

Ireland's most sinister superstition: The changeling

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A changeling

*“Are you a witch, or are you a fairy?
Or are you the wife of Michael Cleary?”*
(Irish children’s rhyme)

When you scratch the surface, most human beings share the same common, primal fears. Chief among them is the loss of a loved one, especially a child.

The idea of the changeling – that fairies could steal a child away, possibly forever, and leave a horribly altered substitute in its place – is one of the most sinister traditions in Irish folklore.

Why would a fairy steal a human child? Many believed that fairy babies were ugly and troublesome, whereas human infants were docile and beautiful. Fairies were always attracted to beauty and music; it wasn’t just babies that were at risk, but good-looking young men and women. In Ireland it common to exchange an elderly, dying fairy with a baby. Others believed that a fairy infant needed mortal food to thrive.

Perhaps the most sinister purpose for stealing away a human child comes from the Scottish tradition. The Scots believed that the fairies had done a deal with the devil, and every seven years they owed him a tithe. The devil demanded a blood sacrifice, but the fairies’ high self-regard would prevent them killing one of their number. The fairies abducted a child in order to pay their blood dues.

Cross-breeding was another motive for kidnap. In order to prevent their bloodlines becoming choked, the fairies took humans to inject fresh blood into their clans.

Whatever the reason, how would a parent know they had a changeling on their hands? Their formerly bonny baby would suddenly sicken, and fail to thrive. Conversely, their appetite may become prodigious and they may literally eat their new family out of house and home. However, no matter how much they consumed, they remained sickly and wan.

The new replacement could be deformed, with strange features. They may be aloof, cry constantly, and generally misbehave. They may be unable to talk.

If all this wasn’t unnerving enough, another belief states that the fairies sometimes do not leave a replacement at all. Instead, they may enchant a block of wood or a lump of wax to look like the

missing child. In this case, the enchantment will soon wear off and the 'child' will die, revealing its real appearance. Throwing the log on the fire was thought to restore the child.



Changelings, by Alan Lee

To prevent a child being snatched, iron (a great enemy of fairies) was left near the crib, usually in the form of fire tongs or scissors. In Ireland, people were warned not to 'overlook' the baby, i.e. look upon them or the parents with envy. All traditions, including Scandinavian and German, agreed that baptising the baby as quickly as possible would prevent fairy abduction.

Even if you had done everything right, you might still be unlucky. Take the story of the Welsh widow woman who the fairies tricked into thinking that her cattle were in distress. While she tended to her stock, the fairies snatched her lovely young son and left a changeling in his place.

With the help of a local wise-man, she gets the child back. But how do you get a child back from fairyland?

Even if you succeed, you may find the child irrevocably changed. The Irish noted that the child may always long for fairyland. On the other side of the world, the Japanese believed the child must be returned before they ate fairy food, or else the exchange was irreversible.

In the legend of the widow of Lianfabon, the wise-man instructs her to perform several unusual tasks, including brewing beer in an eggshell and cooking a fully-feathered chicken. Performing actions like that would cause the changeling to forget himself and pass a remark about never having seen anything like it despite 'being as old as the hills'. Having been rumbled, the changeling would disappear and the human child would return. But other actions were more sinister, including burning and drowning. There are cases on the books involving parents killing a suspected 'changeling' child. One case occurred in Kerry where in 1884, Anne Roche drowned 3-year-old Michael Leahy, who could not stand nor speak.

The Bridget Cleary case in 1895, referenced in the nursery rhyme above, is the most famous example. Tortured and killed by her husband Michael and six other people, Bridget was suspected of being a changeling. Angela Bourke's book on the subject, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, is worth seeking out.

To any modern reader the symptoms of a changeling child can be conflated with autism, Downs Syndrome, and a host of other developmental and congenital disorders. It is heart-breaking to think how these children were treated before the advent of modern science and understanding. Truly, changeling belief is the most sinister in all Irish folklore.

Away with the fairies

POSTED ON [JUNE 29, 2012](#) BY [ROISIN](#)



Something magical I saw by the Corrib on Patrick's Day 2012 (photo my own).

This article appeared in the *North Clare Local* in April. It's the first of my series on folklore, and for the first article I took a look at the Irish tradition of fairy belief.

The streets are long swept clear now of all the paraphernalia surrounding St Patrick's Day, but one of the most prominent accessories in parades of recent years is the distinctive leprechaun hat. Bright green with a gold buckle, sometimes with a red beard, it owes a lot of its imagery to American depictions of leprechauns.

How much does the depiction of leprechauns as jolly little bearded men, and fairies as pretty miniature women with wings, owe to traditional Irish folklore? First, the leprechaun. Well, surprisingly, leprechauns do actually appear in Irish folklore. The earliest reference to them is from the middle ages. The leprechaun wore a red jacket, not green. He was a lone fairy shoemaker – fairies in Ireland are divided between solitary and trooping – and he did have a pot of gold. However, the gold could never be reached, or if you did manage to obtain some, it would disappear by morning.

The leprechaun's darker cousin is called the cluarichan. This is the leprechaun after hours – he has finished cobbling for the day and has taken his gold to the pub. The cluarichan is constantly drunk, and cranky with it. However, if the cluarichan likes you, he will protect your stock of alcohol. If you offend him though, he will ruin your house.

Worse again, on the leprechaun scale, is the fear dearg. Primarily located in Co Limerick, this 'red man' is a gruesome practical joker. He likes to hang around cemeteries late at night and spook out lone travellers. One of his favourite tricks is to impersonate the laugh of a dead man coming from a grave – another to suggest roast hag on a spit for dinner. The way to get around the fear dearg is to tell him “ná dean magadh fúm,” (don't mock me) and then you'll have earned his respect.



A little fairy girl

The common thread between these three characters is their trickster nature. No fairy in Ireland is ever wholly benevolent. While in Scotland, a country with very similar beliefs to ours, fairies were divided between the Seelie Court (mostly benevolent) and the Unseelie Court (malicious), no such distinction was made in Ireland. It was believed that all fairies had the potential to be malicious, and the best policy was avoidance.

The leprechaun, cluarichan and fear dearg were pranksters, and the worst outcome of an encounter with them was a bad fright. But other fairies were far more malevolent. The banshee with her terrifying screech, was only predicting the inevitable death of a family member, and was not evil. She was a keening fairy, and mourned the loss of a Gael. (She is said to only visit families with an O or Mac in their surname).

Fairies could cause sickness or disease. Offending a fairy, by refusing it something it desired, or interfering with forts or fairy trees, would lead it to take against you, your family, livestock or crops. In worse-case scenarios, death or ruination of livelihood could occur.

