



Informants of the Commission



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán
Department of Tourism, Culture,
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media



Informants of the Irish Folklore Commission

It was the intention of the Irish Folklore Commission that photographs of informants be taken so that their image would be captured alongside the written and recorded material collected from them. There are approximately 4,000 photographs of informants from all around the country and abroad now held in the archives of the National Folklore Collection, UCD. Many are held as negatives and others as prints, and a selection of these prints have now been made available on [Dúchas.ie](http://Duchas.ie). The photographs were taken by staff and friends of the Commission, though in some cases they were donated to the Commission over the years. The photographs portray individuals young and old who generously gave their time to the collectors of the Commission. A few well-known people are featured in the collection, including a new photograph of Seán Ó Briain from Loch Conaortha, Co. Galway, King of Storytellers, and Reidar Chistiansen, the Norwegian scholar who had a formative influence on Séamus Ó Duilearga.

Many of the full-time collectors began collecting material in their own local areas, where they had intimate knowledge of the community, the dialect and the landscape. Not every collector did so, however, and many of the collectors were instructed to collect material in new locations at some point during their career. It was essential, therefore, to create relationships with the local people in new areas. They would speak to the parish priest or the local schoolmaster in order to seek out proficient storytellers and singers in the locality. Sometimes, when training a new collector, Seán Ó Súilleabháin (Archivist of the Commission) and Séamus Ó Duilearga (Director of the Commission) would accompany the new collector, to help them find local informants and to instruct them in their work. Often, the collectors had to take the chance and go to a storyteller's house, hoping that he would be welcome. They often were, and it is thanks to this generosity that the Commission succeeded in collecting the volume of material that they did, as the full-time collector Jim Delaney notes in 1982:

'As soon as he begins work in the field, the collector of Irish folklore realises how few are these active tradition bearers, but he also become aware at the same time that the sympathy and good will of the community towards them is also extended most generously to him and his work of perpetuating their traditions and stories. It is this active and generous sympathy for the collector that makes his work, not a task, but a joy and a delight.'

Within the photographs now available on Dúchas.ie there is a short series of images of Síle Bean Uí Shíothcháin from Gleann Cotáin, Co. Kerry, who was 100 years old at the time. Tadhg Ó Murchú describes her, her house and the welcome that was extended to him there:



‘Níl ribe liath ’na ceann fós. Bhí sí éadaithe ar a’ sean-nós — gúna fada plainín agus seaicéad agus hainciarsúr straidhpeach ar a ceann ... Bhí braon biotáille im’ phóca ’gam agus do thugas di é. D’imigh sí chun an driosúr’ agus do thug sí léi gloine beag agus do líon amach taoscán as a’ mbuidéilín. Cheapas gur chuichi féin a bh sí ’á líonadh ach más ea bhí dearmad orm - níorbh’ ea in ao’ chor ach chugam fhéin. Chaithfinnse an chéad scíobas ’ól, a deir sí - gurbh shin é dlí bhéasa — ‘urraim don fhireannach’. Bhíos ’á heiteach ar mo dhícheall ach níorbh aon chabhair dom é - chaithfinn é ’ól nó ní bhlaisfeadh sí féin diúir de. Sea!’
CBÉ 854: 183-186

Fig. 1. Síle Bean Uí Shíothcháin and Tadhg Ó Murchú, 1941

‘She has not a single grey hair. She was dressed in the old fashion — a long flannel dress and jacket, and a striped handkerchief on her head ... I had a drop of spirits in my pocket and gave it to her. She went to the dresser and took out a small glass and poured a good drop from the bottle. I thought it was for herself that she filled the glass and that she had forgotten me, but I was mistaken as it wasn’t for herself at all but for me. I had to drink the first sip, she said, that that was the polite way - ‘respect for the male guest’. I did my utmost to refuse but it was no use - I had to drink or she would not have a drop!’ CBÉ 854: 183-186

