetuating the ‘drop-out’ theory, it appears that the Travellers he spoke to were actually the ones insisting on this history for their community.¹³¹

Similar to the Travellers Mac Gréine spoke to 20 years earlier, Mac Grath’s sources also insisted on their differentiation from the Gypsy community on the basis of religion – the intervening decades had clearly not changed their identification with the religion most associated with the Irish national identity. Again, the Travellers whose folklore was recorded in the IFC’s archives seemed to be insisting that they could be more readily identified with the majority settled population of Ireland, despite the differences in their lifestyles, than with other nomadic communities.¹³² They belonged in the national narrative, not one set exclusively on the margins. It should be noted that the difficulty with Mac Grath’s sources is that the information they imparted can be read in many different ways.

McDonogh later argued that though he could not read, he could communicate nonetheless and that in speaking to many older Travellers he discovered that most had a similar history – they were once settled Irish who were forced into a nomadic existence when they were kicked off their land by the English colonizers. As Jane Helleiner wrote, “Such stories, told to non-

¹³¹ Ó hAodha 28. Although other interpretations are possible, when taken at face value, it appears that the Travellers interviewed were consciously placing themselves within the Irish national narrative – possibly as a way to defend their community from being viewed as disruptive foreigners, as the Roma population often was. Alternatively, the Travellers Mac Grath interviewed may have been completely honest in their telling of the history of their community and were therefore simply answering the questions Mac Grath asked them. The multiple ways in which these sources can be read perhaps explains why Ó hAodha has come to his conclusions. Significantly, however, despite the possibility of reading Mac Grath’s interview transcripts differently, the arguments of Ó hAodha and other like-minded historians have not been overtly challenged in the historiography up until now.

¹³² Ó hAodha also sees both the Roma and the Travellers as grouped into the same category of Irish society’s perpetual ‘Others.’ He made this very clear in the introduction to one of his edited volumes on the subject when he wrote, “We live in the era of the Other, the era of “difference,” the era of migration – that “stranger” who waits silently at the border crossing, battered suitcase in hand. Travellers and Roma are the archetypal migrants. Perennial “outsiders,” they are the people who have lived for centuries on society’s margins.” Micheál Ó hAodha, “Introduction,” *Travellers and Showpeople: Recovering Migrant History*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) vii.

Traveller collectors, reveal simultaneous acceptance of the dominant themes of Irish nationalism and Catholicism, and active rejection of stigmatization of the Traveller way of life.”¹³³ By identifying themselves with the scores of rural Irish who were brutally expelled from their land during the various colonial reorganizations of the Irish countryside, the Travellers Mac Grath interviewed were firmly entrenching themselves in the larger Irish narrative. And McDonogh was not the only one to do so, although there was at least one exception to this trend.¹³⁴

At the end of his manuscript of notes, after giving the Travellers the space to tell their own stories in their own words, Mac Grath wrote:

From the score of travelling families I have interviewed, I have found that the majority, claim to have once been small land owners, at least descendants of such. They claim no connection with Gypsies, Tramps, or Nomads of any other description. All their names are definitely Irish or anglo-Irish, and the majority of them have deep roots in the West of Ireland, particularly Connaught, Clare and Kerry, and perhaps, Cromwells decision to send so many to hell or to Connaught bears a strong claim to the fact that they once were small land owners, but took to the road, during the apoch [sic] starting in 1770 and possibly a multiplication of their numbers after 1847.¹³⁵

The dates included in the Mac Grath quote are significant in terms of the Irish national narrative as by 1770 almost 100 per cent of the land was owned by non-Irish landowners due to various laws put in place by the British colonial authorities. 1847 marked 2 years into the Great Famine in Ireland when the British government tried to mitigate earlier failures by providing more help to the Irish in the form of relief policies (therefore staving off the death toll but hardly creating stability. Those who could not emigrate by this point may have simply left their land in order to access the government’s centralized relief efforts.¹³⁶ Mac Grath’s wording suggests that, overall, the Travellers he spoke to emphasized these specific dates in their descriptions of their

¹³³ Helleiner 50.

¹³⁴ The exception was one Mary Faulkner who insisted that his people had been travelling since Jesus Christ’s time and would never be fully settled as Travelling was in their blood. NFC MS 1391:29.

¹³⁵ NFC MS 1391:28

¹³⁶ Kinealy 121-130 ; 163-163. .

community's history. Although, as mentioned above, multiple interpretations are possible, the fact that Mac Grath's Traveller sources tied their own history so specifically to important dates in larger Irish history demonstrates an historical consciousness of sorts on their part; their adherence to Irish national history in depictions of their own suggests a strategic telling on the part of the Travellers to insert themselves firmly within the Irish national identity.

It should be noted that, as in many of the IFC's manuscripts, Mac Grath did not provide extensive evidence for his description of Traveller history, or much at all. He merely emphasized that he had spoken to many different Travellers and all of them have told him a similar story. Again, it seems that by this point (the 1950s), if these sources are taken at face value, the Travellers had realized to a certain extent that the Irish government was slowly trying to push them out and that this was one way of reinserting themselves into the larger community.¹³⁷ The collection of folklore by the IFC's folklorists was not a case of primarily active collectors drawing information from a passive people. The informants had as much to do with what ended up in the archives, and therefore what constituted the national narrative, as the collectors did. The use of well-establish Irish tropes and grievances to claim a place in Ireland's national identity seems to be a conscious effort on the part of at least some Travellers by the 1950s to ensure they would be included in the definition of the nation.

Following the example of both the GLS and the work of Mac Gréine, Mac Grath also placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of collecting as much of the Travellers' language as they would agree to provide. The first several pages of Mac Grath's notes consist of lists of

¹³⁷ Helleiner notes that by the late 1950s, all of Ireland's political parties saw the Travellers as posing a problem to Irish society at large. She lists some possible reasons for this, most of which are tied to the post-war period and Ireland's wartime neutrality. Helleiner 61-62.

Traveller words, spoken in the Shelta mentioned earlier, and their translations. As a cant, Shelta was designed to hide what the speaker, a member of an outnumbered and, as a result, self-defensive community was trying to convey from outside interests.¹³⁸ Mac Grath, however, did not portray the language of the Traveller in a negative light, one indicating criminality, as some authorities would later do.¹³⁹ Instead Mac Grath emphasized how much it derived and borrowed from both English and, more importantly, Irish. This community had created a language largely inspired by the Irish tongue nationalists had fought so hard to preserve in order to differentiate themselves from their colonizers.¹⁴⁰ And, considering the length of his lists, they were willing to enlighten certain unaggressive interested parties once they had built up that all-important trusting relationship previously mentioned.

Mac Grath was also clear that different dialects were specific to certain counties, thus tying the Travellers very firmly to the land, even with their nomadic lifestyles, as the settled Irish had done within earlier nationalistic movements. He wrote that, “From all the Travellers I spoke to during my research in quest for material, one important item I learned was that each county or area, is regarded as being the ‘home’ of different ‘bands’ or ‘tribes.’”¹⁴¹ Mac Grath was therefore arguing that the Travellers were not an aimlessly wandering nomadic tribe with no sense of direction, trespassing on any and all private land where they saw fit. As the identity of the settled Irish population was arguably tied to Ireland’s geography, Mac Grath’s representation of the

¹³⁸ Zara Power, “A Brief Exploration of Shelta and some of its Historical Functions,” *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 30.

¹³⁹ Ó hAodha 88.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid* 18.

¹⁴¹ NFC MS 1391: 22

Travellers as attached to the land in their own way inserted them into this construction of rural identity and therefore, simultaneously, into the larger Irish national identity.

Again following Mac Gréine's lead, Mac Grath too provided a proclamation of sorts in one of his manuscripts in which he asked directly that Traveller culture and traditions be respected and maintained as an important part of Ireland's national identity. He emphasized that there was still much information to be gleaned from the Travellers and urged anyone who might have any sort of connection or relationship with them to attempt to amass as much as they could. He made it very clear that the Travellers were indeed, "Irish by birth and tradition but who are a class in themselves."¹⁴² They were therefore, according to Mac Grath, a distinct community while still remaining a part of the larger Irish national identity.

As we will see in chapter two, by the 1950s the Travellers had attracted a significant amount of negative attention both from the government in the form of the growing post-war welfare state and, more importantly, from much of the settled population – even those in the rural areas where relationships between the two people had been historically more positive.¹⁴³ Mac Grath railed against this growing prejudice in fairly strong language when he proclaimed:

Do not dread them, neither should one try to transform them. Their nature has willed them the roads of Ireland, they too are members of the Irish race, for whom the men of Ireland died, so as they should live in freedom and peace. Their heritage is their own, - we cherish ours, - they do likewise. Every load contains a bad apple, similarly with the travellers, but why try to punish the child who cried, when it knows no other method or vocal usage.¹⁴⁴

Mac Grath then argued that people similar to the Travellers existed in almost every great European nation and therefore, quite cleverly, tied the presence of a national nomadic

¹⁴² NFC MS 1391:40

¹⁴³ Ó hAodha 28.

¹⁴⁴ NFC MS 1391:40

community to the Irish desire to be accepted as a European nation.¹⁴⁵ Although Mac Grath was insisting that the Travellers be allowed to continue as a distinct community within Ireland, the quote above does contain some of the language to which Ó hAodha took exception. In using the child metaphor at the end, Mac Grath was singling the Travellers out as a less-developed community than the majority population of Ireland. As negative as this image is, it should be noted that he did not see this as a reason to assimilate them – though the Commission on Itinerancy would later use similar language to argue for just that.¹⁴⁶ As will be discussed in chapter two, Mac Grath and his fellow folklorists were not the only ones in the 1950s calling for the Travellers to be accepted as a particularly unique and rich piece of Ireland’s national narrative; many of the respondents to the IFC’s questionnaires argued for a similar form of acceptance. What set Mac Grath, and the IFC, apart was that they seemed to be advocating for the Travellers not only to be recognized as Irish but also to be allowed to continue to live in their chosen way and therefore not be forcibly assimilated into settled Irish culture. They were a part of the national narrative but a distinctive part – one whose existence had to be left alone.

2.6 Shifting Attitudes: From Folklore to Ethnography

There was therefore an attempt during this 20-year period, integral to the development of Irish national identity, to include the Travellers in the (re)creation of a national narrative. It may have been a failed initiative (at least thus far) but there were many such failures in the long and arduous process of defining the newly independent nation of Ireland. Both Pádraig Mac Gréine and Sean Mac Grath managed, individually, to gain the trust of the Travellers and thus gather

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid* 40.

¹⁴⁶ The Commission would neglect to include any Travellers’ views in their Report, apparently because members from this community lacked the basic skills to take part in such a complicated process, in effect describing the Travellers as children. Collins 4.

their folklore into the larger archives of Irish history.¹⁴⁷ The fact that they managed to collect this information was significant as, in the words of Aoife Breathnach, “In the course of research, the Traveller informant is being asked by a representative of a powerful, and often hostile, majority for information, which may be vital to the group’s protection.”¹⁴⁸ Often, therefore, Travellers would avoid contact with settled Irish that involved providing any personal information for the cause of research. The Travellers whom Mac Gréine and Mac Grath collected from in the period from 1930 to 1950 clearly had found a reason to trust these two and, quite possibly, understood that making an exception in their traditional secrecy for these representatives of the seminal IFC was critical for both their history and their future.

Again, it should be emphasized that the Travellers were not passive sources of information that the collectors merely gathered up and collected like rare ancient treasures in a museum. They chose to provide this particular folklore as much as the collectors chose to gather it.¹⁴⁹ And, it should be said, in the cases of Mac Gréine and Mac Grath, the Travellers chose their settled advocates well. As Mac Grath wrote:

Finally to the travellers let it be said, “The roads of Ireland are yours, so are the shady glens, the backward camping places and the rivers and streams. To those amongst us who seek to tighten the reins of movement let me quote Padraig Mac Géeine’s advice: - Leave us our wandering tribes, why cage a Tinker.”¹⁵⁰

Mac Grath was far from suggesting that the Travellers be forced into a settled existence; to the contrary he felt that the roads and byways where they had traditionally camped constituted their

¹⁴⁷ Again, as noted above, there were at least 9 pieces in total written on the Travellers in the first 50 years of the *Béaloides* journal’s existence, comprising about 130 pages of material (Williams 7-8). The information collected by Mac Gréine and Mac Grath, however, was included in the IFC’s Main Manuscript Collection and therefore in the larger body of Irish folklore collected throughout the Commission’s existence.

¹⁴⁸ Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach, “Introduction,” xii.

¹⁴⁹ Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 170.

¹⁵⁰ NFC MS 1391:40.

own territory – they too held a stake in the physical landscape of Ireland. The Travellers, therefore, did have a role to play in the larger and older Irish national narrative.

The significance allotted to this role and by extension their right to maintain it, relied on the way in which their story was told. The 1950s would change their story, possibly irreparably, and call this role into question. By the time the Commission on Itinerancy had finished its Report in 1963, the groundwork laid so carefully by the IFC would be swept away in favour of a new (and increasingly homogenous) Irish national ideal – a blow from which the Travellers’ reputation has yet to fully recover.¹⁵¹

The IFC’s folklorists, for a time, were the only government-related individuals paying significant attention to the Travellers. The Travellers had long maintained their place in Irish society mostly as storytellers, temporary tradesmen and hawkers of various goods. This may explain why folklorists were among the first from the settled Irish community to attempt to preserve the Traveller culture along with that of the rural Irish, also rapidly disappearing in the early years of the Irish Free State.¹⁵² Apart from those found in the collection of folklore, the majority of allusions to Travellers in any sort of government regulation between 1925 and 1960 were based largely on local concerns such as questions of trespassing animals and begging among others¹⁵³ Where the Travellers did not earn a spot in the limelight was in the larger and more contentious national political arena. Some scholars contest that this was because they were too undefined and unstable of a problem and therefore remained under the jurisdiction of local

¹⁵¹ Ryan 63.