The ways to avoid the fairies' unwanted attention was manifold. Their name could never be spoken- they were referred to as the "good people" or the "gentry" for example. Iron was one of the most reliant protections against fairies. Fairies hated iron – it bound them to earth. Never interfering with ring forts, fairy paths, or fairy trees was another sure-fire way to avoid them. Turning clothes inside out, especially if one became lost on a fairy path, was another method to return safely to the mortal realm.

More sinister yet, fairies' attentions could sometimes be unavoidable. They were always watching the mortal realm, and they were always attracted by beauty and youth. They were entranced by beautiful mortals and sometimes stole them away. Fairies also loved music and would steal musicians away to play in their unending revels in Faerie. An Irish legend tells that Turlough O'Carolan, the great harper, got his talent from sleeping in a fairy fort all night.

Worst of all, babies entranced fairies. In Irish folklore, fairy babies were so ugly – or they didn't reproduce at all – that fairies wanted human children for their own. Mothers and newborns were particularly at risk of being snatched and substituted with changelings – ugly old fairy men, or timber – enchanted to look like the missing person.

It's important to note that fairy belief existed all over Europe- the water hags of England, the sinister Erlking of Germany and the beautiful Vila of Eastern Europe. All fairies share similar characteristics – mischief, surface beauty and danger. The Irish tradition, however, is unique to us and worth treasuring.

Abducted by the Faeries?

By Jeremy Harte

(Published at Lughnasa 1999)

They came for Mary Rowlandson at dawn, a wild host that shrieked and yelled. Strong brown arms plucked her from the farm and took her away to their secret places in the wild country. She lay on a bed of dry leaves, watching the black shapes as they danced and sang; then the next day they set her to work, along with the other mortals who had been abducted. They themselves were too proud to work - they knew nothing of the crafts and skills by which ordinary people order their lives. This is hardly surprising. They were the Narragansett Indians, and Mary Rowlandson was a New England settler who had been taken captive in the wars of the 1670s.

Mary was a Puritan through and through. Her narrative of the eleven weeks spent with the Indians is threaded effortlessly with quotations and exhortations from the Bible, the one book she cared about. Fairy tales, one gathers, were not on the reading list. And yet her history corresponds, point for point, with those stories from the old country which tell how a woman was carried off by the fairies. There is the same capricious violence from the strange people, the same stealthy plundering of food and drink from the lonely farms, the same theft of women and children. Captives might be needed to replace Indian children; they might be set to work, or offered up to the Devil - 'for aye at every seven years, they pay a teind to Hell'. The religious views of the Narragansett are not known, but Mary feared the worst, especially after they had selected one of her fellow-captives to be stripped naked. 'And when they had sung and danced around her (in their hellish manner) as long as they pleased, they knockt her on head, and the child in her arms with her' (Turner 1974: 322).

Half-starved and weary, Mary was rescued at last for twenty pounds, paid cash down by a friend of her husband who had plucked up courage to enter the Indian camp. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, other husbands were also making threats and bargains - bringing fire to burn the bushes on the fairy hill, or an iron knife to be thrust into its open doors. Usually the abducted wife is returned, although like the Indian captives she may have been threatened with a beating for speaking to one of her own race. Sometimes, if the husband is not brave or quick enough, the wild host will knock their victim on the head, and then there is nothing to show but a little blood trickling down from the air (Foster 1951: 67). However much the godly New Englanders would have disdained these legends, they loved a true story like that of Mary Rowlandson. Captivity narratives, almost always by women, found a ready market in early America, and passed deep into the national psyche. When the Indians no longer represented a threat, other bugbears took their place - Mormons, Catholics, gangsters, the criminal underworld... 'The image of the woman as pale, frail, protected, vulnerable, and above all chaste... is what furnishes the dramatic tension in the female captivity narrative' (Turner 1974: 310). Chastity, in its contemporary construction, was not a weakness but a source of almost supernatural power. Witness John Milton, who knew his fairies as well as his Bible:

*'no evil thing that walks by night
In fog, or fire, by lake, or moorish fen...
No goblin, or swart fairy of the mine,*

Hath hurtful power o'er true virginity'
(Comus 431-6)

The Lady in Comus is fixed in an enchanted chair, like many other traditional captives in fairyland or in Hell. She is offered magical wine, on the old principle that to take fairy food or drink while a captive in their country will make escape impossible. But the crystal cup is also a moral temptation, a seductive test of her virgin will, and by spurning it she triumphs over the enchanter, who flees as her brothers enter with drawn swords.

Preserving innocent women from temptation was a duty which their husbands took on willingly. Many stories deal with the protection of a young wife from the fairies in this way. Sandie Macharg overheard the fairies as they plotted to steal his bride, and hastened home. First he bolted and locked the doors; then, grimly, he pulled down a Bible and 'talked of mortification and prayer for averting calamity'. There is a thunderous knocking on the door; a messenger in the darkness calls out his wife to act as midwife, but Sandie will not let her budge. Then the night is lit by fire, as the cowshed is seen to be all in a blaze. Kept back from the door, the wife demands an explanation, but her husband continues to pray as only a Presbyterian can. By morning light, the fairies have given up. Outside the door, black and ugly, is the wooden stock which they had intended to substitute for the stolen wife. He throws it on the fire, where it cracks and spits (Briggs 1971: B1-264).

The dour Sandie gives his wife no hint of what is going on - a silence which is open to more than one interpretation. It is true that there is a traditional prohibition on speaking of the fairies, and that a refusal to name the danger outside can be understood as part of the protective magic that rings the house. But it is also a way of testing his young wife, of ensuring that she will be saved, not out of enlightened self-interest, but from pure obedience. In fairytales, a prohibition must always seem unreasonable; otherwise there would be no temptation to break it, and no moral credit for observing it.

It cannot be assumed that everyone, even in Scots folktales, subscribes to a full Calvinist morality. Perhaps Sandie is locking the door, not just to keep out the elves, but to keep his wife in. After all, an unguarded wife might well succumb to fairy blandishments, especially when they are designed to play on the weaknesses of her sex. The first call had involved sympathy for another woman in labour. Childbirth is a time of great uneasiness for a masterly husband, since it places women in the hands of other women, with no male control. The threat from the other side is greatest at such a time; magical protection is needed, and can it be safely left to the hands of slovenly female attendants? 'Near the hour of twelve at night they were alarmed with a dreadful noise, at which of a sudden the candles went out, which drove the attendants into the utmost confusion; soon as the women regained their half-lost senses, they called in the neighbours, who, after striking up lights, and looking towards the lying-in woman, found her a corpse, which caused great confusion in the family' (Briggs 1971: B1-311). Unlike most corpses, this one was restored to her family, once it was established that she had been taken to the fairy hill. The negligence of the drunken midwives was made good by the bold, confident actions of her brother, a sea captain, who dared to challenge the fairies in their dwelling.

