

Then & Now

Tom Aherne



The man who help perserve our folk history

Recalling a West Limerick writer who left his mark on history



Kevin Danaher (right) with Pádraig Ó Ceallaigh. Danaher devised Bunratty Folk Park, an excellent example of applied folk-life

He made a significant contribution to ethnological mapping both in Ireland and abroad

completed his MA thesis on Irish house types.

In 1948, he travelled to the Isle of Man to record some of the surviving native speakers of Manx, thereby ensuring that a permanent record of this language exists. For the next four years he was engaged in field work in Ireland, recording singers, musicians and storytellers. In the course of the 1952-'53 academic years he was a guest lecturer in Irish language, literature and tradition at the University of Uppsala, Sweden.

On returning to Ireland, his research into rural life resumed. He devised many of the commission's questionnaires on aspects of folk tradition which were circulated throughout the country. Replies to the questionnaires provided an invaluable resource for folklorists. Kevin Danaher also compiled a substantial pictorial archive, much of it consisting of an assortment of fine photographs he had taken. It also included plans, diagrams and drawings of traditional farmyard tools and household utensils.

The fruits of his labour were relayed to the general public through lectures, television programmes and particularly through his writings which enjoyed a wide readership. He lectured extensively at university seminars and summer schools and to learned societies and local groups. His 1967 series for RTÉ, *The Hearth and Stool and All*, depicted the Irish countryside as it would have

appeared at the turn of the 20th century.

Kevin Danaher devised Bunratty Folk Park, an excellent example of applied folk-life, which features a range of buildings illustrating the social history of the Shannon areas of south Clare and north Limerick. Traditional furnishings and fittings are seen in context and are augmented by the Talbot Collection of agricultural machinery. Kevin Danaher was also adviser to the trustees of Muckross House Museum and maintained a close interest in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra, Co Down.

In 1971, when the Irish Folklore Commission was transferred to UCD, he became a lecturer in the newly-created Department of Irish Folklore where he proved to be a popular and inspirational teacher. He played a major role in the establishment in 1973 of an undergraduate course in folk-life studies which has been very successful in training people in all aspects of folk-life research.

He was a member of the National Monuments Advisory Council, An Foras Forbartha's Nature and Amenity, Conservation and Amenity Committee and Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann (The Folklore Council of Ireland). From 1965 to 1980 he was general editor of the *Irish Life and Culture* series of the Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Further afield he was a member of the working group of the European Ethnological Atlas and served as president of the Society for Folk-life Studies. His publications include *Ireland Long Ago* (1962), *The Year in Ireland* (1972), *Ireland's Vernacular Architecture* (1975), *A Bibliography of Irish Ethnology and Folk Tradition* (1978) and *that's How*

It Was (1984). A Doctorate of Literature was conferred on him by the National University of Ireland in 1974.

From 1973 through his retirement in 1983 he was lecturer for the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin. As an expert in military history, he was a member of the Irish Military History Society, serving on their council in a variety of capacities. He was the group's president from 1971 through 1980, and editor of their journal, *The Irish Sword*, from 1960 through 1970. He was also a member of The Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and contributed to the Society's journal.

From 1988 through 2002 he served as co-Patron of the Folklore of Ireland Society, and continued to publish articles in their journal, *Bealoideas* as he had done regularly since 1935. When Kevin retired from his position at University College Dublin, his students organised a celebratory volume in his honour: *Sinsear: The Folklore Journal 4* (1982-83). Many of his students, colleagues and prominent scholars made up the international roster of writers paying tribute to Kevin, his work, and his influence. At the same time, his academic colleagues organised the publication of a festschrift, *Gold Under the Furze*.

In 1986 Kevin Danaher suffered a stroke, the effects of which put an end to his professional career. He died on March 14 2002, after a long illness, survived by his wife Anna and sons, Donal and John (Seán). His name is not as prominent nowadays and maybe it is time it was associated with some new festival or literary event to honour his major achievements. He was one of the leading folklorists of his generation in Europe, and 16 years later we salute his memory.

KEVIN DANAHER from Athea was a prominent Irish folklorist and respected scholar with a special interest in ethnography and military history I have often referred to his vast collection of work and his contribution to preserving our past in this column. Kevin was the author of 10 books about Irish traditional customs and beliefs, the best known of which are *The Year in Ireland*, *In Ireland Long Ago*, and *Folktales from the Irish Countryside*. He also published more than 200 articles in academic journals.

His many books and articles reflect the wide range of his research - settlement and dwelling, livelihood and household support, folk custom and belief, social history, folk narrative and research methods. He made a significant contribution to ethnological mapping both in Ireland and abroad. He developed a mobile studio to record in the field and the many sound recordings he made saved a wealth of material from oblivion.

Kevin Danaher was born on January 30 1913, in Athea, one of four sons of William Danaher, (Liam Ó Danachair, a native Irish speaker, and also a folklorist) the local school master, and his wife Margaret (née Ryan). He was educated at Athea National School and Mungret College, Limerick, later studying archaeology at University College Dublin.

He spent his Christmas holidays in 1934 collecting the oral tradition of Athea for the Irish Folklore Institute, the body that

preceded the Irish Folklore Commission. His interest in Irish rural architecture dates from this time. In 1935, he accompanied the eminent Swedish ethnologist, Åke Campbell, on field trips to Galway and Mayo. This experience had a major influence on his subsequent career. On graduating from UCD in 1937, he continued his studies as a Humboldt scholar at the Universities of Berlin and Leipzig.

The outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 led to his early return to Ireland where he began working for the Irish Folklore Commission in early 1940. First as a field worker and then as the Commission's official ethnographer, collecting, cataloguing and illustrating large amounts of traditional tales and folklore, primarily from his home county of Limerick. Some of his sources were family members, such as his father, Liam. He was married to Anna Ryan from Galbally which gave him strong links with both West and East Limerick. His groundbreaking work in the area of seasonal customs and folk practices would later appear in his many articles and books.

But the war again interrupted his work, and he enlisted as a gunner in the Irish Army. He rose to the rank of Captain, and served as an instructor for the Artillery Corps, training soldiers in Kildare. In his time in the Army he missed death by a hair's breadth, when during an instruction in mine-laying in the Glen of Imaal the instructor accidentally stepped on the mine, which exploded killing several of the soldiers. The soldiers directly to the right and left of Kevin died in the blast but he miraculously escaped. By the time he returned to work with the commission in 1945 he had