¹⁵² Ó hAodha 27.

¹⁵³ Helleiner 52-63.

governments through whose territory they passed at different times of the year.¹⁵⁴ Others have claimed that they did not actually constitute a significant blip on the national radar (as they made up less than 1% of the actual population of Ireland) to even attract the attention of Ireland's parliament.¹⁵⁵ Whatever the reason, during the early years of Ireland's independence, according to prominent historian of Traveller studies Aoife Bhreatnach, "Travellers successfully evaded government attention because various parts of the system, from district justices to department officials, were unwilling or unable to view their existence as an urgent problem."¹⁵⁶ This would all change in 1960 with the creation of the Commission on Itinerancy, and the conclusions this same government body arrived at would disrupt the nomadic lives of Travellers entirely.

In the lead-up to the Commission's investigation, the IFC would ask Ireland's settled population to weigh in on the place of the Travellers in Irish society. The responses received made clear just how much more visible, and by extension contested, the place of the Travellers in the national rhetoric had become with the swift development of the Irish nation.¹⁵⁷ By 1950, Ireland was rapidly modernizing and therefore its people needed to do the same. In fact, it appeared that the Travellers, at least in the opinion of the IFC at this point, were going the way of the Gaeltacht.¹⁵⁸ Their likeness needed to be preserved for posterity as a chapter in Irish history but one that no longer fit in the national narrative according to the Irish government and its folkloric agents. Through the IFC's shift from a folkloric method of collection to an ethnographic one, the traditionally nomadic and 'old-fashioned' Travellers were slowly being

¹⁵⁴ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 90.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid* 100-101

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid* 90.

¹⁵⁷ Ó hAodha 62. He sees the Tinker's Questionnaire of 1952 as specifically identifying the Travellers as a countercultural group within Ireland and therefore naturally outside the nation. Ó hAodha's work on the Travellers as 'Other' more generally, and his analysis of the Questionnaire in particular, will be debated in chapter two.

¹⁵⁸ Therefore: disappearing. NFC IFC 1255:3.

relegated to the position of 'Other' within Irish society. Though they remained closer to 'contested outsiders' than the 'Other' in the view of Irish citizens, from the point of view of the IFC and, more importantly, the government, the move towards assimilation had officially begun.

3 Chapter: Compiling a Way of Life – The Tinker’s Questionnaire (1952)

People here do not mix with the tinkers. They do not trust them, and in many ways we know little about them.

- Siobhán Ní Mhurchadha, County Cork (1952)¹

The unique efforts of Pádraig Mac Gréine and Seán Mac Grath to collect Travellers’ folklore as part of the national folklore project suggest that in the early years of Irish independence, there was a period during which the Travellers held a place within the larger Irish narrative. The work of these folklorists, however, only represents a very small and specialized portion of Irish society. A much broader representation of Irish opinion on the place of the Travellers in Irish national identity can be found in the Tinker’s Questionnaire sent out to settled respondents by the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) in 1952.² Recent research argues that the relationship between the Travelled and settled parts of the Irish population began to sour around this time and soon reached a point so hostile overall that the government interfered. Many Traveller-studies scholars, most notably Micheál Ó hAodha and Bryan Fanning, have argued that in fact the Irish majority has always viewed the Travellers as an ‘Other’ against whom they could form their own identity.³ Ó hAodha has been very clear in his work to argue that settled Irish have gradually come to think of the Travellers as the ‘Other’ within since independence when the British no longer filled this role. He sees the efforts of the IFC, especially in the distribution

¹ NFC MS 1255:86, Siobhán Ní Mhurchadha, County Cork, 1952.

² Irish Folklore Commission, “Tinker’s Questionnaire” NFC MS 1255 – MS 1256 (1952).

³ Micheál Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish: Travellers in the Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) and Bryan Fanning, *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

of the Questionnaire, as helping to reinforce this idea that the Travellers were something outside of the nation – a people to form national Irish identity against.⁴

While there were certainly some negative descriptions of the Travellers and their culture in the Questionnaire responses, those that were overtly negative made up less than 10 per cent of the total and overall the respondents displayed a genuine attempt to understand the Travellers and their way of life.⁵ Although a shift is certainly visible in these responses from tolerance to the occasional call for action and what the Commission on Itinerancy would later deem the ‘final solution’ to the apparent Traveller issue, this argument was only beginning to take shape and was not present in the majority of the responses.⁶ Therefore, the designation of ‘Other’ that some scholars have attributed to the Travellers within Ireland was not inevitable, nor was it always the Travellers’ accepted position. More appropriately, Travellers could be seen as contested outsiders – definitely part of the Irish national identity but outside its mainstream definition. Although earlier the Travellers had unquestioningly been included in the national identity as sources of traditional Irish Folklore, the 1950s marked a moment when their part in the nation was beginning to be questioned by some. This chapter will explore how this is demonstrated in the responses by settled Irish to the Tinker’s Questionnaire and how these responses revealed a moment of possibility in which the Irish could have found a place for the Travellers in society or, alternatively, when the Travellers could have confirmed their own place.

⁴ Ó hAodha 2.

⁵ NFC MS 1255 – MS 1256 .

⁶ The ‘final solution’ language was actually used in the Commission’s documents – this is perhaps significant considering the use of the same language by the Nazis in their treatment of the Jewish community during World War Two. It is curious that the Irish government, which already had a reputation as sympathetic to the Nazis considering its neutrality during the war and its previous amicability with Hitler’s government, would resort to the use of this language in its dealings with the Travellers. Although direct comparisons are unhelpful, it does raise the question of whether the Travellers’ situation may have been significantly worsened had the Nazis won the war (discussed briefly in Helleiner 58-59).

3.1 Historical Context

The time period in which the Questionnaire was distributed is significant as the changes occurring in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century certainly had an effect on the shifting public opinion towards the Travellers. Prominent researcher of Traveller history, Aoife Bhreatnach, wrote, “The idea of a rural past, free from historical cleavages between settled and nomadic groups is so powerful that local politicians in 1995 wrote that it had vanished only in the previous thirty years,” putting the moment when the relationship became untenable in the mid-60s.⁷ The Travellers were widely identified with rural phenomena such as horse fairs, isolated country houses and wide open pastures. Bhreatnach’s statement demonstrated that, especially in rural communities, the relationship between Ireland’s nomadic and settled communities had continued much in the same way throughout the mid-twentieth century until the economic boom forced incredible transformation on the country’s landscape and population.⁸ To the contrary, it appears that the relationship had been increasingly strained from as early as the 1930s. By 1950, many saw the Travellers as backwards and possessing a place in society somewhere between unremarkable and a nuisance. Significantly, this did not seem to be based on individual Travellers personally but rather on the overall community’s lack of adherence to societal norms.⁹

Reading the sources this way, it is not surprising that historians such as Ó hAodha and Fanning have designated the Travellers as the obvious ‘Other’ in Irish society.¹⁰ A deeper look at the Questionnaire, however, reveals that the majority of the respondents saw very little essential

⁷ Aoife Bhreatnach, “Fair Days and Doorsteps” *Portraying Irish Travellers: Histories and Representations*, ed. Ciara Bhreatnach and Aoife Bhreatnach (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006) 1.

⁸ This position is makes up the main argument in Aoife Bhreatnach’s *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and the State, 1922-70* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006).

⁹ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 153.

¹⁰ Ó hAodha 2 ; Fanning 48-55.

difference between the Travellers and the settled Irish. The mid-twentieth century was therefore another contested period in the history of the relationship of the two cultures and by extension the history of the place of Irish Travellers in Ireland – another moment where the situation could have gone either way and therefore changed the structure of Irish society. The slow industrialization of Ireland, and with it the end of subsistence farming and the growth of the welfare system, affected the relationship between the two communities but there was something much more intangible at work, a factor intricately, and often emotionally, described in the words of the settled Irish themselves.¹¹ These people were suddenly unsure how to deal with the Travellers as part of the fabric of Irish culture; variously trusted but not understood, the Travellers represented an enigma to settled Ireland, as demonstrated in the quote by Mhurchadha that began this chapter – they did not quite fit the vision of Irish identity being formed in the mid-twentieth century but neither were they ‘Others’ outside the government’s construction of the Irish national identity entirely.

The period from 1937, when the Irish government passed their new constitution, to the 1950s, marked a singularly peaceful period in Irish history during which the details of the national character and identity were being decided.¹² The IFC was to continue their cultural and folkloric role in the re-creation of the Irish identity much as they had during the first wave

¹¹ A full 30 of the respondents emphasized how well certain Traveller individuals and families were known in their area – they made reference to long-standing personal connections which often included memories of the Travellers’ visits from their childhood. NFC MS1255 – MS 1256.

¹² With the creation of the Republic of Ireland in 1937, a new Constitution was ratified to replace that which had been in place since the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Although the original Constitution, and further amendments, had already designated Ireland as independent from British rule, many saw the 1922 Constitution as intrinsically connected with the controversial Anglo-Irish Treaty which had established Ireland as a Commonwealth nation as opposed to a Republic. It was also widely considered to have been a document forced upon the Irish by the British government. The new Constitution of 1937, therefore, not only symbolically divested Ireland of its British and colonial ties but also officially created the Republic of Ireland. It is also the constitution that remains in place today. Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Macmillan, 2006) 328-330.

(throughout the period of the Irish Free State).¹³ Starting in 1937 and continuing into the second half of the twentieth century they would issue questionnaires to working and retired school teachers throughout the country asking them for any and all information they held on Irish folklore and history.¹⁴ These questionnaires covered everything from Irish history as taught by the education system to the finer points of thatched-roofs in the more traditional west – all in an attempt to retain as much traditional Irish cultural knowledge as possible. The IFC argued that by saving this information the Irish nation and its people could gain a better understanding of where they came from and therefore who they were.¹⁵

This time around, however, it did not take the vigour of individual interested folklorists to get the Travellers involved in the process. In 1952, Séamus Ó Duilearga, the head of the IFC sent a letter out to his regular responders with an introduction to the latest in a series of Questionnaires, this one titled simply, “Tinkers.”¹⁶ Unlike the earlier efforts of Pádraig Mac Gréine and Seán Mac Grath which were individual attempts to include at least a few Travellers in the national narrative, this was a project directed by the head of the IFC calling for the focused collection of information on Travellers as a group.¹⁷ This information would be its own archive; the IFC was effectively creating a record of these people as a part of Irish history – what part exactly and how significantly will be explored in this chapter.

¹³ Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007) 37.

¹⁴ Micheal Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, ideology, methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007) 281.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 133.

¹⁶ NFC MS1255 (1952) 3, “Irish Folklore Commission Tinkers: “Travellers,” Séamus Ó Duilearga, February 1952.

¹⁷ In this sense, the Tinker’s Questionnaire does appear to be closer to an ethnography than a collection of folklore. Ó hAodha sees this as a clear example of ‘Othering’ where the dominant culture represents its subaltern ‘Other’ using essentialist language. The fact that a government institution was involved, he argues, makes this even more clearly an effort to ‘Other’ the Travellers to the point that they are completely outside the national community unless they decide to assimilate. Ó hAodha 56.

3.2 The Tinker's Questionnaire as Historical Source

The archived responses to the Tinker's Questionnaire present a challenge to the historian as they largely contain only the views of Ireland's settled majority on the place of Travellers in Ireland. As Ó hAodha has argued, this suggests that the Questionnaire only provided a representation of the Travellers through the eyes of their settled neighbours, and an inaccurate one at that. Ó hAodha sees this failure to incorporate the voices of the Travellers themselves in the archive as a sign of the problematic power dynamics in existence in terms of the relationship between the two communities.¹⁸ In his study on the Questionnaire as an example of Irish 'othering' from within, O hAodha writes that the responses therefore, "reflect Irish constructions of Irish people vis-a-vis the self and Other and as relating to the paradigm that was an 'outsider' group at this critical juncture of Irish cultural development and historical self-definition."¹⁹ He further argues that the responses overall offer a negative representation of the Travellers through which they were 'othered' by their fellow Irish and in the process made irrelevant, and possibly even problematic, in the national narrative.²⁰

Upon further study of the Questionnaire responses, however, one finds that in the 94 responses used, only six have an overall negative tone to them and of these the main complaints seem to be their tendency to drink and their habit of allowing their animals to graze on private land. In comparison, 23 of the 94 responses used are overtly positive in their description of the Travellers. The other 65 are overwhelmingly neutral in tone and often include very positive personal memories of individual Travellers and their families.²¹ It is very difficult, therefore, to

¹⁸ *Ibid* 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 2.

²⁰ *Ibid* 28.

²¹ NFC MS 1255 – MS 1256.

argue conclusively that the Questionnaires show a definitive trend of negative representation of Travellers and their lifestyle leading inevitably to the assimilation policies of the 1960s. On the contrary, the Questionnaire demonstrates that the settled Irish in the mid-twentieth century, or at least those represented by these respondents, were at the very least divided on the subject of the place of Travellers in Irish society and in fact often viewed them as an interesting if sometimes mysterious community.

In terms of methodology, although there were 140 responses to the Questionnaire in total, only 94 were looked at as a source base for this thesis. There were several reasons for the exclusion of certain responses, the first being that a small portion (nine in total) were written in Irish and were therefore left out due to a lack of knowledge of the Irish language.²² Another 13 were sent in from five of the six Northern Provinces and were not included as Northern Ireland has its own distinct relationship with the Travellers residing there and a separate (and possibly far more complicated) history of identity and nationalism, as this region remains a dominion of England.²³ A further 11 responses were returned sporadically throughout the 1950s and kept largely separate from the rest of the collection and were therefore not included as they were sent in outside the period analyzed in this thesis. The final 13 responses were letters, mostly from those who had already responded to the Questionnaire, introducing the information they would be providing. This chapter is therefore restricted to an analysis of the responses to the Tinker's

²² It should be noted that these in particular were overwhelmingly relied upon in Ó hAodha's work, seemingly at the expense of the far more numerous English responses.