A wife might be seemingly taken by death, and yet return from among the fairies. But there are other ways in which a wife can be lost. A curious Highland tale is reported at first hand, by the

son of the woman concerned. He was a child at the time, but old enough to understand that his mother and father did not get on together. There was another man, called Donald, who used to come to the house when his father was away. Soon there was a great quarrel, and then his mother was forbidden to see this other man: but next day she set out for the market, and there she was seen talking to him. That evening, she did not come home.

So far, so good. We feel we understand what is going on, and it doesn't involve fairies. But although the angry husband turned Donald's cottage upside down, there was no sign of his wife there - or anywhere else. Nobody saw her, except the children, and that was always at night. She would appear silently in the house, tend to them and brush their hair before vanishing again. Then, two months later, the man was walking past some woods when his wife called to him out of a hazel bush, saying she was tired and wanted to come home. He had to bring her a fresh item of clothing each day, because she was naked, and finally, when he brought her white cap, she told him to go home - which he did, and found her sitting by the fire, looking after the children. By common consent, nothing more was said about the matter (Folklore 21, 1910, 90).

So abduction is not always unwilling. 'If I had yon horn that I hear blawing / And yon elf-knight to sleep in my bosom', sighs Lady Isobel in the ballad, though in the event she gets rather more than she bargained for, as the elf-knight is a serial murderer. Like a smart girl, Isobel talks herself out of trouble (Grigson 1975: 40). The same cannot be said for Marstig's daughter in the Danish version, a more trusting soul. She gave her hand to the merman, followed him until they were alone out over the deep water, and then...

*'The shriek she shrieked among the waves
Was heard far up upon the land;
I rede good ladies, one and all,
They dance with no such unco' man.'*

Female boldness does not go unpunished in these stories (Dean-Smith 1973: 48).

The temptation offered by the demon lover is one of escape - not necessarily into fairyland. It is escape from the castle, the daily routine, the family: outside there is another world, the greenwood, with its own exotic inhabitants. 'The gypsies came to my Lord Cassillis' gate / And O but they sang bonnie!' The laird's wife runs, unrestrained, to the head of the stairs so that she can listen to the dark strangers, and 'they cast their glamourie o'er her' (Grigson 1975: 53). Glamour is, above all, a fairy power. It changes the appearances of things, making the foul fair, and the fair foul. Music and song were another otherworldly skill; and like the fairies, and the wood-demons before them, gypsies are rumoured to carry off unguarded children. But if Lady Cassillis is carried off, it is not against her will. Under the spell, if it is a spell, of the gypsy lover, she rejects not only her husband but his whole social world. Instead of feather-beds, she will choose the hard ground; instead of red wine, the river water; instead of culture, nature.

Captivity narratives caught the imagination most when they confronted their heroine with the risk of seduction. This need not be physical. Lady Cassillis swears to her abandoned husband that she is still chaste, and even Mary Rowlandson observed, with surprise as well as relief, that the Narragansetts behaved like gentlemen. These tales hint at a deeper threat - that the captive may embrace, not just a stranger, but strangeness itself. Like the girl in Borges' Story of the Warrior

and the Captive, she may go native. 'In her copper-coloured face, which was daubed in ferocious colours, her eyes were of that reluctant blue the English call grey... The woman answered that she was happy and returned that night to the desert' (Borges 1964: 161).

Who would not be happy? – and the fairy kingdom offers endless bliss, on certain conditions.

*'To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And is anxious in its sleep',*

they sing in Yeats, and elsewhere 'O heart the winds have shaken, the unappeasable host / Is comelier than candles at Mother Mary's feet' (Yeats 1962: 3, 21). An eternity of cold, heartless joy among the sidhe is a terrible temptation: at least, it is to some temperaments. As Bob Stewart observes, writing of the allure of fairyland, what may be irresistibly seductive to some people appears simply trivial to others (Stewart 1992: 10). However, priests, husbands and other guardians of moral welfare were not disposed to take any chances.

Yeats took one strand of the fairy tradition, and worked on it for his own poetic purposes. In the original Irish material on which he drew, things are less romantic. These are peasant stories. The young women who go to the fairy hill do not do so out of a yearning to leave the world, but are the unwilling victims of fairy spite (Smith 1987). The situation is not seen from the viewpoint of the girl, but as yet another of the vexations which nature imposes on a hard-pressed rural community, one which cannot afford to lose a pair of hands on the farm. It is worst when a young wife is lost through death, or apparent death, in childbirth. A funeral is bad enough, but who is to look after the baby? And the situation is a common one, since the human body is ill-adapted for bearing children, especially first children. The human mind is not very well adapted to bear this fact with resignation, either. The death of a young mother is a tragedy - a defiance of hope so cruel that it requires a supernatural explanation. In ancient Greece, and in modern India, the cruelty is transferred to the mother-corpse herself, and she turns into a malignant ghost, preying on the fertile living. In Ireland and Scotland, these women became fairy victims.

The physical risks of childbirth are part of its liminal condition. It is not only the unborn baby who will enter on a new life; the woman herself, especially if it is a first birth, has to make the difficult transition from her status of bride and lover into that of mother. Such moments of change represent breaks in the usual continuity of things - cracks opening up in society and personality, through which strange things can creep, especially if the midwives are drowsy or negligent, and there has been no salt sprinkled before the door.

The crisis of liminality exists in all cultures, including our own, but we are unusual in a reluctance to give it supernatural expression. Instead the phenomenon is medicalised, and referred to as post-natal depression. However it is constructed, there is much about the stolen wife stories that suggests what we would think of as depression - especially in the less stereotyped, first-hand narratives. A young woman touched by the fairy sits by the fire, eating nothing, taking no notice of human life. 'She sat there by the hob for three days and she didn't turn her face to the people. And everybody said she used to be a pleasant, jolly girl, but this was

like an old woman' (Gregory 1920: 121). 'Rose grew so peculiar that her folks locked her up' (Evans-Wentz 1911: 34).

Obviously we cannot reduce accounts of fairy possession to mental illness, just as we cannot reduce the Donald story to furtive adultery – not if we want to understand these things as lived experience, rather than making up explanations which will trim them to suit our own cultural template. But an acquaintance with clinical depression is the best way in which we can understand what it was like to share space with an elf-struck wife. 'She never kept the bed, but she'd sit in the corner of the kitchen on a mat, and from a good stout lump of a girl that she was, she was wasted to nothing, and her teeth grew as long as your fingers and then they dropped out. And she'd eat nothing at all, only crabs and sour things. And she'd never leave the house in the day-time, but in the night she'd go out and pick things out of the fields she could eat' (Gregory 1920: 110).

Depression needs time for its cure, and time is in short supply in a peasant household. There was little sympathy for a pair of idle hands, that ate and did no work. In one account, the mother-in-law leaves the young wife sitting by the fire, with orders to get the dinner ready before the men come in from the fields. Returning, she finds nothing has been done, and lashes out at the girl with some strands of flax – flax is such a labour-intensive crop that it can stand as a symbol of work itself. The girl, or a thing in her likeness, flees shrieking up the chimney and the real wife is met with soon after, walking down from the fairy hill to take up her duties (Gregory 1920: 121).

