

ICAN

IRISH
COMMUNITY
ARCHIVE

History Skills Course

- Dr Tomas Mac Conmara
- January – February 2021
- LECTURE 2

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- Your aim/ambition
- Value of Local History
- Planning
- Record Keeping
- Sources
- Referencing
- Enjoy your work!

Lecture 2

Oral History,
Personal Testimony
and tradition,

Interview dynamics

Sample Collections

Sample audio and
analysis

Using oral history
and memory



The Folklorist's Anxiety

“History records that the distinguished Bishop Cormac O Cuileannáin, shortly after he ascended the throne of Munster about 900AD, compiled a glossary of old Irish words, which were then becoming obsolete”.



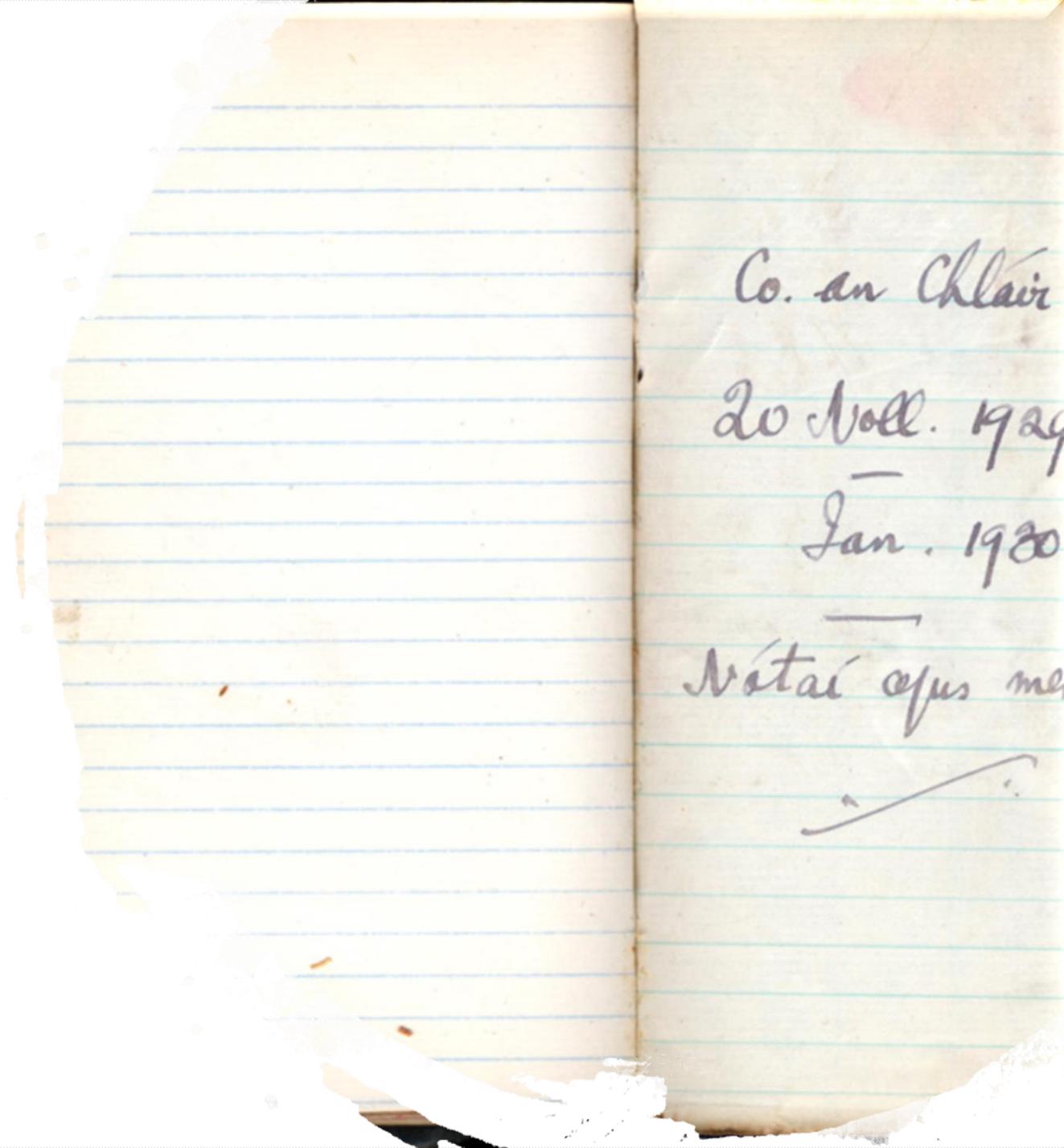


Key Terms

- Oral History
- Folklore
- Oral Tradition
 - Social Memory
 - Cultural Memory
 - Collective Memory
- Dominant/State memory
- Vernacular memory
- Post Memory