²³ The relationship between Travellers and settled Irish in Northern Ireland has been studied far less than it has in the Republic, according to Aoife Bhreatnach, Judith Oakley, Micháel Ó hAodha and Ciara Bhreatnach among others. Ó hAodha took the North into account in his *Insubordinate Travellers* but he still lamented the lack of work in this field. As very few people from the Northern Counties actually answered the Questionnaire at all, these responses may not provide much insight and further sources would have to be sought in order to shed light on the relationship between the two communities in the North.

Questionnaire as contributed by English-speaking citizens of the Republic of Ireland in the year 1952.

One might argue that through the mere distribution of this questionnaire, the Travellers were finally being given their ‘rightful’ place in the Irish national narrative, but upon closer look this argument appears naive. Not only does the introductory letter set the Travellers up as a dying culture, much like the Gaeltacht, which needed to be preserved simply for posterity’s sake, but the responses themselves are even more significant.²⁴ They denote the beginnings of a change in opinion away from the formerly more neutral position towards the Travellers (closer to tolerance than acceptance) towards intolerance and frustration due to the Travellers’ lack of adherence to social norms. It should be noted that the respondents were led towards discussions of the tensions between the two communities by the wording of the questions themselves, which will be discussed below.

In the Questionnaire responses, only nine suggested a possibility of foreign origin (23 per cent of the respondents who answered this question) and more than half of these seem to just have been repeating a misquoted version of the old Traveller’s folktale to do with the crucifixion of Christ, as opposed to providing historical evidence.²⁵ In fact, those who answered the ‘Origins and History’ portion of the questionnaire often referred to knowledge of the Travellers being descended from dispossessed Irish lords and landowners who had been forced off their lands by

²⁴ See Seámus Ó Duilearga’s introductory letter to the Tinker’s Questionnaire: NFC MS 1255: 3.

²⁵ The original Travellers’ tale has it that their ancestors were asked to make the nails to crucify Christ and they obliged, happy to receive paid work, but once they discovered what the nails would be used for they proceeded to steal one in the hopes that the Jews would not attempt to crucify him with only three nails. Christ was indeed crucified but the Travellers escaped damnation because they tried to mend their ways before it was too late. In the misquoted version featured in the questionnaires, the Travellers are doomed forever to a nomadic life as punishment for making the nails with which Christ was crucified. See Pádraig Mac Gréine’s “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” *Béaloideas* 3.2 (Dec. 1931): 170-186 for the full story.

the early English invaders. For the respondents, therefore, it was not a question of whether they were indeed Irish or not but rather whether they were Irish enough. As Ireland attempted to modernize with the rest of Europe the goal of those orchestrating the (re)creation of the national identity shifted from being one based on reconnecting with the nation's history to one of understanding and treasuring this history and moving forward into a new era.²⁶ In this new era, the Travellers were seen as traditional, yes, but their determination to remain true to their way of life made them backwards, in the eyes of the Irish government and by extension the IFC – they were holding Ireland back and needed to be incorporated, by force if necessary, into the modern nation.²⁷

3.3 The Tinker's Questionnaire and the Travellers

Using a tactic popular in folklore studies in Norway – often considered the heart of folklore studies at this time and the place where the Commission gained much of its inspiration – the Commission began sending out Questionnaires to Irish citizens in order to collect information on Irish folklore and history.²⁸ Not only did this make sense logistically as the Commission did not have nearly enough resources to be sending dozens of collectors, either full- or part-time, throughout the country, but it also meant that a larger swath of the Irish population could be involved in some way in the preservation effort.²⁹ It should be understood, however, that the regular respondents did not represent all, or even most, of Ireland's diverse population. The Questionnaires were generally sent out to both current and retired teachers who would gather as much information as they could from their area on the topic in question. While it was

²⁶ Embracing this modern era meant opening up the Irish economy to global capitalism as well as attempting social modernization (which is where the Commission on Itinerancy comes in). Helleiner 76.

²⁷ Ó hAodha 31.

²⁸ Caoimhín Ó Danachair, "The Questionnaire System," *Béaloideas* 15.1-2 (June-Dec. 1945):205.

²⁹ *Ibid* 204.

understood that they were expected to collect this information from the most noteworthy and reliable sources possible, they were largely left free to conduct their affairs as they saw fit. Unlike the full-time collectors employed by the Commission, these volunteers were neither compensated nor supervised and therefore their responses are as much a reflection of their own personal preferences as they are of the collective knowledge of the area.³⁰

In reading some of their introductory letters to the Commission it appears that most, if not all, had an invested interest in Irish folklore and they seem, therefore, to have been largely determined to do their absolute best for the effort. One such respondent prefaced her response to the Tinker's Questionnaire with a long letter in which she apologized profusely for not having sent a reply earlier, citing poor health as the reason for her tardiness. She apologized for the brevity of her response saying, "...what I am sending you as regards the tinkers does not, I know, get to the heart of the matter at all, but I have still a source to tap and hope then to have better matter to send you later."³¹ It appears that this participant took her responsibility as a volunteer for the Commission seriously and she was by no means the only one to put such time and effort into the project. Letter after letter from respondents throughout the country speaks of their awe of the Commission's efforts and their pride at being part of such an important project.³² Even with the best of intentions, however, many answers were left blank and it appears that most, if not all, stayed within their locality and social groups when collecting their responses. On the other hand,

³⁰ Bríody 242.

³¹ NFC MS 1255: 402, Cáit Uí Chonchbhair, County Westmeath, collected by Siobhán Nic Shiomóin, 1952.

³² NFC MS 1255 – MS 1256.

14 respondents made it clear that they had asked local Travellers for information and another two expressed their desire to do so when a group was next in town.³³

Even the responses ostensibly collected from identified travellers did not yield any clearer information than that provided by the settled majority, for many different reasons. Aoife Bhreatnach argues that this is because Travellers might have been wary about providing information about their family groups, culture or way of life to members of the nation's majority who have never completely welcomed the Travellers.³⁴ Although relationships between these two portions of society had at one time been more amicable, or at least represented as mutually-beneficial, they were quickly becoming more hostile during this time period and therefore a refusal to provide more than a minimal amount of information may have served as a means of self-defense for some Travellers. Bhreatnach argues that the Travellers therefore created strategies by which they would be able to keep the researcher happy but still retain the confidences of their culture and history.³⁵

This was not, however, a tendency unique to the Travellers. In his work on the history of the IFC, Michael Briody noted that collectors of all sorts for the organization often ran into a situation where it was much easier to collect folktales from a source, than any kind of tradition or personal information. This is where it was an advantage for the collector to develop a personal relationship with his source – the greater the trust built the more forthcoming the information.³⁶ One Questionnaire respondent noted exactly this when they wrote, “It is most difficult to prise

³³ NFC MS 1255 – MS 1256.

³⁴ Bhreatnach, “Fair Days and Doorsteps,” 15.

³⁵ Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach, “Introduction,” *Portraying Irish Travellers: Histories and Representations*, ed. Aoife Bhreatnach and Ciara Bhreatnach (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006) xii.

³⁶ Briody 257.

information from them, normally but they seem anxious to repay a good turn.”³⁷ Another response collected from one Gympna O’Brien of County Limerick, identified as a ‘Tinker’, was characteristically vague giving only the minimum amount of information about the Travelling way of life. The one aspect that set her response apart from the majority was that she was very clear about the use of Shelta/Gammon by Travellers as their own language – also as a form of self-defense.³⁸ All of the other respondents who mentioned speaking to Travellers (14 in all) emphasized their personal connections to particular Travelling families, which is most likely where they obtained their information.³⁹ Again, those collectors who had built up relationships with the Travellers were the ones able to collect significant amounts of information from them – and they were also more likely to represent the Travellers positively in their responses.

Apart from the apparent reluctance of Travellers to provide those outside their own community with too many details, some settled collectors may also have seen no reason to attempt to question them. Many of the questionnaire responses, especially under the section entitled ‘Tinker Society’ mentioned at least once that Travellers did not mix with the local people unless they needed something from them.⁴⁰ One respondent, under the same category of ‘Tinker Society,’ candidly wrote, “The whole trouble about getting information about Tinker Society is that if you once have any chat with them about such things you are very likely to be annoyed by them for the rest of your life.”⁴¹ Although he was the only one to put this so bluntly, many were under the impression that any interaction with the Travellers would instigate a largely

³⁷ NFC MS 1255:411.

³⁸ NFC MS 1255: 153, Gympna O’Brien, County Limerick, collected by: N. Broainach, 1952..

³⁹ One Michael Hanly was particularly clear about his well-established relationships with various Traveller families. He knew quite a few of them personally and insisted that, “All these were honest characters + [sic] held the respect of the people.” NFC MS 1255: 182, Michael Hanly, County Limerick, collected by Phillip O’Connell, 1952.

⁴⁰ Example NFC MS 1255: 411, quoted above.

⁴¹ NFC MS 1255: 372, Énrí Tréinfhear, County Wexford, 1952.

one-way relationship in which the collector of information would essentially be targeted by said Traveller for years to come. Once contact had been established, the individual who had initiated the conversation would be added to the Travellers' list of people they could call on for money, food or work whenever they were in the area. This may seem dramatic but when one takes into account the fact that the relationship between the two communities was becoming increasingly strained during this period it seems likely that, upon entering an area, Travellers would prefer to visit people that were familiar with than strangers who might treat them cruelly or, worse, have them run out of town by the Gardaí.⁴² There are many reasons why the Commission's volunteer collectors may have chosen not to contact the Travellers for answers to a questionnaire on their own people. Regardless, the Questionnaire responses provide a representation of the place of the Travellers, or lack thereof, in the redeveloping national narrative of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century from settled Ireland's point of view.

Questionnaires were (and still are) a common tool used by folklorists, especially those with few resources at their disposal, to collect mass amounts of information. When the IFC was first established, Ó Duilearga envisioned at least a dozen full-time collectors and even more part-time collectors throughout the country – an army of dedicated folklorists doing the legwork for the organization which was headquartered in Dublin. In the history of the IFC, there were never enough resources for this sort of scope. The IFC would never have more than nine full-time collectors at any given time and regularly had to make do with fewer than that.⁴³ While the few collectors that the IFC did employ were able to amass an incredible amount of material for the Folklore Archives, Ó Duilearga and his team understood that their work was time-sensitive and

⁴² Aoife Bhreatnach covers the increasing tensions between the two communities, and how the Gardaí were often brought in to solve matters in *Becoming Conspicuous* (2006) 43-52 – cited above.

⁴³ Bríody 229.

that other tools for gathering information needed to be used.⁴⁴ To this end, the IFC sent out its first questionnaire in 1937 entitled “The Schools Scheme.” This was a questionnaire distributed to certain schools throughout the country to try to get a grasp on the understanding of local history both from the point of view of the children in any given district and from that of their parents. Not only did the Schools Scheme give the IFC’s folklorists the opportunity to hone their skills at questionnaire-crafting, but it also established a network of 300 to 500 teachers throughout Ireland (spreading even into the Northern counties) whose passion and dedication they would rely on for the success of further questionnaires.⁴⁵

The Commission was well aware of the challenges faced by their volunteer collectors and urged them to only provide as much information as they thought reasonable (a much more lenient position than that taken with their paid collectors, for obvious reasons). In his letter of introduction to the Tinker’s Questionnaire discussed below, Ó Duilearga included a note to this effect which read,

If you feel that a reply to all the queries would involve too much time or trouble, we will be grateful for *any* information which you can give regarding some of them. We would, however, deeply appreciate your earnest help in securing a good return to this very important questionnaire.⁴⁶

Ó Duilearga and his colleagues valued the input of their fellow citizens and indeed were quite adamant that they play a role in the preservation of Ireland’s culture and history. The IFC saw

⁴⁴ Ó Danachair 204.

⁴⁵ There were also many different types of questionnaires, some more difficult to answer than others and requiring different degrees of effort depending on the respondent’s own experience and knowledge. The two broadest categories of questionnaires were general versus local questionnaires; the first being sent out to respondents all over the country about a topic relevant throughout Ireland and the latter focused on a local area of folklore studies and therefore only relevant to certain districts. Within these two broad frameworks there were two classifications more relevant to the respondents themselves: whether the questionnaire was seeking as much information as possible about a particular topic or was more focused on obtaining specific details on a very narrow one. Briody 281.

⁴⁶ NFC MS 1255: 3, “Irish Folklore Commission, Tinkers: “Travellers,” Seámus Ó Duilearga, 1952..

this as a mutually beneficial relationship and while the various challenges faced by the respondents may have lessened the number of responses received as the years went on, the IFC's questionnaires nevertheless provided the nation's folklorists with substantial amounts of information from which to construct a description of Ireland's past.

In 1951, Séamus Ó Duilearga drafted the introduction letter for his latest appeal for information simply entitled, "Tinkers." In this letter, Ó Duilearga took the position firmly held by collectors Pádraig Mac Gréine and Seán Mac Grath (discussed in the previous chapter) that the Travellers were a unique part of the larger Irish community.⁴⁷ His appeal made very clear why he felt that a collection of information about the Travellers at that particular time was important. He wrote, "Comparatively little is known about them, however, as no serious attempt has hitherto been made to collect information about them from all over the country in a systematic way." He later explained that the Commission was requesting this information, "In the hope that a representative documentation on certain aspects of the tinker' way of life may be compiled, before it is too late to do so."⁴⁸ Ó Duilearga had always argued that the folklore of the Gaeltacht needed to be preserved because it was rapidly disappearing as the country became more and more anglicized. Now he was using this same argument to explain why it was important to collect as much information as possible on the Travellers' way of life.⁴⁹ This was meant to be a collection of settled knowledge of the Travellers and their culture – an attempt by the majority community of Ireland to preserve what Ó Duilearga saw as a dying way of life for future reference.