In these stories of stolen wives, a clear distinction is made between the real wife, the one who was there before the fairy troubles came on her, and the sullen thing that has taken her place. This false wife is not real; she is a deceit, something which should be treated without any mercy. The laird of Balmachie, while away from home, encountered a troop of fairies and made them release their captive. It was his wife, whom he thought he had left in bed. Wrapping her up warmly and carrying her back home, he confronts the false wife who remains in the bedchamber. 'She was fretful, discontented, and complained much of having been neglected in his absence'. The laird simulates concern. He has a fire made up in the bedchamber and then, in one swift move, plucks the hated figure from the bedclothes and hurls her on the fire. 'She bounced like a sky-rocket, and went through the ceiling and out at the roof of the house, leaving a hole among the slates' (Briggs 1971: B1-297). And so the scene is set for the return of the true, loving wife.

In other accounts it is made clear that this thing which is thrown in the fire is the wooden stock, carved into the likeness of a woman, which the fairies prepare for their attempt at abduction, as in the story of Sandie Macharg (Briggs 1971: B1-360). This distinguishes these stories from accounts of changelings, in which an actual, wizened fairy is threatened with the fire in order to bring back the loved, healthy child. Either way, there is an unpleasant whiff of charred flesh about these tales. They offer a charter for behaviour which would have been unacceptable if it had been seen as involving suffering human beings, rather than spirits or wooden blocks. Was it not the Japanese prison guards who referred to their experimental subjects as 'logs of wood'?

Stolen wife and changeling stories are common developments from a single mediaeval prototype. Gervase of Tilbury tells of a girl child in Catalonia who was carried off in consequence of an angry word from her father, when he was tired of her crying. Seven years later, news came that the mountain demons were prepared to return her. The repentant father climbed lonely

mountains, and called out for his child. 'Like a sudden gust of wind she came, tall in stature, but wasted and dirty, her eyes rolling wildly, and her speech inarticulate' (Keightley 1900 [1828]: 457).

The Bishop of Gerunda made a splendid sermon on the occasion, reminding parents of the ill consequences that follow when you wish your offspring to the Devil. The unwanted child grows up rough and neglected: when she is wanted again, there is a magical change. After reviewing the abuse, deceit, mania, adultery and torture involved in most stories of fairy abduction, it is nice to conclude on one with a happy ending.

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Fauns and Fairies

An article from the Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness

Since the day on which the Rev. Robert Kirk, minister at Aberfoil, “went to his own herd,” in 1692, our knowledge of fairies has made no appreciable advance. When men ceased to prosecute witches and burn them, the traditions of the past were by mutual consent forgotten, and the prevalent type of Christianity put curious prying into the unknown under a ban. So it happened that during the latter half of the seventeenth, and the whole of the eighteenth century Scotland, forgot its folk-lore. Old stories with a spice of Paganism were deemed unsuited for grave and sober Presbyterian households. Even the cherished traditions of the Roman Catholic church were regarded as something more than harmless superstition, and treated accordingly. In odd corners the older folk-lore stories remained. Men could tell tales of battle where other heroes than the Great Twin Brothers led the van, and record, with minute amplification of circumstance, scenes of midnight carouse and revel, at which immortals appeared and claimed the service and homage of those whose spirits were congenial to the forgotten cult. Gradually the beliefs or superstitions of Christianity displaced the ancestral spirits from their sylvan homes, and substituted a kind of personal devil, clad in bull hide and smelling evilly of brimstone, thus transforming beautiful legends and stories of folk-lore of untold value into grotesque representations of a Christianity little understood and rarely practised.

When science begun to sift medieval and modern accretions from the ancient, little which was of direct value was left; and only by infinite pains, and comparing beliefs, customs, ceremonial acts and usages in widely separated countries could a measure of certainty be arrived at, and this is particularly the case in regard to the subject of this paper. Of theories and writing we have enough and more than enough. Scattered through the records of trials in court, enquiries before ecclesiastics, theological dissertations on demonology, diaries and curious essays, there is no lack of counsel; but any one who is acquainted with Kirk’s essay on “Fairies, Elves, and Fauns,” and Martin’s “Description of the Western Islands,” must feel that both ancient and modern theorists have not much more to relate. That a great deal of good work has been done since then every one knows, but this has been by way of wider research in other fields, illustration and comparison of facts already recorded, and a closer application of scientific methods to the elucidation of the facts folk-lore has to teach. But this has not greatly added to our direct knowledge of how our ancestors viewed the fairy world; that we learn rather by inference than by fresh discovery within our own borders.

In discussing the subject of fairies we much approach it as antiquarians, folk-lorists, and anthropologists; for beyond all doubt fairy cult is a complex thing, and is based on material supplied by tradition going back thousands of years: on the facts of nature and unexplained phenomena, as rappings, loud noises, mysterious movement of bodies, lights and phantoms, and all the complex powers of the unknown as these presented themselves to primitive man as he looked out upon the world, and as they reshaped themselves through ages upon ages of an evolution imperceptible in its upward movement – here leaving an ancient belief behind forever, there seizing on a new thought and clinging to it with the same tenacity with which man clings to life itself.

In this paper I propose to glance first at a few of the more common fairy beliefs and legends, and then endeavour to trace their origin and how they are allied to other phases of folk-lore and myth. And to revert to Robert Kirk. Before he “went to his own herd,” he had no manner of doubt regarding the actual physical existence of fairies, and with rare glimpses of the scientific method, sets himself to explain the undoubted facts. His evidence in this respect is of more value than Martin’s, who simply records many Celtic beliefs and customs as a curious survival. Kirk’s pamphlet does not appear to have been published till comparatively recently, but Lord Reay saw it about the close of the seventeenth century, and Scott had access to it at the time when he wrote the letters to Lockhart. These, and a number of his poems and ballads, are largely indebted to the minister of Aberfoil. When Kirk wrote, probably about 1680, unseen beings abounded, castles were haunted, lakes and rivers had their denizens, witches practised their evil arts, and kirk sessions exercised their diligence in rooting out these public pests; and to doubt the existence of fairies would have been to have exposed his own orthodoxy to a severe strain. So his science must yield to acknowledged facts.