Micil Paor from An Seanphobal, Co. Waterford, is an informant from whom the full-time collector Nioclás Breathnach collected a lot of material, from stories to local lore and songs. This is how Breathnach describes him in his diary in 1936:

‘Lá saoire an lá inniu agus tar éis aifrinn do chuir mé mo chuid giúirléidí i gcóir ceart agus i dtúinn agus d’imigh mé liom amach go dtí’n Seanphobal agus ó dheas go dtí tigh m’uncail Micil Paor, Curraichín. Tá ana-chuid i gceann Mhicil nár shíl mé a bheith ann a chuigint agus chuir sé iontas mór orm nuair a líon sé ocht mbosca dom go dtí so. Ní mar mhagadh a leithéid a dhéanamh.’ CBÉ 205: 369

‘A day off today and after mass I fixed and tuned my tools and went out to An Seanphobal and south to my uncle Micil Paor, Curraichín. Micil remembers much that I had not believed to be still there anymore, and it surprised me when he filled eight boxes [of ediphone cylinders] for me. It is no joke to do that amount.’ CBÉ 205: 369

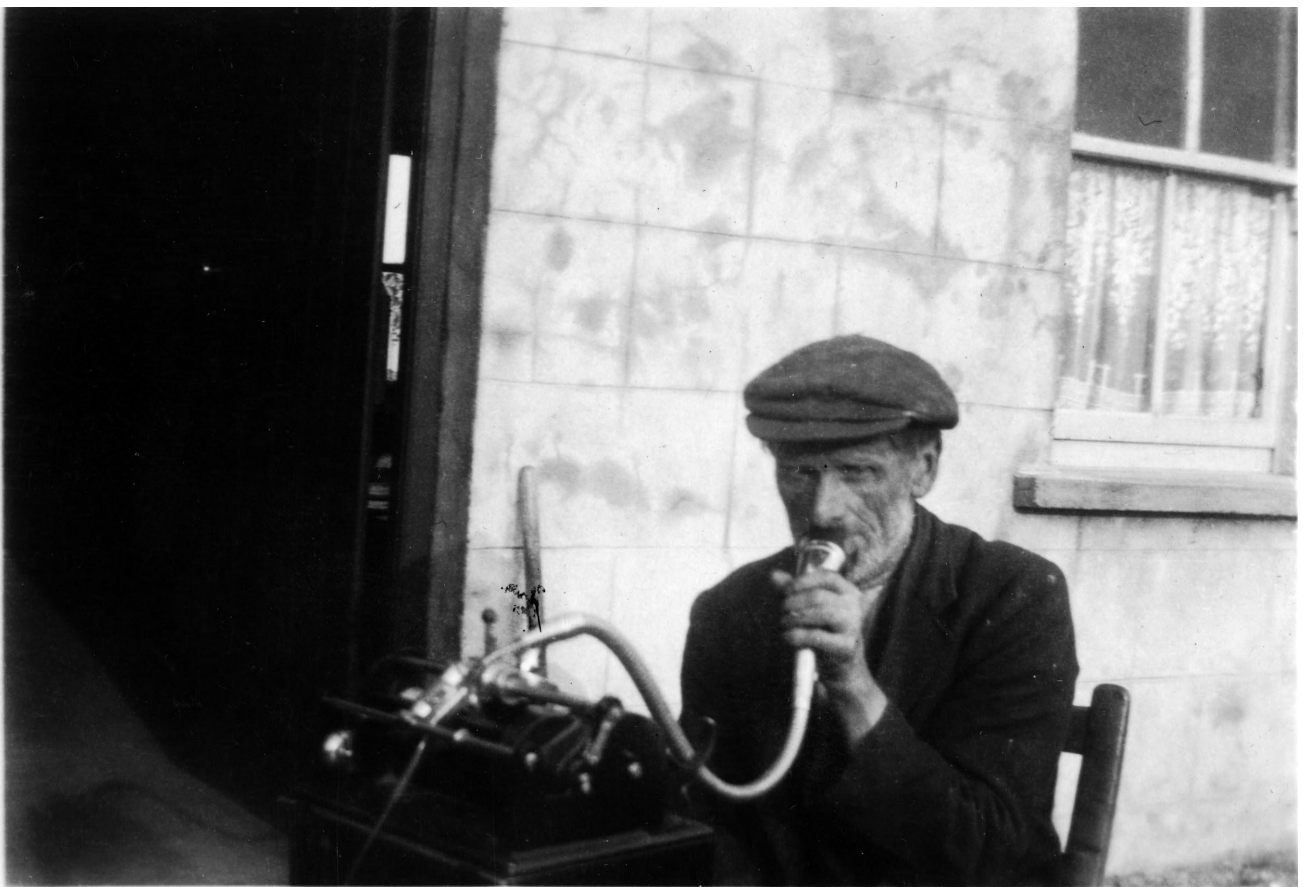


Fig. 2. Micil Paor ag baint úsáid as an eideafón, Co. Phort Láirge

It is thanks to the generosity of their informants that the commission could amass the volume of material it collected over a 35 year period. As Tadhg Ó Murchú wrote of the hospitality of the Irish in *Béaloides* in 1948:

‘Is dócha, ’á bhféadfaí a bhfuil de thae ólta agam i dtithibh na sean-daoine ó thosnuigheas ar an obair seo, ’á bhféadfaí í bhailiú n-aon chlais amháin agus loch a dhéanamh di, go snámhfadh long chogaidh uirthi gan aon spleádhchas!’

I suppose, if all the tea I have drunk in the houses of the old people could be collected into one channel and made into a lake, a warship could float on it independently!

Writing on the photographic collection in the book *Seoda as Cnuasach Bhéaloides Éireann* in 2010, Anne Burke notes:

‘In some way this becomes, in turn, a measure of the Commission’s success: its ability to elevate ordinary people as the principal characters in the narration of Irish culture. The extent to which this depended on a level of trust being established and of relationships being formed that extended beyond the professional to the personal is similarly testified to ... Welcomed into informants’ homes, working and relaxing together, there is something optimistic about this as a shared project, a redemptive investment in Irish culture which was very specifically of its time and which was concerned ultimately with the reinvigoration of Irish identity. In this context, the visualisation of the relationship between collector and informant plays a crucial role.’

More than 250 new photographs are now available on Dúchas.ie, mostly featuring informants from around the country. Without the patience, generosity and goodwill of these informants, it is certain that the Commission would not have been so successful in collecting and preserving the folklore of Ireland for future generations.



Máire Bean Uí Áilíosa, Co. Kerry, 1941. [M001.18.00807](#)



Tadhg Ó Murchadha sitting by the fire, Co. Kerry, 1941. [M001.18.00821](#)