⁴⁷ NFC MS 1255: 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 3.

⁴⁹ Briody 108.

Although they may have allowed their agents to collect their information on their own terms, the IFC by no means left them unguided in terms of their responses. Instead of just providing simple questions in the Tinker's Questionnaire, the IFC chose to include follow-up questions, which would give their respondents an indication of the information they were looking for.⁵⁰ A closer look at some of these follow-up questions, however, suggests that a number of the respondents may have been partially influenced by the IFC's priority to put more of an emphasis on the tensions between the two communities, than the respondents may have otherwise. While this is conjecture, more than three-quarters of the respondents answered each follow-up question individually as opposed to providing more generalized answers to the larger categories suggesting that they formatted their responses to the IFC's specifications and not according to their own categorizations.

Even in the first question, probably the easiest to answer, the IFC did not just ask the respondent to provide "Generic Names" but instead offered possible answers ("tinkers, travellers, 'gipsies,' tramps, beggars, *tincéiri*, *siúbhlóiri*, etc").⁵¹ It is later in the Questionnaire, however, that these clarifications on the larger categories begin to steer the respondent towards detailing certain aspects of the relationship. Under the category "Visits and Encampments," the Commission asks for general information concerning local Travellers, but adds a specific request that reads, "Where do the animals graze – along the roads or in the fields? Any friction with the local people or with the authorities regarding this?"⁵² As mentioned above, negative representations of the Travellers in the Questionnaire responses overwhelmingly focus on the

⁵⁰ NFC MS 1255:4-7.

⁵¹ NFC MS 1255:6. *Tincéiri* is most commonly translated to mean 'knackers,' a derogatory term used to describe Travellers who buy and sell horses for a living. *Siúbhlóiri* does not seem to have a direct translation to English but used to be a common Irish word used to describe itinerants according to the Questionnaire responses.

⁵² NFC MS 1255:6

friction caused when their animals graze on private property. The fact that they were specifically prompted for this information may partially explain why these incidents were so prevalent in the responses sent in – it remains unknown whether this aspect of the relationship would have appeared as significant had the IFC not prompted its inclusion.

Another example of this filtered response tactic used by the IFC is in the section with the vague title, “Behaviour.” Again, the question begins with a general call for any accounts regarding Traveller behaviour be it towards each other, authorities, clergy, women and children or animals. The IFC then asks specifically for, “Any information about their moral character – honesty, truth, charity, and so on,” followed by a request for their attendance record at Mass and the Sacraments in particular.⁵³ This seems to account for the frequent representation of the Travellers as dishonest (found in 23 of the responses) although only four of these qualify this description with a reason – in all cases due to the fear of theft.⁵⁴ On the other hand, by specifically asking for descriptions of Traveller honesty, the IFC received a further 20 responses which singled the community out as honest and trustworthy overall, suggesting that the steering attempts by the IFC sometimes led to positive accounts as well.⁵⁵

Again, it is unclear to what extent the subjective quality of ‘honesty’ would have figured in the responses had the IFC not asked specifically for such information. While these sub-questions might seem harmless, they acted as a way for the IFC to garner certain types of

⁵³ NFC MS 1255:7.

⁵⁴ NFC MS 1255 – MS 1256.

⁵⁵ One Michael Martyn of County Clare was very clear about the overall honesty of the Travellers as a community. Significantly, he also pointed to the occasional trouble with locals over animals grazing on private property and yet he saw the community as a whole as both honest and truthful. It remains unclear whether the trouble with the locals would have even been mentioned had he not been prompted to speak of it by the IFC’s sub-questions. NFC MS 1255:261, Michael Martyn, County Clare, collected by: Margaret Josephine Martyn, 1952.

information from their sources on the subject of the Travellers. As Ó Duilearga, in his introductory letter, had already established the Travellers as a rapidly disappearing people, the IFC was arguably looking for support for this foregone conclusion.⁵⁶ By directing their respondents towards more contentious aspects of the relationship between the two communities the IFC seems to have attracted more negative representations from them, therefore indicating that the Travellers were at odds with the majority of the population. One might ask if it was the respondents or the IFC itself which was insisting on the ‘othered’ status of the Travellers, although Ó hAodha would argue the former.⁵⁷ At any rate, the sub-questions need to be taken into account when looking to understand at least part of the representation of the relationship between the two communities through the Questionnaire responses. The settled respondents may have answered based on their own knowledge and that of their community, but the information available to them was filtered to highlight certain desired aspects due to the structure of the Questionnaire itself.

3.4 Arguments For and Against the Questionnaire as an ‘Othering’ Tool

By the phrasing of their questions, the IFC was nudging their respondents towards agreeing with their designation of the Travellers as a disappearing community – a description that suggested the IFC did not see them as a part of the modern nation of Ireland. Social scientist Bryan Fanning, mentioned above, argues that for centuries, but more particularly in the twentieth century, the Travellers had been considered naturally outside the community that would become the nation of Ireland. He states that the Travellers always were, and still are, viewed as deviant

⁵⁶ NFC MS 1255:3.

⁵⁷ Ó hAodha 2.

and inferior and therefore unsuited to the ideal of the homogenous and fixed Irish identity.⁵⁸

There were many factors during the twentieth century which determined who would be considered a part of the nation but one of the most prominent and long-standing was that of religion, the Catholic religion to be precise. Early Irish nationalists had defined the Irish identity as being predominantly a Catholic one, making Protestants (and to a lesser extent Jews and other religious groups) part of the non-Irish category.⁵⁹ Although there were important Protestant Irish nationalists as well, Catholic nationalism quickly gained dominance and would persist into the twentieth century as the official religion of an independent Ireland.⁶⁰

In relation to this significant aspect of Irish national identity, the Travellers did not fit the description of the natural ‘Other’ in Irish society – all but one of the Questionnaire respondents described them as Roman Catholic, and overall the scholarship on this field seems to agree.⁶¹ They adhered to this aspect of what the government posited as the Irish national identity and yet scholars such as Ó hAodha still insist that they were portrayed as a community outside this identity. Anthropologist Jane Helleiner, mentioned earlier on in this thesis, argues that the Travellers have been ‘othered’ based on, “a negatively evaluated ‘way of life,’ exemplified by specific features including itinerancy, trailer-living, particular occupations, and poverty.”⁶² All of these intrinsic differences were identified by various respondents as reasons why the Travellers remained separate from the majority of Irish society but, significantly, many respondents also argued as to why these differences did not matter. Despite Fanning’s argument that Irish society

⁵⁸ Fanning 3-5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid* 31

⁶⁰ Helleiner 6-7.

⁶¹ Even as early as the 1930s, Pádraig Mac Gréine emphasized the importance of the Catholic Religion to the Traveller Community. Pádraig Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” 175. I have yet to come across a study on Travellers that suggests they are members of any religion but Catholicism.

⁶² Helleiner 8.

overall has always been discriminatory towards Travellers – always viewing them as something outside the national community – this does not seem to be the case. While some, certainly, viewed the Travellers as ‘Other,’ many settled Irish did not understand the need to claim superiority over these native nomads, no matter what the differences between the two cultures.

Controversially, Fanning has also argued that the outside status of the Travellers in comparison to mainstream society is obvious due to their invisibility in many of the sources. He wrote,

The extent of the ideological and social marginality of the Travellers within the emerging nation can be seen from near total lack of references to them in mainstream histories and studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland. Travellers were, in essence, an invisible minority and a people ‘without history’ within the nation of the dominant imagination.⁶³

The question of history in relation to Travellers will be considered later on but this statement remains problematic even without considering this factor. For many, the Travellers may have long represented one of the many forms of ‘otherness’ in Irish society but the story is much more complicated than that. The large amount of responses to the Tinker’s Questionnaire demonstrates that the Travellers are hardly invisible in the archives. These responses also reveal that settled opinion overall was hardly unanimous when it came to deciding whether the Travellers were ‘Other’ or ‘Irish.’ Irish politicians may have eventually decided that the Travellers did not belong, but it appears that the average Irish men and women were not so sure.⁶⁴

⁶³ Fanning 50-51.

⁶⁴ The various exclusionary policies of the Irish Government towards Travellers in the second half of the twentieth century can be found in the following: Eleanor Carey, “Public Policy and Irish Travellers: Exclusionary Policies and Approaches,” *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representations of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 85-95.

Irish historian Mícheál Ó hAodha has argued for the status of Travellers as the natural ‘Others’ in Irish society. He has written and edited many books on the Travellers and their history, focusing especially on their ever-changing relationship with the settled majority.⁶⁵ One of the few scholars to have looked at the Tinker’s Questionnaire as of yet, Ó hAodha argues that the Travellers have long been considered the ‘Other’ in Irish society and that their relationship with the settled Irish has always been complicated. In his book, *Insubordinate Irish: Travellers in the text*, Ó hAodha essentially argues that over the past century the Travellers have been the victims of discrimination and exclusion based on their apparent primitive-nature in comparison to the settled Irish.⁶⁶ This coincides with Bryan Fanning’s argument that the Travellers have always held a complex place in Irish society, never quite belonging to the majority culture and yet not causing enough of a problem to be considered entirely outside of it – until independence.⁶⁷ Ó hAodha also argues that the growth of the new nation-state in Ireland was the catalyst for a fundamental change in the relationship between the Travelling and settled Irish but, in his opinion, it appears that what came out of this new national narrative was essentially an understanding that the Travellers did not belong at all.⁶⁸

Ó hAodha categorizes the Tinker’s Questionnaire as one small part in the larger project to create a new national identity in Ireland. As Ireland’s population began to turn away from the old traditional ways in the twentieth century, the relationship between the two communities slowly slipped away from one that was symbiotic and largely accepted, to one that was increasingly

⁶⁵ See Mícheál Ó hAodha’s *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) and *Travellers and Showpeople: Recovering Migrant History* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

⁶⁶ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, x.

⁶⁷ Fanning 3.

⁶⁸ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 2.

complicated.⁶⁹ As Ó hAodha argues, this is demonstrated in a small number of the Questionnaire responses. The same respondent quoted at the beginning of this chapter was one of the bluntest when describing the position of the Travellers in society by the 1950s. Ní Mhurchadha wrote, “They are becoming a nuisance. They come in swarms in their caravans and motor vans, also in long high cars with their children sprawling all over them. People here have always been good to them, but they are getting very sick of them.”⁷⁰ Apart from the fact that she outright represented them as a nuisance, even more significant is that she put the blame entirely on the Traveller population. According to her, the local people had been nothing but helpful to the local Travellers and their kindness was repaid by larger and larger swarms of Travellers moving through the neighbourhood.⁷¹ Many respondents also referred to the modern irrelevance of the Travellers, with one writing, “They do not mix with the locals and have no local contacts at all. They are very little of a nuisance...Local Opinion: Harmless but entirely useless parasites.”⁷² This respondent did not represent the Travellers as a nuisance to locals but rather that as ‘parasites’ on the community and therefore served no useful function in society. These were the sorts of responses that Ó hAodha drew upon to argue that the Travellers were slowly becoming the ‘Other’ with whom the settled folk could not identify at all and, indeed, against whom they began to form their common identity.⁷³

⁶⁹ Ó hAodha places his argument within the wider discussion of the concept of ‘Otherness’ and the nation when he writes, “Groups such as Travellers or mulattoes who belonged to the mainstream and were at the same time luminal to inhabit an indeterminate, unstable, or dangerous central locus. Since stable or mainstream cultures required that groups stay in their appointed or classified position they imposed symbolic boundaries to keep their categories ‘pure’ and reinforce their own meaning and identity...The mainstream society attempted to drive away that which it perceived as impure or abnormal.” *Ibid*, 39.

⁷⁰ NFC MS 1255 :85.

⁷¹ *Ibid* 85-86.

⁷² NFC MS 1255 :352-353.

⁷³ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 51.

Another way in which the Travellers significantly differed from the rest of the rural Irish population was in their disregard for the law, according to some of the respondents. Many of the responses described situations in which Travellers would blatantly go through farmers' fences to allow their animals to graze on land that was not their own. They also, apparently, would harass locals until given what they wanted, far past the point of respectability, especially in comparison to other poor people. As one respondent wrote, "These poor creatures begged. The tinkers just demanded and God help anyone who left one of them leave the door empty-handed."⁷⁴ Unlike the non-Traveller Irish poor, therefore, the Travellers felt entitled to help from the settled majority, according to the representations provided by some respondents. Aside from begging, which was one of their means of earning a living in the mid-twentieth century, the overall behaviour of some of the Travellers also concerned some of Ireland's settled population. Similar to one of the descriptions of Traveller behaviour included above, one respondent described the Travellers as behaving well over all when arriving in small groups but when they 'swarmed' the area, "Then they show their true form wrangling, fighting, cursing, swearing, trespassing on private property...their moral character is not on a very high level."⁷⁵ There are several descriptions of specifically large groups of Travellers that represented them in such a negative way supporting Ó hAodha's point that the slowly modernizing rural Irish had no desire to associate themselves with such a people.⁷⁶ If one looked only at these examples, it would be easy to assume that the overall tone of the Questionnaire responses was negative when discussing the place of the Travellers in modern Irish society. This was, however, not the case. In a similar number of responses, many settled Irish suggested that not all the Travellers were necessarily

⁷⁴ NFC MS 1255:108, Máire Bean Uí Urdáil, County Cork, 1952.

⁷⁵ NFC MS 1255:238.