His fairy bodies are congealed air or essence. They have, or assume, the human form, but are diminutive and most frequently invisible. They eat, but not our gross material food, for only the finest spirituous essences serve to sustain them. These they extract or suck out of ordinary substances, and neither corn nor milk comes amiss to them. They have been known to impoverish whole fields so that the meal made from the corn had no sustaining power, nor would barley so affected make whisky. The little people can work, and they have been heard striking with hammers as a smith at a forge; but their only visible work is the elf arrow. They change their place of residence quarterly, and where there is at one period of the year high revel, with music and the dance, there is at another nothing but the silence of the everlasting hills. As they migrate from place to place they swim on air low down above the ground, and men, seers that is, have often seen them travelling through space, and felt a rush as of wings, with low musical notes which filled earth and air as they went.

Among fairies there are orders, kings, more often queens, and commoners. The latter are divided into various grades, chiefs, masters, servants, slaves. They attend at all banquets, marriages, and funerals, and take part of the provision made for those who attend, not in its gross material form – they simply extract its essence and regale themselves on this ethereal fare. They help to carry the body to the place of sepulture at funerals, and take part in all the ceremonies connected therewith, except those of a religious or Christian character. They go fishing on stream and tarn in the guise of monks in cowl and hood. Men have fairies as their co-walker or double, and these are never separate from their human second self. A voracious eater does not require more food for his support than another man, but an elf is his co-walker and must be daily fed. Our reverend author prescribes no remedy for this form of possession, but there are other fairy evils he knows how to cure. For example; when a cow calves, if some of her dung is smeared on the calf’s mouth before it sucks, no harm can come to the milk during the season. When a mother just begins nursing her new born infant, a bible, iron, or a piece of bread placed in her bed will prevent her being stolen by the fairies to nurse elf children, a common occurrence in those old days at Aberfoil. Of all substances the little people feared iron most; and that because hell lies between the chill tempest and hot scalding metals, and no sooner does a fairy smell iron than it fears and flies. Fairy clothing resembles that of the country where they dwell. Its colour is always green. At Aberfoil they wore kilts; in Ayrshire trews! They become old and die, but not as we do; for nothing ever perishes in fairyland. Everything goes on in circles lesser or greater, but continuing for ever and

renewing all that revolves, every change being but a kind of transmigration into new forms. Nor is the mystic land devoid of literature; but the books are so learned, involved, and abstruse, that mortal man has never been able to unravel their contents.

The wraith, or death messenger from elf-land may be insulted, and his vengeful rage knows no bounds, only his wrath may be appeased by the death of an animal, whether offered directly in sacrifice or not the record does not relate. The coming of this elf land wraith seers can foretell. They have seen him and have entered into combat with him. But he is impalpable and invulnerable, for he may be cut through with a sword blade with no resistance and no result; the blade simply passes as through the liquid air. On the other hand he has wrestled with seers, and many a sore combat has been waged on the heathery hill-side between those who could see farther than their fellows, and the mysterious figures, half light, half darkness, which met with them and maimed not a few of them for the remainder of their days – which same may be a kind of Pagan paraphrase of the well-known story Of Jacob by the Jabbok. The spirit-world messenger inflicted his wounds with elf-arrows, and these left no visible mark though the wound was mortal. The only hope of cure was to find the spot where the arrow entered the body, and place one's finger upon it. As men were wounded to death by these fairyland weapons, so, too, were cows and other domestic animals. After such wounds they pined and died with no visible sign of injury.

Departed human souls frequently dwell in fairy hills, and are identified with the fairy folk. Numerous instances are related of their being seen and even recovered. When our reverend historian "went to his own herd," it was revealed to a seer, after his supposed burial, that he was not dead, and that the coffin contained nothing but leaves. On a certain night he was to reappear, and if a relative, named to the seer, threw his dirk over him he would remain; if not, vanish for ever to the land of mirth and song. He did appear, but the man who alone could detain him among mortals got so excited that he only threw the dirk as the minister vanished into thin air. It was too late. He had gone to his own land, and was seen no more. He still, doubtless, visits the scenes of his mortal life on winter nights when the moon is full.

The vanished world of those days could not get along without its seers. Men became soothsayers by training. An essential part of the rites of initiation was, that the novice should make himself a girdle from a horse hair tether which had been used in binding a dead body to a bier. With this girdle about his loins he must stoop downward and look backwards between his legs till he saw a funeral approach and cross two marches between lands or farms. Another method of watching an approaching funeral was through a hole in a board where a wood knot had fallen out. Having attained to second sight, the seer could tell the future by looking through the shoulder-blade of a sheep, and this was a sure method of detecting any misdemeanours in the owner's household. A man who doubted his wife's fidelity, had but to present a shoulder of mutton to the seer, and the facts were revealed.

But the erratic movements of wives were not always the result of fancy for a handsome man. Fairies stole them, and only a seer could restore the abducted spouse to her sorrowing lord; and our author puts one well-authenticated case on record of a wife being stolen, and a fairy woman substituted in her place. The elf-wife died and was buried. After a suitable period the widower consoled himself with a "fair and comely maiden" as his second wife. At the end of two years the original wife was restored, but whether she proved a kind of Enoch Arden the history does not

relate. The author, however, adds that “there is an art, not superstition, for recovering the stolen.” It is a pity he did not deem it worth while to put the art on record, only being well known and authenticated, this was unnecessary in his day, and it is to be feared it has been lost. He does tell us a number of marvellous facts, of which the following is one: – Lord Tarbat met a seer in the west of Ross-shire. He was working in a field, and Tarbat having observed him looking intently towards a hill above the place where he was working, asked him if he saw anything. He replied that he saw a troop of soldiers leading their horses down the hill, and turning them loose to graze in a field of barley. This was on the 4th of May. In August of that same year, a party of soldiers under Colonel Middleton led their horses down the hill in question, and turned them loose to graze in the very field where the seer was sowing his barley in the previous May when he saw them.

This brief summary of the contents of Mr Kirk’s pamphlet gives pretty well the substance of what was known of fairies two centuries ago, and all the stories gathered since then, may be regarded as a mere amplification and fuller illustration of what was well-known and universally believed about the time of the Reformation.

In “Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition” we have a number of familiar stories of work done by fairies – their tireless energy, the spells they laid upon people, how inanimate objects did their bidding, and how men outwitted them. The same is found in the pages of Kennedy’s book regarding Irish fairies. As we advance we see a kind of Christianised Paganism opposing itself to the forces of demonology, and in accordance with the trend of the prevalent theology prevailing. For example: – A diligent housewife is busily engaged preparing yam for cloth. She is both careful and worldly. Sleep has departed from her eyes, and as she spins after the witching hour has struck, she keeps wishing she had some one to help her in her labours. Obedient to her wish a fairy enters and begins to spin, another comes and takes to carding the wool, then another and another, till they convert the house into a workshop, and the whirr of labour is heard afar. The husband sleeps and snores, nor is his rest disturbed by the busy scene. The wife provides refreshment for her guests, and they devour all she can give them – they are more materialistic than Kirk’s. She now wished to be rid of them but could not, so she hurried to a wise man. The seer told her that her husband was under a spell, and that she must return to the house, and before she enters shout three times – “Burghill is on fire;” and when the fairies rushed out to see if their house was destroyed she must enter and disarrange everything in the house. This she did, and when the fairies returned one called out “ Spinning wheel open the door.” “I cannot, my band is off.” And so all the other articles, wool cards, water pails, chairs, and tables.