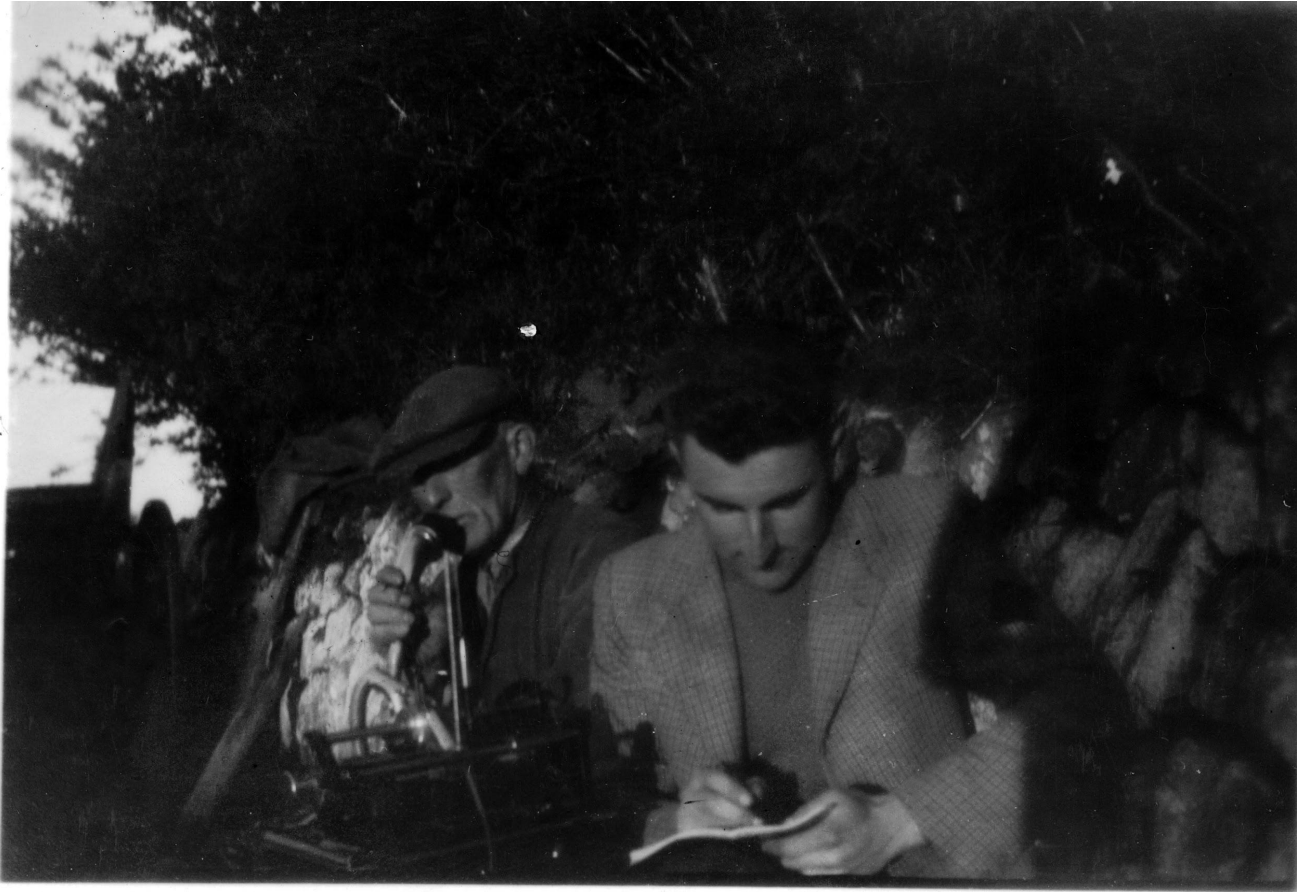
Gobnait Uí Shúilleabháin 'Gobnait na mBróg', Co. Kerry. [M001.18.00811](#)



Mr Walker, a weaver, Co. Kerry. [M001.18.00814](#).



Síle Bean Uí Shíothcháin, 100 years old, Co. Kerry, 1941. [M001.18.00831](#)



Mícheál Ó Murchadha using the ediphone, Co. Waterford. [M001.22.00115](#)



Máire Ní Ghuithín and three others on the Great Blasket Island, 1935. [M001.18.00779](#)



James Maher, Co. Wexford. [M002.13.00003](#)