⁷⁶ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 51.

deserving of the title of ‘Others.’ In fact, many referred to the similarities between the settled and nomadic Irish, barring the latter’s aversion to remaining in one place for long periods of time, and some even represented the Travellers as ‘Irish’ in their own right.⁷⁷

In direct comparison to the examples provided in the above paragraph that supported the arguments of Ó hAodha and Fanning, there were several instances in which the settled respondents themselves argued against the negative trope of the demanding, disrespectful and irrelevant Traveller. While the respondent above insisted that the Travellers were incorrigible when it came to demanding things of the settled population, 16 of the respondents insisted that the Travellers remained useful to Irish society and three-quarters of the respondents admitted that the Travellers had a tendency to beg, but emphasized that they also earned a living through tinsmithing and other means.⁷⁸ One respondent answered the Questionnaire’s section on Behaviour by suggesting the Travellers had their faults but remained hard workers, “They never have recourse to dole or outdoor relief from the local authority, unlike many of our supposedly socially superior citizens.”⁷⁹ The welfare state grew steadily in Ireland during the period of the Irish Free State as the new nation inherited the Poor Law system from the British and many settled Irish were taking advantages of the different forms of social aid newly available to them. Because of their lack of permanent addresses, in the early years of the Irish welfare state the Travellers could not take advantage of local welfare and therefore had to find other means to

⁷⁷ These sentiments echoed those of Pádraig Mac Gréine and Sean Mac Grath as discussed in chapter one. Although she also referred to them as parasites (quoted above), one Conchubhar Mac Suibhne of County Wicklow wrote, “They look just the same as the rest of us, with, perhaps, a greater proportion of red heads. They are not Gypsies at all but just Irish.” NFC MS 1255:354, Conchubhar Mac Suibhne, County Wicklow, 1952. Many of the other respondents would echo this sentiment, often making it quite clear that the Travellers were in no way related to Gypsies widely understood to have originated outside of Ireland.

⁷⁸ NFC MS 1255-1256.

⁷⁹ NFC MS 1256:119, Frank Corduff and others, County Mayo, collected by: Michael Corduff, 1952.

support themselves – often by extension avoiding being categorized by the government as part of Ireland’s urban poor.⁸⁰

Though in the second half of the twentieth century Travellers would attract more attention from Ireland’s welfare administration, it was not until the Commission on Itinerancy that their community would be singled out as a drain on the Irish economy. In the Questionnaire responses, however, some settled Irish recognized that though the Traveller community had its flaws, it had no more so than Ireland’s settled population which was struggling to keep up with the extensive changes to Ireland’s economy, politics and social systems at the time.⁸¹ The Travellers, it seems, were far from the accepted deviant ‘Other’ described by both Fanning and Ó hAodha, among others.⁸² Although variously troublesome and occasionally a ‘nuisance’ to the majority population as described above, the responses portrayed the Travellers as contested outsiders as opposed to ‘Others.’ Their position within Irish society was debated during this period, as can be seen by comparing the different tones of the Questionnaire responses, but it was far from decided.

In the Questionnaire responses, there were three main areas, largely ignored by Ó hAodha, where the respondents resisted depicting the Travellers as those who do not belong in Irish society: relations with local settled people, their connection to the larger history of Ireland and their resourcefulness when it came to supporting themselves and their families.⁸³ If one

⁸⁰ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 83.

⁸¹ NFC MS 1255:173.

⁸² Also see Helleiner’s *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (2000).

⁸³ This last category, the resourcefulness of the Travellers in terms of means of livelihood, has been emphasized by both Travellers and scholars of Traveller studies alike. Judith Okely argued this as a positive aspect of the Traveller’s community is referred to within their group as “Calling,” and is highly regarded as a crucial skill to have. This ability also gave the Travellers a place in the larger Irish community as, “Many of the Travellers’ occupations

added to this the overwhelming representation of the Travellers' as Catholic (along with adherence to this religion's rituals and practices) it appears that the vast majority of the respondents did not view the Travellers as uncontested 'Others' who remained entirely outside Irish society.⁸⁴ Although the structure of the Irish workforce was changing rapidly in the mid-twentieth century, due to late industrialization and the related economic boom, over half of the respondents still emphasized the usefulness of the Travellers as tinsmiths, chimney sweeps, horse dealers and workers able to take on any other task which was available in the communities in which they stopped.⁸⁵ Though begging was also common, the majority of the respondents who referred to this practice (nine cases out of 10) paired it with the suggestion that this was how the women would supplement the earnings of their husbands with small bits of food and clothing from local farmers.⁸⁶ Apart from annoyance over begging practices, however, the relationship between Travellers and the local people was represented as overwhelmingly positive, with over one-third of the respondents reporting a personal connection to one or more Travelling families. Finally, sometimes as part and parcel with these personal connections, but also apparently as general knowledge, the Travellers were widely believed to be ethnically Irish and significantly

make important contributions within the dominant sedentary economy. Travellers have traditions of flexibility and adaptation to changing economic circumstances, and they have been able to exploit new occupations when others have declined." Judith Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 64.

⁸⁴ Out of those who answered the religion question (all but nine), only one response listed the Travellers as any religion other than Catholic, suggesting that some may have been Protestant (NFC MS 1255:346, Allenwood Boys' National School, County Kildare, 1952) and two others suggested that the Travellers had no religion at all (NFC MS 1255:140 ; NFC MS 1256:245).

⁸⁵ The best example of this can be found in NFC MS 1255:245 which will be quoted in full below.

⁸⁶ Aoife Breathnach suggests that begging had long been an accepted part of the relationship between the two communities and that it only became a contentious point in the mid-twentieth century with the creation of national welfare programs in Ireland. The problem here is that the Travellers had no fixed abode and therefore rarely qualified for welfare, which might explain the continuation of their begging practice in their community. Aoife Bhreatnach, "Fair Days and Doorsteps," 2.

connected to the history of Ireland as a whole.⁸⁷ In all three of these areas, discussed in most of the Questionnaire responses, the settled Irish did not represent the Travellers as ‘Other’ but rather a curious community both like and unlike their own but, most importantly, one that belonged in Ireland.

3.5 The Travellers as Well-Known

One of the most common arguments when designating a nation’s ‘Other’ is that the othered community is one against which the national community can identify itself. Differences in history, language, religion and ethnicity are drawn upon by nationalists to show why this ‘Other’ does not belong in the national identity and, alternatively, why the nation’s designated ‘insiders’ do.⁸⁸ This definition argues that there is not much amicable interaction between the two communities, or little enough that it becomes acceptable to see the ‘Other’ as one who does not belong. Contrary to this, many of the respondents to the Questionnaires had regular contact with the Traveller community, providing them with enough information to fill the 94 responses used in this chapter. Significantly, at least a quarter of the respondents spoke of regular and sustained contact with particular Travelling families, always of a positive nature, sometimes even calling them ‘our tinkers.’⁸⁹ Some of these Travellers were invited into settled homes as welcome guests, as described by one respondent:

⁸⁷ Ó hAodha argues that the ways in which the Questionnaire respondents posited Traveller History as being connected to the larger history of Ireland (especially in the drop-out theory camp) were derogatory. This idea will be discussed further below. Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 5.

⁸⁸ Kalwant Bhopal and Martin Myers have discussed the ‘Gypsy’ character (in all its various forms – usually inaccurately grouped under the title of ‘Gypsy’) as the ideal ‘Other’ in British society especially. As a community that both constructs itself and is constructed as separate from the majority the ‘Gypsy’ is often completely misunderstood and therefore mistrusted. They are the stranger within the nation and, “The power of the stranger is his ability to disrupt the ordinariness of everyday life. He is unsettling because he is not understood and yet he remains...” Kalwant Bhopal and Martin Myers, *Insiders, Outsiders and Others: Gypsies and Identity* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2008) 2.

⁸⁹ NFC MS 1255 :239, Conchubhair Ó Néill, County Clare, collected by Sean A. Breathnach, 1952.

Tinkers often sit down in a house and talk of their travels. If they knew you had relatives or friends in another district they would gather up news for you when they passed that way [and] tell you when are your house again, maybe in a year or two years after.⁹⁰

At other times, settled Irish stopped by the Traveller campsites, often remaining to hear their songs or stories once their work was done for the day.⁹¹ These responses, provided by settled Irish, suggested there was in fact a place for the Travellers within the wider Irish community. While there were certainly tension in the relationship, something which has been well-studied by other researchers, there was still a personal connection between these two distinct segments of Irish society.⁹²

In the responses to the Questionnaire, the Travellers were represented as a separate community in and of themselves but not necessarily one which was ‘othered’ from the rest of the Irish population. This was demonstrated by one respondent living near the border with Northern Ireland who wrote, “They are a distinct people following their own exclusive way of life...Certainly whatever their origins or history, our tinkers seem to be a very ancient class in the Irish Community.”⁹³ It is perhaps most significant that this respondent had this opinion despite living close to the border with Northern Ireland. Much less research has been attempted on the place of Irish Travellers in the identity of Northern Ireland. It has been suggested that in periods of conflict in Irish history in the twentieth century, especially, Travellers were often used to smuggle goods across the border because they could move more freely, and were less likely to

⁹⁰ NFC MS 1255 :310, Eilis Ní Plant, County Tipperary, 1952.

⁹¹ NFC MS 1256:143, Information collected from various unidentified people in the area around Kiltyclogher, by Lorcán Ó Rúanaidhe, County Leitrim, 1952.

⁹² Aoife Bhreatnach argues that this was the case in the early-twentieth century but that by the 1950s the relationship had been damaged almost irreparably due to outside influences and circumstances mostly out of the Travellers’ control. She explores the degradation of this relationship in “Fair Days and Doorsteps,” 1-16.

⁹³ NFC MS 1256 :119.

be searched than the settled Irish.⁹⁴ This arguably would have led to more tension between the two communities than existed already in the post-war period and yet, despite this complication in the relationship, the respondent above was still eager to represent the Travellers as a part of the larger Irish community.⁹⁵ Though this view was not unanimous within the Questionnaire responses it demonstrates a different side to the debate over the place of Travellers in Irish society. This response also touched on an increasingly important question in Traveller studies: ‘origins’ and history. The Questionnaire responses on this topic, though few of them answered this particular question, showed yet another way in which the Travellers were possibly viewed as a distinct community as opposed to Ireland’s natural ‘Other’.⁹⁶

3.6 The Travellers and Irish History

Social scientist Jim MacLaughlin posits that one of the arguments against ascribing Travellers a place in modern Irish society was that they were a nomadic people with no real history and therefore they had no home.⁹⁷ As can be seen by the methods often used to establish national identities, history is a key factor in determining who does or does not belong as part of

⁹⁴ Ó hAodha, *Insubordinate Irish*, 78-79.

⁹⁵ The issue of the border with Northern Ireland also brings up the question of regional identities and opinions in the Tinker’s Questionnaire. As mentioned in the introduction and chapter one, Ireland has long been a largely-rural-based nation with each community possessing its own distinct identity exacerbated by the fact that they were often miles apart. Although, arguably, this would have still been the case in the 1950s, it is perhaps surprising that a pattern was not notable in the responses based on regions. The only effect the regional identity in question had on the responses was to dictate which particular Travelling families were spoken of and what their travel routes were. Apart from these logistical factors, the reputation of the Travellers appeared to be less based on location than on the personal opinion and the experiences of the respondent in question.

⁹⁶ The use of the term ‘natural’ is problematic here as it assumes that this status was both inevitable and unchallenged but it is in fact a term used in the historiography. Jane Helleiner cautioned scholars on the use of such terminology when she wrote, “While highlighting the existence of a history of Irish racism, the phrase ‘organic racism’ needs to be used with care, as it may uncritically reproduce naturalized constructions of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ of the nation rather than interrogating how such distinctions have been historically produced and reproduced within the wider processes of colonialism, nation-building, and capitalist development.” Helleiner 7.

⁹⁷ Tony Ryan, “Irish Travellers and the Legacy of the Stereotype: Some Considerations,” *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 57-58.

the nation and, further to this, in determining the actual parameters of the nation.⁹⁸ It is easier for nationalists to argue that certain groups do not belong within the nation if those groups cannot be tied to its larger, linear history. Conversely, traveller advocate Micheal McDonagh argues that the Travellers have been given a history, but one that posits them as ‘drop-outs’ who could not handle the settled life.⁹⁹ For McDonagh and others, the histories which depict the Travellers as a people who were once settled and were forced to give up their land, whether because of famine, eviction or other reasons often tied to the British, suggested that the Travellers could (in fact should) rightly be resettled as they ostensibly had been forced into a nomadic existence.¹⁰⁰

While most of the respondents understood Traveller history as being firmly connected to that of the settled population – suggesting that they were not ‘Others’ after all – they did not suggest in any way that this meant they should simply be (re)assimilated into the larger population. Though this was a stance the Commission on Itinerancy would later take in their final report, this report was arguably not based on anything taken directly from the IFC’s archives.¹⁰¹ By tying the Travellers’ history to that of the settled Irish, rather than dooming them to assimilation, the respondents were perhaps attempting to include the Travellers in the national story. The Travellers were not ‘othered’ by this history but rather quite the opposite: they had experienced the same struggle as the settled Irish and had come through this history intact; they

⁹⁸ Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944) 4.

⁹⁹ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 41.

¹⁰⁰ Helleiner 30.