Collectors and Collected

- Collection in the past
- Collection in 19th Century
- Folklore of Ireland Society
- Irish Folklore Commission
- Collection in 20th century
- Collection in 21st century



Oral History (and) History

- ❑ 'All history is oral' – New insight into Irish history
- ❑ A new 'valued knowledge'
- ❑ Helps understand the everyday experience of life in the past
- ❑ Untapped sources of information
- ❑ Putting 'man' back into history

Continued

- ❑ *The construction of a life is a major object of sociology.* - Henri Peretz
- ❑ Analysis of oral tradition as resource helps us understand the structure and dynamics of society from late 19th century to present.
- ❑ Help to draw connections to patterns of human behavior and individual life changes, inferences on the social structure of society, dynamics of groups, organizations, communities etc.

Listening to Silence



1. Mr. Costelloe and his blind wife.

'We said goodbye to them then – we all had a great night, and I myself was lonesome when the time came to say goodbye to the elderly woman ... It is unlikely that I will ever see her again, this noble elderly woman who accurately inherited the ancestral knowledge of her kin – the stories and the old-world knowledge which she heard from the old people by the fireside when she was a young girl. There will never again be her likes in Loop Head – this Oisín after the Fianna.'

- - Tágdh Ó Murchú



Memory and the Academy



Technological
development



Shift to archival
exploration in 1970s



Emergence as credible
academic discipline



Popularity of history
from below



Expansion of the
academy

National Folklore Collection

- The Main Manuscript Collection
- The Schools' Collection -
<https://www.duchas.ie/en>
- The Photographic Collection
- The Audio and Video Archives
- Folk Music Archive

Oral History Collections and Archives

- Cork Folklore Project
- Mary Immaculate College
- Waterways Ireland Oral History Project
- Dublin Port Memory and Story Project
- GAA Oral History Project
- Military Archives Oral History Project



<https://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/oral-histories-project-20th-century>



Methods, Practice and Rules



The Fifty-Year Rule



- Who is the interviewee?
- Who is the interviewer?
- What project was it recorded for?
- Where recorded?
- Date recorded?
- Anyone else in the room at the time of the recording?
- That the interviewee consented to being recorded?