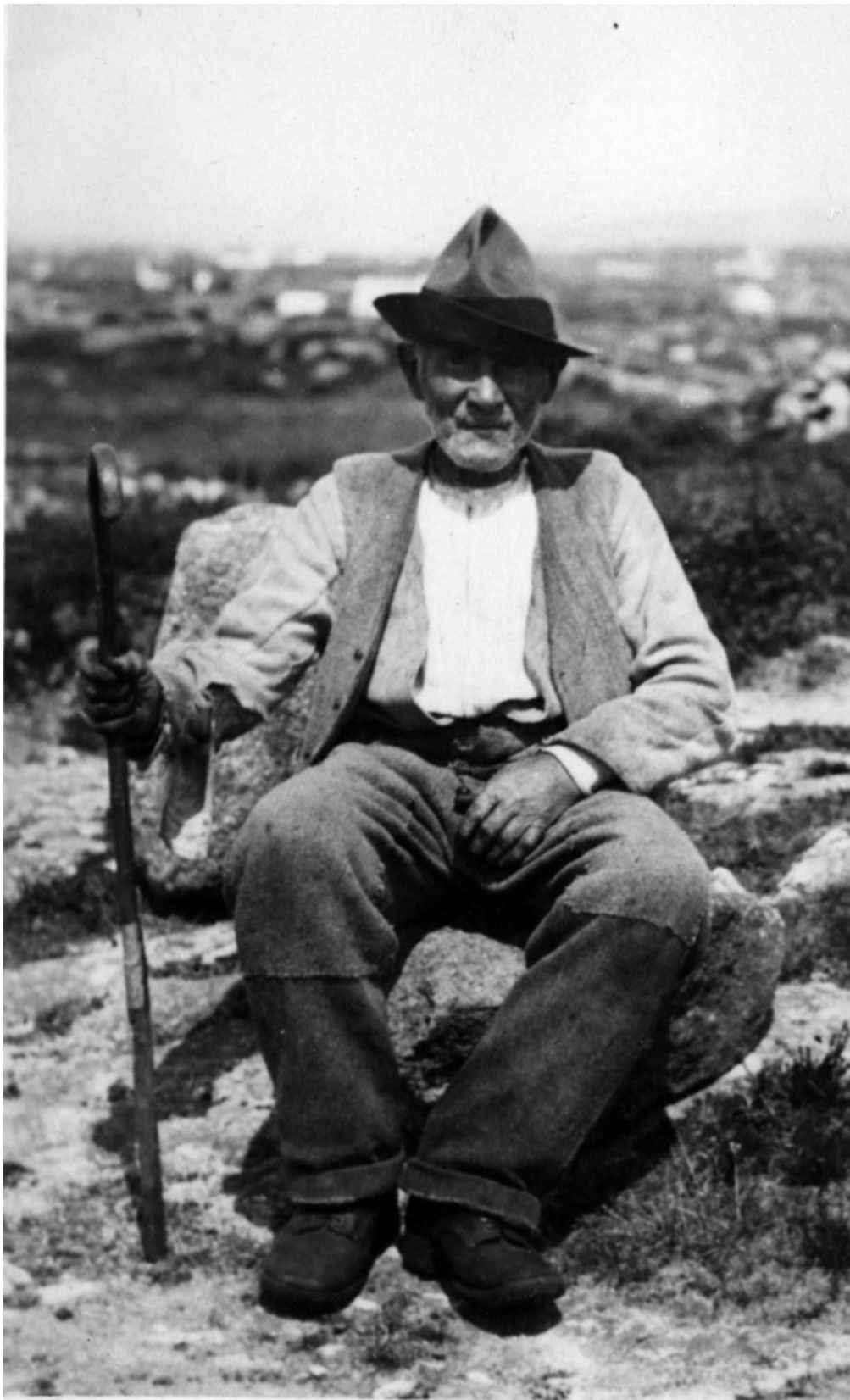
Seán Ó Briain, King of Storytellers in west Connacht, Loch Conaortha, Co. Galway. [M003.01.00533](#)



Seán Ó Flatharta, fisherman from Claddagh, Co. Galway being recorded in 1940. [M003.01.00552](#)



Mrs. Mary Helen Devlin (Mary Helen Viddy) and the collector Michael J. Murphy, Co. Tyrone, 1950. [M004.32.00156](#)