¹⁰¹ The Commission on Itinerancy, and by extension the Irish government, also argued that settlement was desired by the Travellers themselves who felt wronged by the previous colonial rule. Although there were no Travellers represented on the Commission on Itinerancy’s board, their community’s voice was appropriated to emphasize this ‘colonial victim’ narrative and therefore support the argument for assimilation. Helleiner 79.

were representative of the survivor spirit of the ancient Celts so cherished by Irish nationalists in the creation of the Irish national identity.¹⁰²

Although not all of the respondents gave an answer in the section entitled “History and Origins” (39:94), those who did were either completely unaware of any sort of Traveller history or they understood the Travellers to be descended from ancient Irish clans and therefore firmly entrenched in the larger history of the island.¹⁰³ There were two main versions of the place of Travellers in Irish history, both of which will be discussed here. The first was that the Travellers were actually modern descendents of ancient Irish royalty and/or lords or wealthy landowners who saw themselves dispossessed of their land with the coming of the Norman or later English conquests. One respondent suggested, “The people believe that the tinkers themselves are the lineal descendents of ancient Irish kings or Chieftans...as a general rule they never enter into subject employment and so always maintain personal Liberty.”¹⁰⁴ Once dispossessed of their land, the Travellers (at that time, more accurately, settled folk stripped of their homes) attempted to live among the people who had once served them for a time. While this was successful for a while, it soon became clear that the two classes of people did not understand each other and the former lords in particular found it difficult to integrate themselves within their newly adopted society. Because of the growing tension between the former upper-class members of the dispossessed Irish society and their ‘lesser’ counterparts, the Travellers’ ancestors decided to

¹⁰² *Ibid* 32.

¹⁰³ It should be understood that though the word ‘clan’ tends to carry with it notions of ‘uncivilized’ people and constant warfare, it is a valid term to describe earlier Irish society that was indeed divided into various clans and complex systems of loyalty. The use of this term here is not meant to define the Travellers as ‘uncivilized’ by any means but rather to emphasize the belief of many of the Questionnaire respondents that this nomadic community was connected to the semi-nomadic Celtic clans of an earlier period in Irish history. Helleiner 47.

¹⁰⁴ IFC 1255 :318, members of the Dualla Guild of the Irish Countrywomen's Association, County Tipperary, collected by Mrs. Mary Finn, 1952.

leave their new dysfunctional community and take to the roads, the better to be in control of their own livelihoods and ways of life.¹⁰⁵ This description of Traveller history did not represent them as failures but rather as ordinary Irish citizens who had to make the best of a bad situation due to forces beyond their control. As many Irish lords and landowners were dispossessed of their lands, often violently, during the several centuries of British rule, many of them were forced to reinvent themselves in order to support their families.¹⁰⁶ Some of the respondents to the Tinkers Questionnaire arguably saw the possibility of the Travellers having a part in this history, and in perpetuating this idea included the Travellers in the larger Irish narrative, therefore ascribing them a part of the Irish identity.

Others argued that the Travellers were descended from early metal workers who took to the roads out of necessity, leaving locations when their services were no longer needed and travelling on to new areas where they could find work.¹⁰⁷ This explanation seemed an obvious one as most respondents also identified the main occupation of Travellers at the time of the questionnaire as ‘tinsmithing.’ It is reasonable that some might have assumed the Travellers had been plying the same trade from generation to generation in the same way that farms were often passed down from father to son in the settled community. One intrepid respondent apparently garnered the information he provided from a Traveller and recorded her response to the question of origins as, “They are supposed to be the tinsmiths belonging to different Irish tribes before their dissolution when tribes went the tinsmiths took to nomadic life.”¹⁰⁸ During the period referred to in this quote, the Irish tribes would have already been semi-nomadic and so ‘taking to

¹⁰⁵ NFC MS 1255 :285-286.

¹⁰⁶ Christine Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland*. Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2004) 102.

¹⁰⁷ NFC MS 1255 : 12, Eibhlín Bean Uí Loingsigh, County Kerry, 1952.

¹⁰⁸ NFC MS 1255 :153-154.

a nomadic life' was not as much of a break from society (not a sign of failure) as it would be viewed today.¹⁰⁹ Some scholars would argue that this appropriation of Irish history by a Traveller was merely an attempt to convince her settled interviewer that the Travellers shared, accurately or not, a common history with Ireland's settled population.¹¹⁰

It is significant that what the Travellers posit as their own history is alternatively deemed inaccurate, deceptive or defeatist by historians and anthropologists alike. The fact that the Commission on Itinerancy would use this notion of a previously-settled past for the Travellers to justify their assimilation was unfortunate and would prove devastating to the Traveller community in the second half of the twentieth century.¹¹¹ This was one action taken on the part of a government organization, however; the decisions of the Commission, regardless of how grounded in these origin stories they were, should not completely devalue the legitimacy of these versions of Traveller history. While the metal-worker history placed the Travellers in a social bracket closer to the one they occupied by the mid-twentieth century, this explanation was also more malleable than the idea of their descent from kings as the trade could simply be changed to suit different travelling groups. If they were not metal workers from the old days they could have been descendents of the old bards or even nomadic shaman.¹¹² No matter what the occupation the overall representation found in the Questionnaire responses was that the Travellers had long been

¹⁰⁹ Helleiner 31-32.

¹¹⁰ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 41.

¹¹¹ Freyne Corbett, "Life on the Margins: Representations of Irish Vagrancy in Early Modern England and Ireland," *Travellers and Showpeople: Recovering Migrant History*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 29.

¹¹² NFC MS1255 – MS 1256 – There were all kinds of origin theories posited for the Travellers in the Questionnaire responses, far too many to mention here. Those who could not speak to their origins, but who chose to answer the question anyway, often alternatively referred to the Travellers having visited their area for as long as they could remember or, in some cases, "always." NFC MS 1255:178, David Cantwell, County Limerick, 1952.

a useful part of Irish society, whether they started out as settled people or had been roving the countryside since time immemorial.¹¹³

One of the most intriguing descriptions of the Travellers' history (or origins as the Questionnaire termed it) that came out of the Tinkers Questionnaire is worth writing out in full:

The general oppinion [sic] as to the Origin of the Tinkers, expressed by people from all parts of Kerry is: That they Represent the Descendents of the Tribes or Clans of Ireland, from Pre-Christian & Early Christian Times as instanced by the fact that they are Nomadic to a certain extent – so did life go with the Early Settlers who roved along the coastlines from one end of the Country to the Other (the centre being wooded & impregnable).¹¹⁴

While the genesis of this opinion was obviously regionally based, it demonstrated that at least some within the population saw Travellers' history as long being intertwined with that of the country's settled people. In fact, this response made it clear that the modern 'settled' portion of the Irish population was once nomadic as well and therefore both communities seemed to have come from the same stock. This was a new twist on the common belief that the Travellers were once a settled people who were forced off their lands and into a nomadic existence, as detailed above. Regardless of the position, however, many of the settled Irish contacted for this Questionnaire perhaps understood the Travellers to be naturally 'Irish' and therefore not the 'Other' at all.¹¹⁵ Although the communities were distinct from one another, their common history

¹¹³ The word 'immemorial' may seem extreme but it comes directly from one of the Questionnaire responses: "There are no local traditions how the tinkers originated but it has often struck me that they are some of them at least the descendants of chieftans dispossessed in the plantations. A few names suggest this O'Rourkes, McGinleys, Gallaghers, Boyels etc...They have been visiting these districts from time immemorial." NFC MS 1256:167, Seán Ó Beirn, County Donegal, 1952.

¹¹⁴ NFC MS 1255 :31, Séamus Mac Domhnaill, County Kerry, 1952.

¹¹⁵ Another attribute often emphasized in the Questionnaire responses that distinguished the Travellers as descendent from Irish stock was that their names were traditionally Irish. One respondent pointed to their historic Irish names, connected to famous Irish families and specified that within her area, "They claimed to be descended from the royal McCartheys of Munster, and to see their splendid figures and handsome features one could believe this. Could we not believe it also from our sad history, when those nobles were outlawed and crushed?" NFC MS 1255:276, Máire Bean Uí Riain, County Tipperary, 1952 . Not only does this respondent emphasize the Travellers'

showed that they were two people cut from the same cloth, and so defining one's national community in opposition to the Travellers would be like defining the nation against its own people – illogical and ineffective.

3.7 Contested Terrain: The Usefulness of Travellers

It is in the descriptions of their trades that one discovers the beginnings of a shift in the opinion some settled Irish had of the Travellers and yet only one of the respondents demanded outright that something be done about the community as a whole.¹¹⁶ When describing the tinsmith's trade, which nine out of 10 of the respondents did in response to the "Crafts and Means of Livelihood" section, at least a third of the respondents also mentioned its declining usefulness.¹¹⁷ They did not, however, do so in such a way that represented the Travellers as no longer useful to society as a whole, but merely suggested that their traditional craft is not as in demand as it once was before Ireland's industrialization. One respondent set the ideal period for their craft in the pre-independence years by writing, "About 50 years ago farmers [and] their wives would have a lot of jobs awaiting the coming round of a tinker..."¹¹⁸ supporting the overall belief that their area of expertise was once valued but was no longer needed by society at large. Others, however, emphasized the ability of Travellers to turn their hand to any task that

likely connection to the larger Irish society but she also argues that the Traveller community suffered just as the settled community did – they shared a long and difficult history.

¹¹⁶ This suggestion is found in the same response quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The respondent in question referred more to the sheer numbers of Travellers in the area as the problem than any individual members of the community or specific incidents. At least part of her reasoning for viewing the Travellers as a problem was revealed near the end of her response when she wrote, "It is sad to see young boys and girls leading such idle lives [sic] and as they are all regarded as out to "do" everyone, there is very little welcome for them." One could guess that her career in teaching may have influenced this pessimistic view of the future of Traveller youth at the time but regardless of her vocation, her concern was that the Traveller community provided no opportunity for social or economic mobility. She did not see their society functioning as efficiently as that of the settled Irish. NFC MS 1255:88.

¹¹⁷ NFC MS 1255 – MS 1256.

¹¹⁸ NFC MS 1255:135, Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe, County Cork, 1952.

needed doing in the locations in which they stopped. One particularly positive respondent wrote, “It is amazing what they can do in a few minutes on the side of the road with a sheet of tin and a hammer – just that...A tinker will do for a few shillings and a cup of tea what a plumber would charge a pound for...”¹¹⁹ Though there may not have been any tin pails for the Travellers to fix upon their visit to an area, as there might have at one time been numerous such jobs to be done, the Travellers were often able to put their considerable skills to whatever job was offered to them. Even when the tinsmith’s skills were high in demand, “The tin-trade was but one aspect of the Traveller economy; making a living on the roads depended on the ability to turn a hand to anything.”¹²⁰ The adaptability of the Traveller community was therefore one of its defining characteristics, as was the nomadic lifestyle. As noted above, the resourcefulness and adaptability of the Traveller community has also been pointed out in studies on Travellers by scholars such as Judith Okely, as an indication of their ability to ride the various waves of change in Ireland through the centuries.¹²¹ In describing the decline of the tinsmith’s trade the Questionnaire respondents were arguably making a statement about the larger changes in mid-twentieth century Irish society, especially as they pertained to industry and the economy, as opposed to directly attacking the usefulness of the Travellers to society.¹²² While one respondent did refer to them as ‘useless parasites’ the majority focused on the skills the Travellers possessed

¹¹⁹ NFC MS 1255:245-246, Pádraig Mac Conmara, County Clare, 1952.

¹²⁰ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 21.

¹²¹ Okely 56.

¹²² The changes in society were affecting the settled Irish just as much, if not more, than the Travellers. As Ireland industrialized and farming practices rapidly changed many farmers found supporting themselves close to impossible and so moved to the larger city centers in order to find work or, indeed, left the country entirely. The trials of the Travelling community were just another symptom of Ireland’s rapid modernization. These changes were especially visible with the introduction of the First Program for Economic Expansion (implemented in 1958). Helleiner 76.

and, in addition to this, their ability to turn a hand to almost anything, thus remaining a useful, if distinct, part of Irish society.¹²³

Despite some very negative and sometimes even damning representations of Traveller culture, none of the Questionnaire respondents described the Travellers as essentially non-Irish. Although some may have separated themselves from these nomadic people citing their lack of civility, their disregard of the law and even their inability to remain in one place, the respondents were all in agreement that the Travellers were a part of Irish society, if a contested one. Several of the respondents made direct correlations between the two communities, with one in particular writing, “I have known tinkers all my life [and] as far as I could see their behaviour is much like that of any other section of the community. Their personal and social manners are perfection when they regard you as a friend.”¹²⁴ It should be noted that this respondent referred to only one Traveller community. While the Travellers were distinct they made up just a single section of the larger complex community that was Irish society. This statement also emphasized the importance of personal relationships as a way to understand the Travellers better as individuals; they were more likely to interact positively with settled Irish if they trusted them, a point that had been noted as early as the 1930s by IFC folklorists. In this way, the Travellers were quite similar to many rural Irish communities in that their trust needed to be earned, and indeed friendships need to be formed with them, before they would open themselves up to those outside their group.¹²⁵ This simple statement from one of the Questionnaire responses, therefore, represented the Travellers as not only part of the larger Irish community but also as sharing some of the traits understood to make up the Irish national identity.

¹²³ The ‘useless parasites’ reference can be found in NFC MS 1255:88.

¹²⁴ NFC MS 1255:311.

¹²⁵ Briody 235.

While this may not seem significant to some as discrimination is just as possible against nationals as against immigrants, it did leave a small window of opportunity for the Travellers to be designated, ultimately, as a contested outsider as opposed to an outright ‘Other.’ One of the most significant (and lengthy) discussions of how the Travellers were essentially not all that different from the rest of the Irish population was submitted by a respondent of County Limerick. His overall response represented a positive relationship between the two communities and he even noted that he had learned a few words of their language and surprised a few young Travellers on the road when he spoke to them in their cant.¹²⁶ His response when asked about their behaviour was long, but worth writing out in full as it was indicative of a view of the Travellers as something apart from the mythical ‘Other’:

Local people eschew the company of the Travelling folk... they have no ‘respectability.’ There may be other reasons also, and there are, the chief being that they are ‘poor’ and that the Irishman who has been firmly rooted in or to the soil for generations is a very conservative character indeed and looks, with something akin to shock, upon anybody whose livelihood has no permanence and who is in fact leading a hand to mouth existence and who therefore is to be avoided... But these disfigurements [drinking, begging, fighting, etc] are [human enough, and] superficial in the sense that similar faiblesses in the normal citizens exist, but are driven undercover because of the exigencies of well-ordered society, to thrive in the underground chambers of organized pretence the Tinker and the Traveller are a while millennium nearer to nature than the average, educated ordinary individual and hence the violent ebullition of nomad passion as compared with the luke-warm [sic] bubbling of Mr. Average Citizen’s controlled anger.¹²⁷

In a way, this respondent was criticising what the IFC would find in other responses to their Questionnaire. While some respondents may have picked out negative aspects of the Travellers’ behaviour, such as drinking and fighting, and targeted these tendencies as separating them from the ‘normal’ Irish, this respondent astutely pointed out that both groups displayed these

¹²⁶ NFC MS 1255:178.