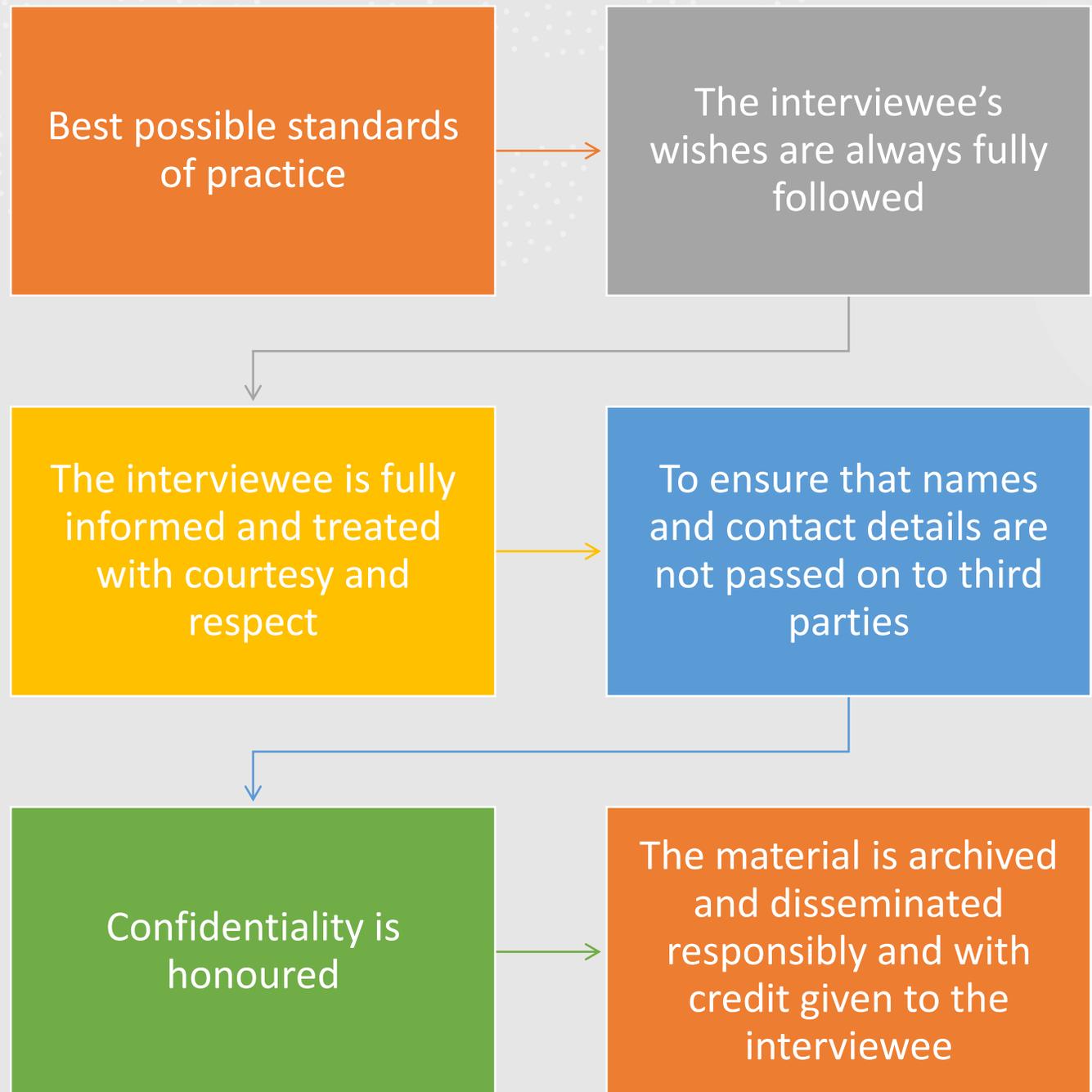
Ethics / Legalities

- Principle of 'Do No Harm'
- Ethics go hand in hand with legalities
- Ethically and legally sound methodologies will protect both you and your participants

- **4 Key Stages**

1. Approaching Interviewees
2. Recording an Interview
3. Processing / Archiving Recordings
4. Analysing / Publishing Recordings

Ethical Standards



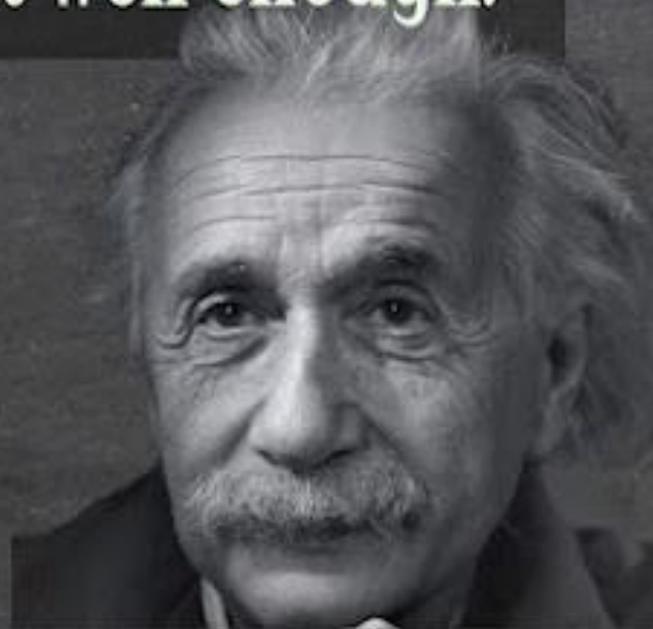
Legal Compliance

- Needs equal consideration to ethics, but overlap
- Copyright / Clearance: Anything somebody else offers as a response is their copyright
- Defamation: Something which lowers a person / group in the estimation of reasonable members of society. Only if untrue.
- It is impossible to defame the dead
- It is possible to defame a group
- It is possible to defame / libel yourself!