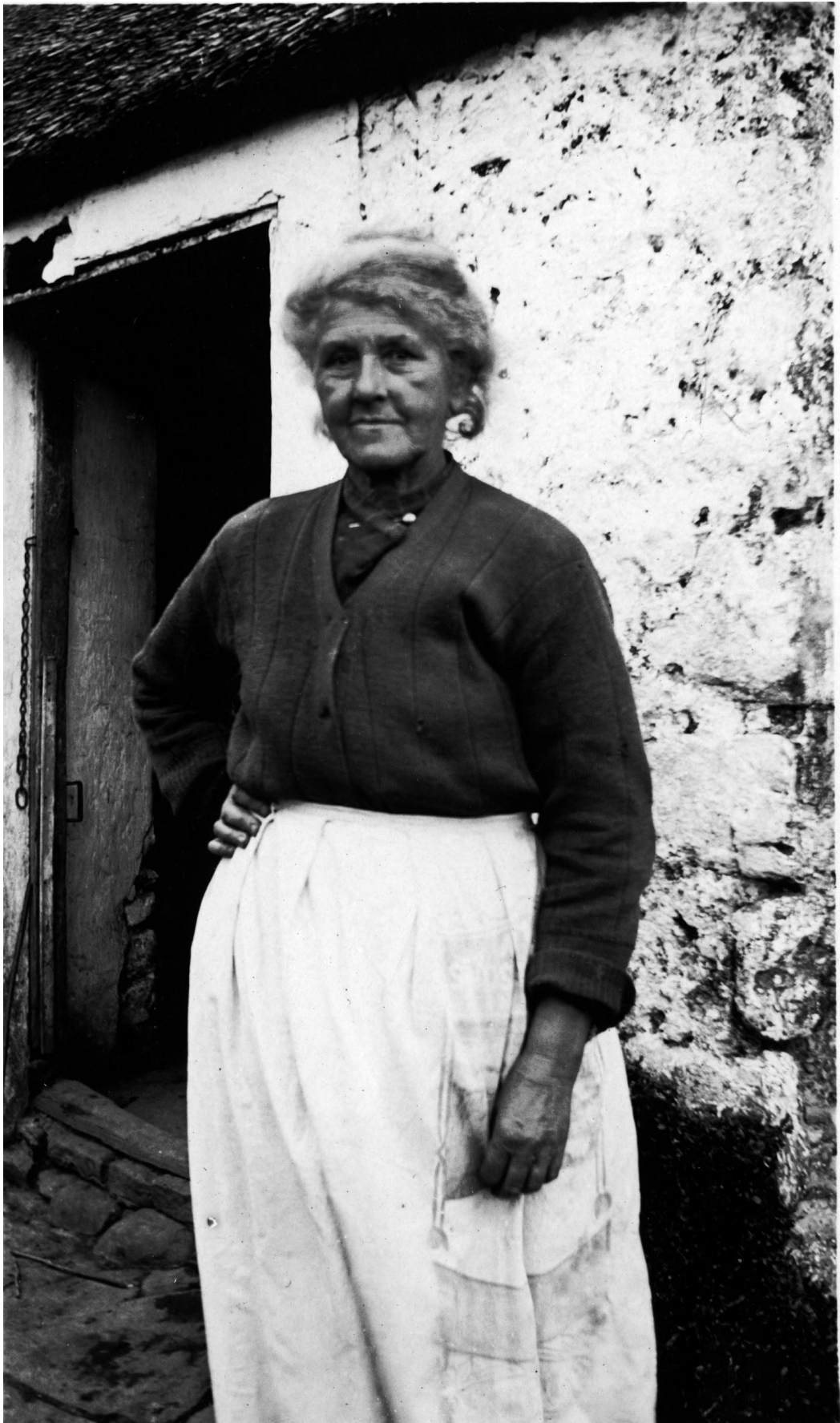
Seán Ó Laoidhe, An Cheathrú Rua, Co. Galway. [M003.01.00565](#)



The collector Ciarán Bairéad and Seán Mhicí Ó Curraoin, Co. Galway, 1960. [M003.01.00574](#)



Ciarán Bairéad collecting from Seán Mhicí Ó Curraoin. [M003.01.00576](#)