¹²⁷ NFC MS 1255:172-173.

behavioural patterns. It was arguably, therefore, the overt regulation of Irish society overall which made such human ‘faiblesses’ less notable among settled communities, but they certainly still existed.¹²⁸ The respondent also called upon the argument discussed earlier in this thesis that the Travellers were representative of what was viewed as a less complex period in Irish history and therefore displayed their emotions openly as opposed to bottling them up as was the ‘norm’ in modern Irish society. His argument was that the Travellers, therefore, were not so different at all from the settled Irish – at least not enough to be deemed the ‘Other’ against whom to form the Irish identity.

3.8 Moving Towards Assimilation

Despite the insistence of many settled Irish that the Travellers belonged within Irish society, once the tensions between the Travelling and Settled populations began to escalate, some settled Irish weighed in on what should be done with these people in the future. Whether this took the form of specific complaints, hopeful descriptions of change, or outright advice, the Tinker’s Questionnaire provided the government with at least some support for its growing interest in assimilation.¹²⁹ As one respondent put it in his letter to the IFC:

As you say, they have become a social problem. Many Co. Councils have made bye-laws forbidding them to camp on main roads but this does not affect them at all for in practically all places here their camps are on bye-roads.¹³⁰

Not only did he identify them at the very beginning as being a social problem but he suggested that this definition was provided by the IFC itself and he was merely agreeing, which begs the

¹²⁸ *Ibid* 172.

¹²⁹ The Commission, it seems, focused on certain aspects of the Traveller community as problematic and therefore in need of fixing as opposed to symptoms of the inattentiveness of the Irish government over the first 40 years of its existence. Corbett 28.

¹³⁰ IFC 1255: 319, Eamonn Delaney, County Tipperary, 1952.

question of what the IFC had actually told their collectors about the future of the Travellers as a part of Irish society. The respondent was under the impression that the local authorities were not doing enough to stop the ‘nuisance’ that was the Travelling population at this point, a sentiment which was apparently shared by others. It would eventually take the collective agreement of several county councils to bring this matter to the notice of national politicians, leading to the creation of the Commission on Itinerancy in 1960.¹³¹ Even the Commission on Itinerancy, however, did not ultimately designate the Travellers as the ‘Other’ in Irish society. Instead of shoring up Irish identity in comparison to that of these ‘perennial outsiders,’ the government decided to try to pull them into the fold – to make them inextricably part of the nation. This would lead towards the assimilation policies of the 1960s and beyond and, by extension, to further tension between the two groups; but through all of this the only clear designation of the Travellers as ‘othered’ is found in the historiography. The politics of the situation in Ireland were much more complex as the representations of Travellers in these Questionnaire responses suggest. This complexity left the Travellers room to continue to interweave their community’s distinct identity with that of the larger Irish population despite the government’s attempts to assimilate them fully into settled Ireland.

¹³¹ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 100.

Conclusion: Uncharacteristic Hostility?

Up until now, much of the historiography has argued that the Irish Travellers have consistently held the position of ‘Other’ in Irish society for as long as their community has been noted by Irish nationalists.¹ There is much evidence to support this hypothesis as the two communities, of the Travellers and settled Irish, have had a complex relationship for centuries. Although, as Aoife Bhreatnach argues, this relationship was often a symbiotic one, there has always been the contention that the Travellers were not like the settled Irish; they were a nomadic community with their own protected family units, traditions and culture.² To some, they represented an earlier form of Irish identity, but to others they were a group completely separate from the majority Irish community. The tension the differences between the two communities created was exacerbated throughout the mid-twentieth century (especially after the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922) and would continue to increase until the government created the Commission on Itinerancy in 1960 to discuss solutions for what they saw as a national ‘problem’.³ It is easy, therefore, to understand why the idea of the Travellers as ‘Other’ is so prevalent in the historiography.

That being said, considering Ireland’s complex relationship with England and, by extension, the intricacies of creating an Irish national identity, this designation seems simplistic at best and naive at worst. Viewing the Travellers as a constantly ‘othered’ community within Ireland unnecessarily naturalises their exclusion from the rest of the Irish population. This naturalisation of their ‘otherness’ makes it appear that the exclusion of the Travellers as a distinct

¹ Micheál Ó hAodha, *‘Insubordinate Irish’ Travellers in the Text* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) x.

² Aoife Bhreatnach, “Fair Days and Doorsteps,” *Portraying Irish Travellers: Histories and Representations*, ed. Ciara Bhreatnach and Aoife Bhreatnach (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006) 16.

³ Aoife Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and the State, 1922-70* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006) 100.

community from the Irish national identity was inevitable as opposed to the result of policies put in place by the Irish government in the second half of the twentieth century. Although the Irish Travellers were certainly viewed as their own distinct group by Irish citizens, folklorists and politicians alike, it did not necessarily follow that the Travellers were always seen as an ostracized ‘Other’ outside of the national identity.⁴ Though they lived a nomadic lifestyle, they not only shared a common history with the settled population of Ireland but also maintained a steady relationship by turning their hand to any work required by their settled neighbours.⁵ Individual Travellers were also well-known as talented storytellers, and therefore held a place within the Irish community as keepers of the nation’s ancient folklore.⁶ Although some Irish nationalists would claim a homogeneous national identity for Ireland, especially from when the Irish Free State was created and on, this version of Ireland simply did not exist.⁷ The Travellers were variously included in this identity, “as is,” as contested outsiders rather than uncontested ‘Others,’ and people who were in fact included within Ireland’s more accurately described heterogeneous national identity in the mid-twentieth century.

The previous chapters have shown the inclusion of the Irish Travellers within the construction of an Irish national identity to be largely based on two aspects: folklore and history. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century, Irish nationalists from the various camps (both Catholic and Protestant) included the Travellers in their collection of what they deemed to be evidence of pre-colonial ‘Irishness’ that viewed the Travellers as conduits of this knowledge.⁸ In the 1930s,

⁴ This is particularly visible in chapter one’s discussion of the Irish Folklore Commission and its collectors.

⁵ Judith Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 64.

⁶ Artelia Court, *Puck of the Droms: The Lives and Literature of the Irish Tinkers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) xiii.

⁷ Ó hAodha ix.

⁸ Jane Helleiner, *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 30.

folklorists working for the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) would pick up this thread by interviewing Travellers as sources of the rapidly-disappearing Irish folklore. Pádraig Mac Gréine was possibly the most prolific collector of Traveller folklore during this period, and would in fact continue to support the place of Travellers in the larger Irish community throughout the twentieth century.⁹ Beginning in the early 1930s, Mac Gréine made contact with several Traveller families, especially the Power family. As he wrote in his first Traveller-based article in *Béaloideas*:

I found them always ready to tell stories, and to furnish me with the names of other storytellers, but they were not inclined, in the beginning, to talk about themselves, or to speak their secret language or “cant.” When they found that I was not an emissary of the law they had little hesitation in talking freely to me.¹⁰

Mac Gréine’s efforts to establish such trust between himself and the Powers not only furnished him with unique sources of folklore, as well as vast amounts of information on the Traveller community, but also served to highlight the potential for a positive relationship between the two communities. Significantly, throughout his years with the IFC, Mac Gréine collected folklore from both Travellers and settled Irish alike; all of which was bound in manuscript volumes for the IFC’s archives.¹¹ At no point was the information from the Travellers separated from that of the settled Irish, which meant that the Travellers were included “as is” within the national archive of Irish folklore. Both Mac Gréine’s collection efforts, and the fact that they were later placed within the larger archives, arguably made a place for the Travellers in this significant endeavour on the part of folklorists and politicians alike to create an Irish national identity.

In the second half of the twentieth century, amateur folklorist Sean Mac Grath also strove to collect folklore from the Irish Travellers. Although he too argued that the Travellers belonged

⁹ Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, “In Memoriam: Pádraig Mac Gréine: 1900-2007,” *Béaloideas* 75 (2007): 289.

¹⁰ Pádraig Mac Gréine, “Irish Tinkers or “Travellers,”” *Béaloideas* 3.2 (Dec. 1931): 170.

¹¹ Ní Fhloinn 289.

to the Irish national community, in his work one could see the beginnings of a shift from the perspective of accepting the Travellers as a distinct community to one which might allow them a place in Ireland, with certain stipulations. In the IFC sources used for this thesis, Mac Grath was very positive about the Travellers and their community as a whole and described them as a familiar sight in Ireland, “Their everyday methods are known to us all, so are their inner secrets of the band, who are Irish by birth and tradition but who are of a class in themselves.”¹² Even as late as the 1950s, folklorists such as Mac Grath argued that the Travellers constituted a distinct community within Ireland, although one that was not ‘othered’ from the national identity.

Unlike Mac Gréine, however, Mac Grath made an argument similar to the early Gypsy Lore Society when he spoke about the principal families who were “really Travellers.”¹³ Although only one line to this effect can be found in the IFC’s manuscript containing Mac Grath’s collection, Ó hAodha argues that this opinion made up a large part of Mac Grath’s argument about the place of the Travellers in the nation. Mac Grath seemed to be stating that only certain Travellers were worth the attention of Ireland’s settled community as only a few of them were ‘genuine’ Travellers and, “therefore heirs to an ‘older Ireland.’”¹⁴ This was a common position taken by settled people throughout Europe when studying the nomadic cultures in their midst: certain ‘Gypsies’ were authentic while others were imposters who took to the roads out of laziness or uselessness.¹⁵ Although Mac Grath may not have been asserting this overtly in his work for the IFC, Ó hAodha points out that he broadcasted these opinions on Raidió Éireann, therefore widely publicising this shift from seeing the Traveller community as a part of Ireland to

¹² NFC MS1391:40, Kilrush, County Clare, Collected by: Seán Mac Grath.

¹³ NFC MS1391:22.

¹⁴ Ó hAodha 29.

¹⁵ Okely 13.

accepting only certain representatives as true members of this community who shared in a part of the Irish national identity.¹⁶ Significantly, despite this categorization of the Travellers, Mac Grath did not argue that the Travellers were Ireland's 'Other'. Instead he argued that they represented a more traditional Irish national identity that was to be treasured, not assimilated.¹⁷

Much of the historiography has argued that the IFC's collection of Irish Traveller Folklore contributed to the growing hostility between the two communities in the mid-twentieth century. Anthropologist Jane Helleiner viewed both Mac Gréine's work and the distribution of the Tinker's Questionnaire as hindering efforts to include the Travellers within the national identity. She wrote, "Such nostalgic harnessing of Travellers as symbols of a 'national' tradition on the wane, however, made them the subject of a form of salvage scholarship, and offered little space in a self-consciously modernizing nation."¹⁸ Although the collection of Traveller folklore was a form of this 'salvage scholarship,' the categorization of the Travellers as the sole victims of this type of collection is deceiving. The IFC overall, and both Pádraig Mac Gréine and Sean Mac Grath individually, collected information from Irish Travellers and settled people alike, with the bulk of the collection retrieved from the settled population. Both communities were tapped in the process of this salvaging of information – it was in the IFC's mandate that, "...the folklore of Ireland must be saved in its true and unadulterated form through engaging the assistance of the people of Ireland, for the people of Ireland and for the world."¹⁹ The IFC was clear from the outset, therefore, that its mission was to save Ireland's folklore; its president, Seamus Ó Duilearga contended as early as 1927 that this folklore was disappearing rapidly and thus

¹⁶ Ó hAodha 28.

¹⁷ NFC MS1391:40

¹⁸ Helleiner 48.

¹⁹ Bo Almqvist, "The Irish Folklore Commission: Achievement and Legacy," *Béalóideas* 45/46 (1977-1979): 8.

collection needed to begin immediately.²⁰ All of the IFC's work was part of a larger salvaging effort, not only focussed on Traveller folklore. Furthermore, the IFC was funded by the Irish government during its 35 years of existence as a tool for the development of an Irish national identity.²¹ Irish President Éamon de Valera consistently referred to folklore in his speeches, especially in the form of images of peasantry and tradition, and it was his government that would initially fund the IFC. Men like De Valera and Ó Duilearga understood the importance of folklore to their new nation. Indeed, "Folklore has often been used to advance nationalist claims of ethnic communities, and in the newly independent Ireland folklore was recognized as a cultural resource for national identity."²² As the IFC was overtly a part of the construction of the national identity in Ireland from its creation in 1935 (following the dissolution of the Irish Folklore Institute established in 1930), the collection of Traveller and settled folklore alike was given more than a 'little space' in Ireland as a modernizing nation.

With the IFC's release of the Tinker's Questionnaire in 1952, however, the problem of 'salvage scholarship' became more obvious. In the introductory letter to the Questionnaire, which received just fewer than 150 responses, Seámus Ó Duilearga described the Travellers as a rapidly disappearing community from which information needed to be collected "before it's too late to do so."²³ Despite the urgency of the IFC's request, however, many of the respondents' replies asserted that the Travellers had long been regular visitors to their various communities and seemed likely to continue to be so. The majority of the respondents, all settled Irish, also had

²⁰ Micheal Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, ideology, methodology* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2007) 108.

²¹ Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007) 36.

²² *Ibid* 37.