If you can't explain it **simply**, you
don't understand it well enough.

-Albert Einstein

QuotesEverlasting.com



Elements of an Oral History Project

1. Collection
2. Archiving
3. Dissemination

Posterity and Digital Preservation

- Consent/Clearance
- Repository
- Archival imperatives
- Access and outreach plans
- Boundaries

Continued

- Transcription/Abstraction
- Quality control
- Ethics in use of material

Do you have
a list of
questions I
can ask?



Main Approaches



LIFE STORY/CYCLE



SUBJECT SPECIFIC



MEMORY TRIGGER



GROUP INTERVIEW

Oral History

**What are the
most Important
Skills?**



Key Skills

- Listen
- Hear
- Understand

**The biggest
communication problem
is we do not listen to
understand.**

We listen to reply.

Key skills

- Be clear about why and what you are collecting
- Identify areas and themes to be explored
- Time and space
- Know what you want and know about what you want



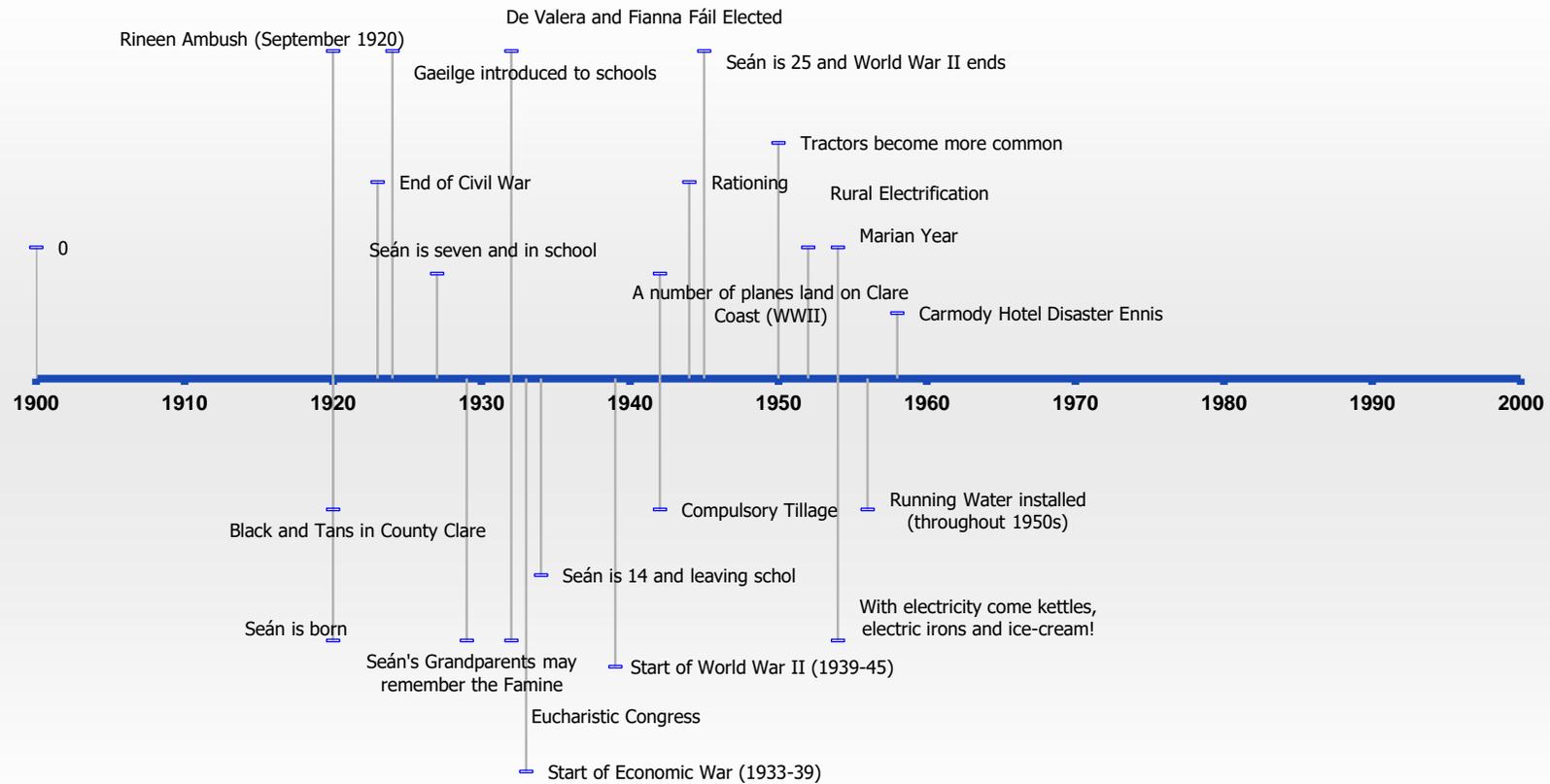
The Good Collector

“The good collector then should be an opportunist, ready to take advantage of every chance to reap his or her harvest of lore”.

Seán Ó Suilleabháin

– *Handbook of Irish Folklore*

Life Interview Time Line



How to get ready

A4 hard back copy book to write and retain all interview and research/field notes - **This will be your fieldwork journal!**

Write notes and memory prompts into your fieldwork journal

Write short biographical notes page on interviewee based on what information you have or can find about him/her.

You should have a clear knowledge of your line of enquiry. However, keep your bio notes to hand close by in the event that you draw a blank!

Before Pressing Record

- Interview skills (Individual interview)
- Setting up interview
- Environmental control
- Check list
- Informed consent

The Interview Space

- **Biggest factor is YOU!**
- Control environment
- Interview space
- Orientation of device (place the recorder close to the interviewee and on a stable place)

Interview Space

- Subtly in set up – Don't make a fuss when you are setting up recorder
- Note information received
- Explain process of interview before starting
- Orientation of device

Watch and Listen

- People
 - Radio/Television must be turned off including the next room
 - Open door and noise outside
 - Loud Fridge or dishwasher
- 