Fairy visits did not always end thus. The miller of Alva had his wife spirited away, and had infinite labour before recovering her; while the smith of Tullibody saw his never no more. Working a bar of iron he heard the abductors sing as they flew up the chimney –

*“Deedle Linkum Doddie,
We’ve gotten drunken Davie’s wife,
The smith of Tullibody.”*

The theft of children was more frequent than the abduction of wives, and when a child was taken an elfin was substituted; but they do not appear to have succeeded in grafting our heavier mortality on to their own aerial bodies. Even thefts were not always on one side, for a man

rushing in upon a fairy festival and carrying off their drinking goblet could keep it as an heirloom and cornucopia for all time, if he only succeeded in crossing a running stream before being overtaken by the revellers whom he despoiled, a fact immortalised by the famous riding exploit of Tam o' Shanter and his grey mare. One such fairy goblet is preserved at Edenhall, in Cumberland. This was secured by one of the ancient family of Musgrove, and while it is preserved prosperity attends their house; but

*“If this glass do break or fall,
Farewell the luck of Edenhall.”*

A more useful motto than the rhyme of the Clydesdale ploughboys of a past generation, who believed if they but sang as they turned at the end of the rig,

*“Fairy, fairy, bake me a baunock and roast me a collop,
And I'll gie ye a sportle aff my gad end,”*

that at the fourth round these desirable delicacies should be there waiting for them.

The fairies were on the whole a good-natured sportive folk, but touchy on matters of names, and revengeful of insults and injuries. They differed from brownies or domestic spirit drudges. The latter were given to eavesdropping and tale-bearing, and frequently accused others when they were themselves the culprits. One who did drudgery for a very close-fisted Galloway matron,, who gave her servants but poor fare and little of it, is a typical example. Two servant girls stole a bowl of milk and a bannock.

In order to make a fair division of the spoil, they sat on a bench and took alternate mouthfuls of the bread and milk. Presently the one accused the other of taking more than her fair share, and was answered by a similar charge. Suddenly they were startled by a “Ha, ha! Brownie has't; Brownie tells.” These domestic spirits and fairies blend together in many of our folk-lore stories. For example: – A steward during the winter months steals small quantities of his master's grain. In spring he has enough to sow a field for himself, which he does; but when the corn is fully ripe, the fairies from a neighbouring Shi pull up every stalk, thrash it clean, and deposit the grain in the bam of the man from whom the seed was stolen. This is doubtless Brownie's work though attributed to fairies. It has besides a modem flavour, and leaves an uncomfortable impression of copy-book head-lines and adaptations, by some shrewd ecclesiastic in the days when fairies were still real beings, and scientists had not learned to call “brimstone” by its more modem name.

But our fairy cult as a whole represents them as a free, rollicking, social pagan society – music and the dance, midnight rides and wanderings, elvish pranks and light laughter covers the canvas, and any departure from this cau only be regarded as the growing spirit of austerity in the religious opinions of the people, and that this gave a gloomy bias to certain traditions and a moral or rather theological trend to others. This is borne out by the well-known fact that modem English fairies are more sportive than their Scotch cousins. Naturally the fairy legends tend all over Europe to merge into the common doctrines of demonology, and this is the more natural as the same process goes on among savage men, with every advance of thought, as we shall see. The green patches called “the guidman's croft,” which our ancestors never disturbed with spade or ploughshare, were, though not expressly avowed within historic times, sacred to spirits, fairies, or

pagan gods, and so passed over as by right of inheritance to the more modern devil. This is all the more certain, as beneficent gods were favourable to agriculture the world over, and the fairy knowe and guid man's croft were left untilled, first from reverence; then through fear of malign influences. Again, the Ourisk or domestic spirit resembles Pan, and is something between a goat and a man; hence a goat's head being made representative of the devil. One of these Ourisks becomes troublesome to a miller down Lochlomond way. On being caught red-handed and challenged, it gives its name as "Myself." Here we have the "Outis" of the Odyssey, transferred from the shores of the Mediterranean to the banks of Lochlomond by a process of oral tradition which has gone on, the world over, since first men dispersed themselves and carried with them to their new abodes the little stock in trade with which the race emerged from its cradle.

The working machinery of tradition the world over is a dwarf race and their doings. A people untamed and untamable, impalpable and invulnerable, and these we find in England as in Scotland; dwelling in green glades in Dorset, in caves in Shetland; frequenting ancient ruins in the Highlands; hid in the depths of the forest in Germany; wandering on the mountain tops in East Central Africa; and making their home with the Bengal tiger on the plains of India. They keep the Breton peasant in a state of perpetual fear, and their favour must be bought in New Caledonia. Clearly we must look for some explanation which will account for world-wide facts like these elsewhere than among the Scottish "Pechts," worthy burrowers as they must have been.

The Celtic peoples of Europe being essentially an imaginative race, ascribe to their sylvan pigmies social and convivial qualities of which we hear nothing among peoples of different origin. But this is nothing more than a detail resulting from special characteristics, both national and individual, and these social qualities freely ascribed by tradition to its heroes easily pass into an organised fairy society, corresponding to what existed during the oldest memories of the race preserving the traditions. Kings, queens, courts, courtiers, splendid halls, feasts, brilliant surroundings, loyalty, love, revenge – these are the necessary trappings in which the Celtic imagination clothes its puppets. These are the things most loved and sought after by any typical Celt. It is only when a seer – a seer of Christian times, be it observed – has a vision of elfland, that its glory turns to dust and ashes, and its banquets to tasteless and saltless insipidity. Then fairy bodies shrink into the shrivelled decrepitude of old age, and intercourse with them is converted into a social crime and deadly sin.

Nor could the Celtic imagination be otherwise, for the Celt himself is a curious bundle of contradictions. The man who in the early morning would commit the most cold-blooded murder to save his chief the trouble or danger of slaying an enemy later in the day, would spend the evening composing love ditties with no sense of incongruity. The chief himself, impoverished beyond the hope of solvency, assumes the airs of a man able to dispense princely hospitality without the slightest inconvenience or financial difficulty, and every clansman speaks of his chief as regal in dignity and princely in fortune, even should he have suffered the deepest indignities at his hands but a day before. Passion and poetry, love and revenge, cruelty and pathos, individual independence and absolute loyalty to the chief or the cause, blend together in the Celtic character with no sense of incongruity left, and the Celt is the same to day, or the breed and blood is the same, as when Somerled roved the Western seas, giving short shrift and a long halter, to any unfortunate wight who raised unnecessary scruples about adopting the clan name and wearing the heather badge.