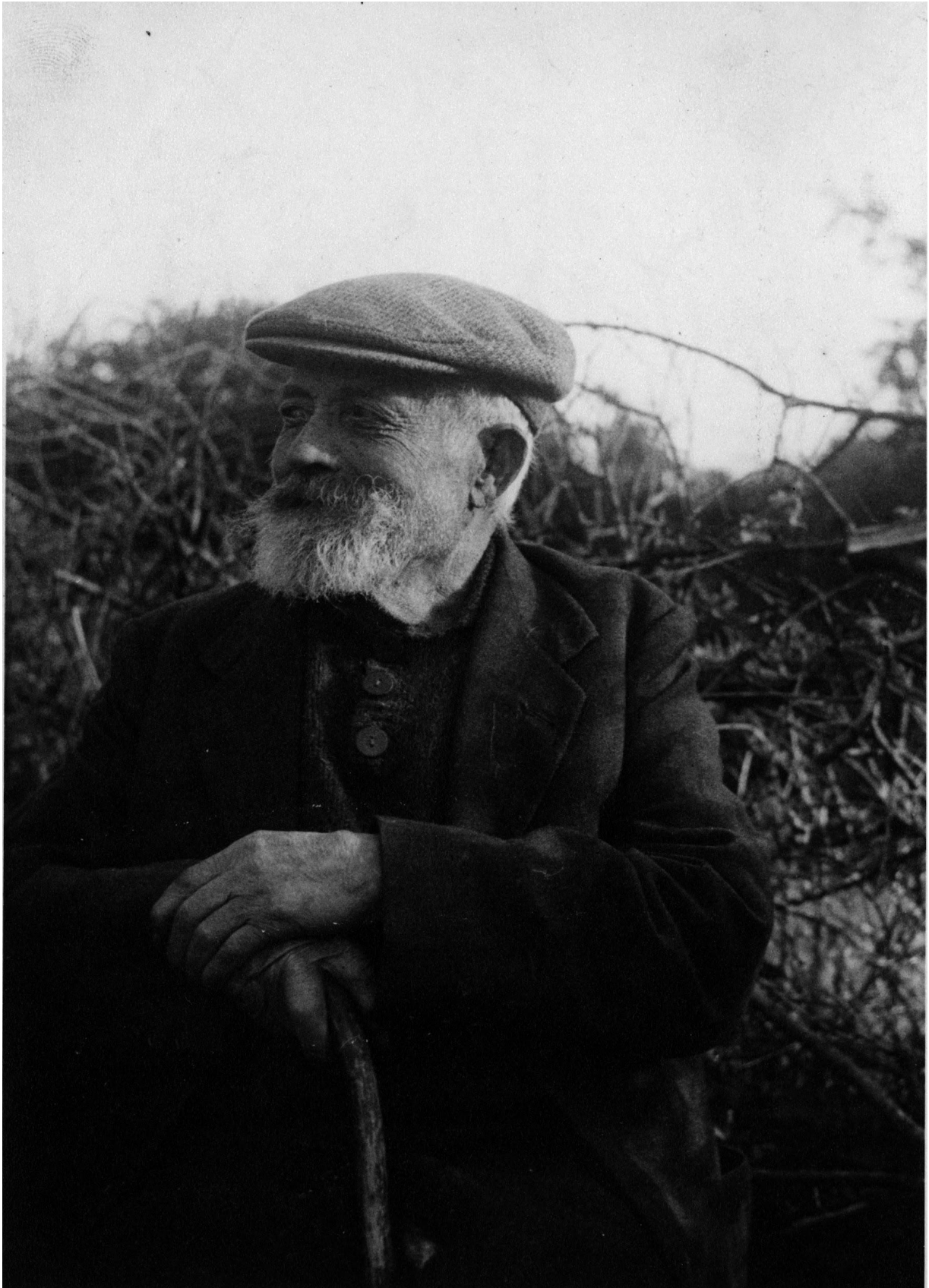
Brigid Ní Ghadhra, Co. Waterford. [M001.22.00108](#)