- A large yellow triangle is positioned in the bottom right corner of the slide, pointing towards the top right.

Continued

- Large Windows (if possible sit the interviewee with his/her back to the window)
- Loose paper on a table will cause noise disruption if moved during interview
- Rattily chairs or tables can cause noise disruption
- Turn off your mobile

Continued

- Research and confidence
- Prior meeting if possible
- Explain that interview is not an end in itself but a beginning
- Informalise the interview and keep comfortable

50 Year Rule

**After
pressing
record**

Names

Date

Place

Group

Who else there

Semi-structured conversational

- Keep tone similar to that before beginning
- Try not to lead the interviewee – Keep questions open ended
- Nonverbal indication of interest (nod instead of saying ya or yes)
- Ya Ya is a No No! Try not to keep saying ya, ya, really!
- Display knowledge through questions (Informed Curiosity)
- There to be educated, not to educate (keep your opinions to yourself)

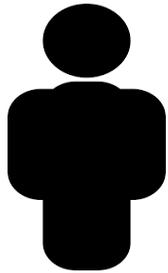
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- Be responsive to interviewee – Attend to their interests and use to mine for further memories
- Aim for firsthand or ‘eye-witness testimony’
- Clarify factual points like a names, places or dates
- What’s on the wall?

Continued

- Annunciate new files
- Make sure the interviewee knows they can take a break at any time
- Silence is golden – A pause can be a prelude to something significant. Do not panic if there is a silence – You are not on live radio!!!

Three Dimensions



Person - Who they are, their background, any significant points of interest, their interests, passions, known stories, characteristics or connections etc.



Place - Where they are from, what happened there, any significant characters, historical events, folklore, traditions, customs, cultural phenomena, places of interest etc.



Life - What is the approx. age of the person and what did they live through during that life. Try to remember what was happening in Ireland when they are at a certain age. I.e. if they are born in 1920, then at the age of 13 the Economic War starts. At the age of 19, World War II starts and they are probably married before electricity arrives in the 1950s etc. If born in 1940, they were in their early twenties when John F. Kennedy was shot dead in 1963.