Sleeping on a dun-Shi exposed one to the danger of being transported to fairyland, leaving no trace of the unhappy wight's whereabouts except his bonnet placed on the top of some church steeple as he sped his aerial flight. But the journey was not always through the limped blue, for Jane Thomas travelled to elfland mounted on the "lady's own milk white steed," and left the north wind behind. It was not so long after the Rhymer made his famous pilgrimage to the farthest confines of elfland that a new bias was given to the graphic stories of a long-forgotten past. We find the Earl of Orrery sending his valet or butler to buy playing cards, which were now veritable "devil's books." While on his errand he was invited to join a fairy revel. This he refused to do, and hurried home; but he was almost carried away bodily, though Lord Orrery and two bishops held him down – rather a poor certificate to the power of book, bell, and candle.

It was possible to hold converse with fairy-land without journeying thither and taking up one's abode there. Bessie Dunlop met Thomas Reid, who was killed at Pinkie, and had long conferences with him. He stood by her and showed her fairy horsemen when others saw nothing. Through him she became familiar with all the mysteries of the unseen world, and at her trial gloried in her knowledge and power. Poor Bessie, whether lunatic or driven mad by torture we do not know, for all the record we have of her is a note scrawled on the margin of the trial record – "Convict and burnt." Alison Pearson was another who had her familiars from fairy-land. One William Simpson, a cousin, who was "taken away by a man of Egypt," came to her clad in green, and told her what men may not know nor maidens dreari. He always left abruptly when adjured in God's name, which is another copy book headline if you please. Alison affected to cure diseases by elfine arts, and Patrick Adamson, Bishop of St Andrews, who suffered from some intractable malady, submitted to her cures. The old pagan was promptly "libelled" by his peers. Besides effecting cures she delivered oracles. She met Lethington and Buccleuch in fairyland, and we can only hope that these turbulent spirits had a less stormy existence among the green knowes and the elves who dwell there, than they had as courtiers and rebels by turns. Alison's fairy friends stole infants because they had to pay a yearly tribute to Tartarus, and mortal infants stolen helped to make up the tale. For her tampering with green men and dead politicians Alison Pearson followed Bessie Dunlop, and went to her own herd in lurid flames; and men looked, and as they saw the smoke ascending, blessed God who had given power to holy men to root out evil-doers.

Setting the legend of "True Thomas" aside, which is simply a Scotch version of Numa and Egeria, we have, in the statements of those who professed to hold converse with the unseen world, the imagination run riot after a confession had been wrung from them by torture. Once that was made, all subsequent statements were simply the grouping together and localising of all the folk-lore stories they knew. One can understand a woman with a distinct individuality tortured into a confession, and knowing she had neither love nor pity to expect, simply glorying in scandalising her legal and clerical examiners by each enormity she confessed. At this distance of time we cannot reduce to their original form the stories they adapted; but certain it is that, after examination by torture, they personified the heroes of ancient story, and even this throws us back a step, and brings us nearer to the real fairyland we are in search of.

The Welsh Nicneven is but a hag, a bad reproduction of the Greek Hecate, and has little in common with the jolly and convivial Mab. The Morayshire trials do not add much to what we learn from the two already referred to. But they all point back to a time when woodland deities abounded, and when these passed into elves, fauns, and fairies. They are sportive or malevolent,

according as the ideas of the Reformation or the pagan Renaissance were pushed and almost forced upon the people. The old beliefs, deities, superstitions, and traditions must be adapted or disposed of as the case may be. A death by summary violence they refused to accept; but being violently driven out, and the tolerant indulgence of the older religion and science being no longer possible, the gods retired to fairyland. They continued to revisit mortals as guardian spirits, and in this form the Church found some use for them. A Banshi gave Macleod of Dun-vegan a fairy banner. It has already been in two battles, and each time was borne to victory. When it is next carried to the field of combat, Macleod will be carried away to fairyland, nevermore to revisit Dunvegan with its scenes of song and story.

The guardian fairy appears most frequently in Irish legend, and the minuteness of detail regarding time, place, and circumstance, leaves no doubt as to the Irish Celts being animal worshippers. Myth is never so graphic as when it weaves actual facts into its narrative; and the creditable way in which Irish domestic animals acquit themselves, reminds one of the Hottentot wolf which appeared at places a hundred miles apart in a single night. For example, a talented Irish bard satirised mice that troubled him, and at the same time lampooned domestic cats for allowing such vermin to put their noses into an egg he was eating. He was at Cruachan, in Connaught, at the time. The King of the Cats was at Knowth on the Boyne. No sooner did the senachan finish his rhymes than his feline majesty took the road under a vow to eat nothing till he had chastised the poet. Arrived at Cruachan, he seized the offender, carried him off, and swept across the Shannon with him, and would doubtless have borne him to Knowth, to be solemnly tried by a jury of cats, but St Kieran, who was working a bar of hot iron, seeing a baptised person being carried away, shot the bolt at the abductor. It pierced the cat's body just one inch behind the man. He was saved, and the saint's labour rewarded. In this narrative the resolve to eat nothing, the timely appearance of the saint, and the fell design of the cat being frustrated because the poet was baptised, reminds us too forcibly of that band of Jewish enthusiasts who vowed neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. The ancient belief in the supernatural powers of animals is used as a foil to the saint's intuitive knowledge regarding baptised persons, and his power against all malign influences, the virtue of iron as a talisman being brought in us an incidental circumstance.

Nor is this the only manner in which the priest appears in those fairy legends. The minister of Aberfoil did not record the method of recovering the stolen, but his Irish confrere gives us a means of knowing whether we have changelings in our cradles. One of these elfin imps was found to be always fretful and wailing. It ate what was given it, but never seemed to be satisfied or thrive. Doubts having arisen as to its being a fairy, it was arranged to have it baptised, and for that purpose it was, on the way to the priest's residence, carried across a stream. When crossing, the imp wriggled out of its wrappings, freed itself from the nurse's arms, and plunged into the water with a "Ha! ha! ha!" of derisive laughter.

Reference has been made to the more sportive tendencies of English fairies as compared to the Scotch. The Irish have their own peculiar characteristics, and of these one is a strong tendency to faction fights. The man who at Ballinasloe fair asked the time of day, and then said, "Eleven O'clock, be jabbers, and the divil a foight yet!" was no keener for a riot than are some of these sylvan pigmies. Their hostile meetings were near streams, and a rushing noise as of wing-flapping was heard by seers on either side. This rushing noise moved and swayed from side to side, as do men when settling a disputed matter at a fair. As the noise went to this side or that, faint silvery bugling was heard as if to rally the combatants. The notes were strange and weird,

differing from all human music, and impossible to reproduce on any known instrument. Their light bodies were heard falling into the water with a noise resembling that made by an angler's fly when fishing. After such falling noises shouts of victory could be heard filling the air, not as our harsh notes make the hills reverberate, but as a kind of low, wafting sound, as if the air itself moved and became audible, and so fell upon the senses like an enclosing medium.