Reidar Th. Christiansen in Dublin, 1960. [M013.06.00041](#)



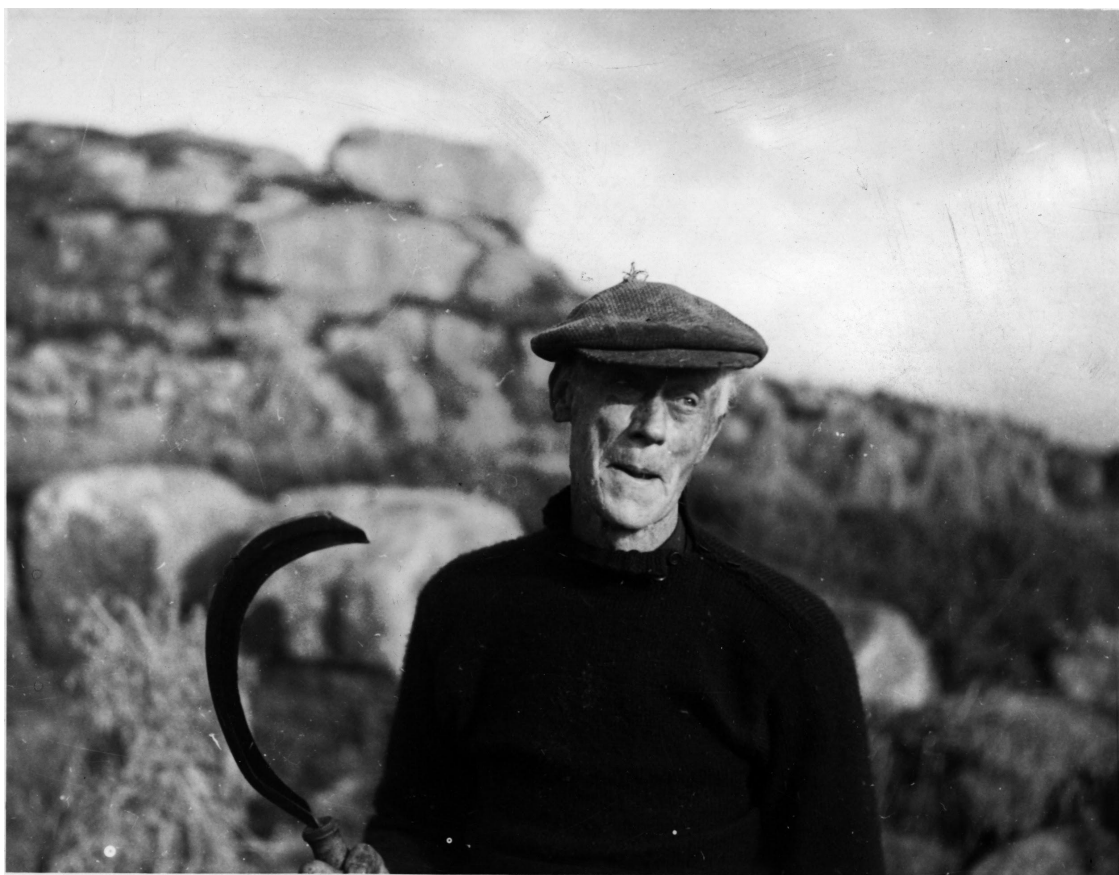
The collector Seán Ó Dubhda, Co. Kerry, 1953. [M011.18.00037](#)



John Keen from the Isle of Man, 1948. [M007.34.00008](#)



Seán Ó Buidhe with an unnamed woman and child, Co. Donegal. [M004.29.00632](#)



William O'Doherty holding a scythe, Co. Donegal. [M004.29.00623](#)



Two girls from Bogagh, Co. Donegal. [M004.29.00614](#)



Seán Sigerson smoking his pipe and cutting tobacco, An Rinnín Dubh, Cill Críocháin, Co. Kerry.
[M001.18.00760](#) .