²³ NFC 1255:3, "Irish Folklore Commission Tinkers: "Travellers," Seámus Ó Duilearga, February 1952.

overall positive opinions of the Travellers as a community, despite the fact that the IFC provided questions that elicited more negative answers. Ó hAodha argues that the Questionnaire responses overall demonstrated:

the significance of Travellers as a morally suspect or degenerate ‘Other’, a group whose socially exclusive mode of life was a cover for suspicious behaviour and crime and, associated with this, the representation of Travellers as some type of countercultural group.²⁴

The Travellers, according to Ó hAodha, were not only ‘othered’ by Irish society but were also intrinsically countercultural, according to the Questionnaire responses he used, and therefore posed a threat to the existence of the larger Irish community. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, however, only a small number of the responses used this kind of language when describing the Travellers, and it is hard to know how much the individuals who did so were influenced by the way in which the questions themselves were phrased.²⁵ The vast majority of the responses were quite positive in their descriptions of the Traveller community and often the respondents referred to their personal and long-standing relationships with local groups. Most significantly, only a handful of respondents suggested that the Traveller community may have originated from outside of Ireland.²⁶ The Questionnaire respondents overwhelmingly represented the Travellers as Irish and though these Travellers remained a distinct community they still made up a significant part of Irish society as a whole. Despite the IFC’s categorization of the Travellers as a disappearing community, the majority of the respondents did not seem to share this essentialist view; the Travellers were and would continue to be a part of the Irish national identity. The Questionnaire respondents did, however, admit that tensions were growing between the two

²⁴ Ó hAodha 62.

²⁵ See the Commission’s sub-questions for the Questionnaire – NFC MS 1255:6-7.

²⁶ Three in total – NFC MS 1255:233; NFC MS 1255:439 ; NFC MS 1256:285.

communities, in a way foreshadowing the changes to come in the rapidly-modernizing post-war Ireland.

Those who did write negatively of the Travellers in the Questionnaire predominantly emphasized tensions over matters such as trespassing and begging which both became more contentious as the Irish government strove to modernize the country socially, politically and economically in the post-war period.²⁷ Although begging had long made up a part of Traveller-settled interactions, Ó hAodha argues that the situation, “was exacerbated by the fact that for many settled people it might be one of the primary contexts in which they had communication with the Travellers.”²⁸ As traditional means of making a living were becoming increasingly less profitable, the portion of Traveller income derived from overt begging was apparently rising. That being said, even up until the 1970s scholars such as anthropologists George and Sharon Gmelch were taking note of the resourcefulness and adaptability of the Traveller community, their ability to turn their hand to whatever job needed to be done, which suggested that the situation was more complex than just settled Irish tiring of the begging practices of Travellers;²⁹ the Travellers’ entire way of life was quickly being defined as ‘out-of-step’ by the Irish government which was attempting to modernize the country in all respects. As Judith Okely wrote, “Nomads are seen sentimentally or negatively as ‘hangovers’ from some hypothetical linear development in which sedentary living is considered to be the single superior future.”³⁰ It was during this period of rapid modernization therefore that the Travellers were steadily ‘othered’ from the majority of Irish society based on their nomadic lifestyle more than any other

²⁷ Ó hAodha 72.

²⁸ *Ibid* 70.

²⁹ George and Susan Gmelch, “The Emergence of an Ethnic Group: The Irish Tinkers,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 49.4 (Oct. 1976): 235.

³⁰ Okely 24.

quality. Significantly this ‘othering’ would be instigated not by the general Irish population but rather by the Irish government itself.

The growth of nationalism, it has been argued, is always accompanied by the designation of a nation’s ‘Others,’ those who do not belong.³¹ After the Republic of Ireland was created, the Irish government slowly designated certain communities within Ireland as ‘Others’ who were holding the nation back from modernization. Bryan Fanning has argued that the targeted groups included Jews, Protestants and immigrants along with the Travellers.³² The issue with including the Travellers in this early ‘othering’ process is tied to the idea of origins – whereas the other groups could feasibly be argued to have arrived in Ireland from elsewhere, the Travellers were overwhelmingly believed to have ‘originated’ in Ireland, thus distinct them from these other communities. It is perhaps largely for this reason, that is the connection of Travellers to the larger Irish history, that it took the Irish government until the 1960s to pay any sort of specific attention to the Travellers.³³ This thesis has argued that the Traveller community was not designated as ‘Other’ in Irish society in the mid-twentieth century, but rather considered a contested outsider who was both variously a part of and separate from the Irish national identity. In 1960, however, this would change with the government’s creation of the Commission on Itinerancy. Kalwant Bhopal and Martin Myers referred to the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in their discussion of the treatment of the ‘Other’ in nationalism which is worth quoting in full:

Bauman argues that the process of nation-building can work in either an assimilatory or an exclusionary manner. The assimilatory method is loaded with imagery of being

³¹ E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1987) 144.

³² Bryan Fanning, *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 3.

³³ Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 68.

consumed by the host nation, the difference between cultures being eaten away and destroyed... The alternative is to be excluded, an option which, in Bauman's imagery, is again loaded with a degree of violence. It is suggestive of being cast out and ghettoised, but it also suggests that the minority group have a certain strength in the face of a hostile set of circumstances which allows them to maintain an identity and not become subsumed within an assimilatory process. Under such circumstances, notions of community may actually become stronger and more resilient as groups are forced to make a choice between defending what they value or surrendering everything.³⁴

Throughout the mid-twentieth century the Irish government and its agents turned neither to the assimilatory process nor the exclusionary method when dealing with the Travellers as a community. As shown above, through the collection of folklore especially, the Travellers were included within a broad definition of what it meant to be Irish, though they retained their distinct identity as a community. In 1960, however, despite evidence of an amicable relationship between the two communities, the Irish government chose the assimilatory method as part of their modernization of the Irish nation. They would support this method through the creation of the Commission on Itinerancy, whose report (released in 1963) would influence their policies for much of the second half of the twentieth century.³⁵

The Commission on Itinerancy was created by the government ostensibly to analyze the situation of itinerancy in Ireland at the time, and to find solutions to the problems its board found in their examination. Most of the historiography, however, argues that the Commission on Itinerancy had a pre-determined agenda: rather than look at Irish itinerancy in general (a pejorative term in itself according to Traveller advocates), the Commission's purpose was to figure out how to settle the Travellers and therefore find some sort of 'final solution' to the

³⁴ Kalwant Bhopal and Martin Myers, *Insiders and Outsiders: Gypsies and Identity* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2008) 110.

³⁵ Eleanor Carey, "Public Policy and Irish Travellers: Exclusionary Policies and Approaches," *Migrants and Cultural Memory: The Representation of Difference*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) 86.

‘itinerant problem.’³⁶ Though their work concerned the welfare of Travellers in Ireland, the Commission’s board did not include a single Traveller nor did the Commission consult the Traveller community in the course of their research. Traveller Martin Collins has posited three possible reasons for this oversight: the government may have believed the Travellers were not interested in what they had to say about them; they may have assumed the Travellers would not care about their conclusions; or the government may have believed that the Travellers lacked the ability to take part in the process of drafting a report. Collins wrote, “The people on the commission were well intentioned and set out to do the right thing to alleviate the hardship being experienced by Travellers as they saw it. However, ultimately their analysis was misguided, offensive and damaging.”³⁷ In any case, without the input of the community they were studying, in 1963 the Commission would publish its Report – the first explicit government policy response to the Travellers.³⁸ In it, the Commission on Itinerancy recommended a policy of assimilation through which the Travellers would be settled and therefore their community would ideally disappear into the larger Irish society. The Irish government implemented the Commission’s recommended policies the next year and this move would prove to have far-reaching consequences even to today.³⁹

³⁶ Freyne Corbett, “Life on the Margins: Representations of Irish Vagrancy in Early Modern England and Ireland,” *Travellers and Showpeople: Recovering Migrant History*, ed. Micheál Ó hAodha (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) 18. The discussion of the Commission on Itinerancy about the ‘final solution’ of the Traveller problem was disturbingly reminiscent of discussion of the Jewish problems by the Nazis during World War Two (as discussed in the previous chapter). While comparisons to the Nazis does not further the current discussion, it is perhaps surprising to see the intolerance shown towards a certain sect of Irish society coming on the heels of such a devastating conflict experienced elsewhere and centered on such policies. Jane Helleiner, *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 58-59.

³⁷ Martin Collins, “Travellers as an Ethnic Group,” *Travellers and the Settled Community: A Shared Future*, ed. John Henghan, Mary (Warde) Moriarty, Micheál Ó hAodha (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2012) 4.

³⁸ *Ibid* 3.

³⁹ Ó hAodha 30-31.

The intended readers of the Commission's report, other than members of the Irish government, were the clergy and those involved in volunteer organizations. According to Jane Helleiner, "These readers were urged to act as both implementers of the Report's recommendations and educators of the wider non-Travelling public."⁴⁰ The Travellers did not even constitute part of the targeted group of readers for the Report – they were expected to cooperate fully and passively in their assimilation into larger Irish society, as the government believed they were doing them a service by 'rescuing' them from their nomadic existence.⁴¹ The settlement of the Travellers was therefore considered to be the responsibility of Ireland's settled population, as a part of their 'national duty' as well as a way to alleviate the tensions in the relationship between the two communities. In the words of the Report:

Hostility to a class or group as now exists in relation to the itinerants is uncharacteristic of our people and its existence is indicative of the extremity to which the settled community or a large portion of it feels it has been driven. The normal kindly feelings of the people... Will once again predominate when the immediate pressure of the itinerants' wrongdoings has been relieved or, at least, substantially reduced.⁴²

Not only was the Commission supporting the idea of an Irish society that was never guilty of discrimination or racism towards its own, but it was also suggesting that any hostility that existed was the fault of the Travellers' community as opposed to indicative of a problem in the circumstances surrounding the relationship. As Freyne Corbett has suggested, the Commission's error was not in its diagnosis but rather in its proposed solutions. By the 1960s in Ireland there was a marked rise in the tension between Travellers and the settled community but the root cause

⁴⁰ Helleiner 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid* 79.

⁴² Report of the Commission on Itinerancy qtd. in Bhreatnach, *Becoming Conspicuous*, 118.

of this tension was the poverty of the Travellers, not their nomadism or their identity as a community.⁴³

By suggesting that the tensions in the relationship could only be alleviated by assimilating the Travellers into larger Irish society, the Commission appeared to be complicating matters further. As seen in the quote that began this thesis, the gradual forced assimilation of Travellers only led to more conflict between the two communities (often in the form of evictions) and, arguably, created new contentions that did not exist previously.⁴⁴ Though the Commission's Report was apparently progressive for the time period, it led to nearly irreparable damage in the relationship between the Travellers and the majority community of Irish society – the ramifications of which are still noticeable in Irish society today. Despite the negative implications of the Commission's report, the government would later take positive steps towards recognition of the Travellers as a distinct community within Ireland. Following various other reports from the 1970s onwards, as well as the creation of several Traveller rights groups, the Report by the Task Force on the Travelling Community of 1995 would be the first to suggest a coordinated approach on both the national and local level when it came to improving the living conditions of the Travellers in Ireland. This Report looked at such wide-ranging issues as Traveller culture, economy, women and Travellers with disabilities, as well as the lack of equality in legislation, making it the most in-depth Report on Irish Travellers up to that point.⁴⁵ Since then, Traveller advocates have continued to argue for the place of Travellers in the nation

⁴³ Corbett 28.

⁴⁴ Sean Ó Riain, *Solidarity with Travellers* (Dublin: Colour Books Ltd., 2000) 4.

⁴⁵ Carey 89.

and, most significantly, for the importance of their right to choose to either remain settled or to return to their previous nomadic lifestyles.⁴⁶

In recent years, the ethnicity of the Travellers has become a contentious issue, but regardless of the categorization, their identity as a distinct community does not assume their complete removal from the larger Irish one. As Traveller Martin Collins has written:

Recognizing Traveller ethnicity is not to be interpreted as some have sought to do, that we are less Irish. There is no conflict between nationality and ethnicity, they both can and should mutually co-exist. I am very proud of my Irishness but I'm equally proud of my Traveller identity.⁴⁷

This statement by a modern Traveller not only suggests that they can be considered a distinct group within Irish society but that, whether in the form of language, ethnicity or any other attribute, this distinctiveness does not necessarily have to place a community at odds with the rest of Irish society. Collins' statement also supports Bauman's argument about a community's reaction to exclusion from the nation in which it finds itself – the Travellers have been faced with the decision to either defend what they value or to surrender everything.⁴⁸ As a Traveller himself, however, Collins suggests a third option – existing as both a distinct community and as part of the larger national identity.

There is more work to be completed on this topic. For example, although some historians have included an analysis of gender in their work on Travellers, they have yet to look at the role ideas about gender, both within Traveller culture and by the larger settled community, played in deciding the place of Traveller men and women within the Irish national identity.⁴⁹ There have

⁴⁶ *Ibid* 88.

⁴⁷ Collins 10.

⁴⁸ Bhopal and Myers 110.

⁴⁹ Helleiner does discuss this in *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (2000) starting on p. 46.

also been studies on the effects mandatory education policies had on the Traveller community in the second half of the twentieth century but very little research has been undertaken on childhood in Traveller communities pre-World War Two.⁵⁰ While a consideration of both gender and childhood as constructions would have added to this analysis, these were not the focus of this thesis. Even without these elements, however, this thesis concludes that Irish Travellers were not constructed as ‘Other’ in the early years of Irish independence and nor are they today. The Travellers have overall successfully navigated the Irish government’s shift from acceptance to assimilation of their community; they have emerged in their own right as a complex community both belonging to, and separate from, the Irish national identity.

⁵⁰ Bhreatnach discusses the Irish education system and its effect on the Traveller community in *Becoming Conspicuous* (2006) p. 80. This is also discussed in Eleanor Carey’s “Public Policy and Irish Travellers,” cited above.

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