A prominent feature of Irish fairy lore is the Ban-Shi, or Guardian Spirit. She appeared to persons of pure Milesian origin, in whose veins there was not a trace of Norman blood, and announced to them certain future events. When an approaching death was to be made known, she appeared in mourning, and evinced all the outward signs of bereavement and sorrow. Closely allied to this guardian spirit is the fairy love. Respectable Presbyterians have had their fairy loves, to the no small scandal of their wives. The case of Fion's daughter is well known. She, according to high courtly etiquette, was, on being betrothed, given in charge to a trusted guardian – this is a common custom among Africans at this day, and to the guardian the bridegroom is responsible. The guardian consigns her to the care of another for added security, and he to the bridegroom. The bridegroom had a fairy love. She bullied and upbraided him; told him false stories about the bride, but all to no purpose, for he loved the King's daughter. The fairy then turned her into a hound, and a hound she remained. The husband stormed and raged; the wife whined piteously, but all to no purpose. The fairy was obdurate till the husband came under a dreadful vow to renounce his wife for ever. Then she was restored to womanhood, while the husband vanished into elf-land, and still holds courtly revel when the moon is at the full.

These general statements and examples, which might be indefinitely multiplied, illustrate with tolerable accuracy the fairy belief as it has come down to us in our own land. The whole field of fairy cult is too wide to be touched upon in a brief paper, and that just because we find similar traditions among peoples differing from each other in race, language, religion, institutions, customs, habits, and usages. And the question forces itself upon us, Whence these legends so universal and persistent? Have they a common origin, and if so, can we trace it back to a once universal cult? Or is it simply the result of a peculiar tendency of the human mind? Do legends, as we possess them, represent the faded memory of a lost race, or are they the dying flickers of a world religion? And do the variations in details simply point to modifications and adaptations, or do they mark radical differences? Are the traditions and accretions of Brahminism, Buddhism, Mohametanism, and Christianity, as these are modified by race, locality, and social institutions, part of this once common cult?

These questions have been variously answered, and men have not even now arrived at a universally accepted solution. Only as the sciences of antiquarian research, ethnology, and anthropology eliminate the modern from the ancient and pre-historic, can we hope to attain to definite results. If we look only at the fairies of our own land and their German cousins, we find Mr Macritchie and others arguing them into a race of dwarf inhabitants, whose memory has been obliterated by time, as they themselves were exterminated by the conquerors, and that they made their last retreat in underground dwellings, which still exist to prove beyond dispute the soundness of this conclusion. In order to identify the semi-mythical Fions with the fairies, he is driven to the necessity of converting the former into a race of dwarfs, and that on the sole ground that the exploits of certain dwarfs of that famous race are preserved by tradition. He reminds us too that the knight-errants of old had each a dwarf attendant, a statement fatal to the theory of a

war of extermination on the part of the conquerors. Sons of fairywomen take service with the Fions, a somewhat unnecessary illustration if the Fions were themselves the fairies!

A bishop of Orkney appears to support the extermination theory, and gives names and places. One Haarfayr, a ninth century worthy, obliterates all trace of a whole people, and we are invited to believe that since then all memory of them has perished, and that we find neither waif nor stray to give evidence of their existence except the people clad in green. To the worthy churchman the Peti were an exceedingly small people. They worked with incredible energy at city building during the morning and evening, but were in daylight devoid of all strength and energy, and reared to their underground dwellings during the day. One asks with amazement why these dwarfs should work with incredible energy at city building if their homes were underground burrows? And whether the zeal for building was inspired by the church? The bishop, it is clear, does not advance our knowledge. Indeed, all ancient history lies under the suspicion of adaptation, and the sins of ecclesiastical history are more aggravated than those of secular narrative.

But any facts are useful to support a theory, and the realists, or euhemerists, as they like to be styled, find, in the loss of strength during the day and alleged defective vision in sunlight by the good bishop's dwarfs, a sound reason for the identification of Fions and fairies. There is another line of argument – that based on root words and vocables. The name for an underground dwelling, in a language which could not be that of the original inhabitants, but that of the conquerors, affords strong presumption that they lived underground; that they were dirty in their habits; that their dens reeked of filth; and that they themselves were but a modified kind of skunk as they emerged into the light of day, so evilly did they smell.

It does not fall within the scope of this paper to take account of underground human dwellings. War and conquest, possibly partial extermination, may have given colour to many fairy legends. It may be pointed out that certain south-east African tribes live habitually underground in earth excavations. These are not their only dwellings, and are used for security or concealment, or both. The slight basket hut, with its straw roof, is a poor citadel to defend. It is easily fired by an enemy, and then the inmates can be speared at leisure as they emerge from the burning dwelling. The underground burrow cannot be so easily destroyed, even if it is discovered, no easy matter as a rule, and this is especially the case at night. So the native in time of profound peace occupies the more airy and healthy hut. In times of war or danger he lives in his hut by day, but retires to his underground chamber at night. And any one seeing and entering a sentry cell in Angoui land ceases to wonder at the small size of many similar chambers found in underground dwellings in Scotland. A man crouching with, his chin between his knees does not need a high vaulted roof. Our own earth houses, doubtless, served a similar purpose in the wild and lawless days of old, when clan feuds were rife and fire the most effectual weapon in rooting out a troublesome sept. The ordinary houses were wattle; the strongholds burrows. That fire was a ready means of warfare within historic times we know, and the name of at least one Highland parish is evidence of the fact.

The fairy cult is world-wide, and to account for it we must travel farther afield than Highland Brochs, Fion Kings, and Gaelic particles, and go back to a time when man looked upon nature as the true divinity, and worshipped her in the person of his chief, and then in sylvan deities who for him were the personification of the powers of nature. To gain a clear understanding of such

worship our appeal must not be to Highland fairies, their English cousins and German kinsfolk, where primitive beliefs have been compelled into the service of the varying phases of the historical religions professed from century to century, and made and re-made to suit the predominant bias. Our appeal must be, in the first instance, to people who have remained practically unchanged through millenniums, and who to-day perform the same acts of worship, and revere the same deities which inspired the world with awe in days when the remote ancestors of the Chaldean astrologers gazed upon the stars and read the fate of nations and individuals indifferently, as written in the heavens, or in the spots found on the entrails of a decapitated cock.

Among such peoples we do not expect to find a fairy tradition, for the fairies themselves are there. Our popular tales are being daily enacted. Spirits live and move and regulate the course of nature. They are beneficent or revengeful; sportive or cruel, as they are treated. They know pride, anger, jealousy, and revenge. They demand victims and abduct persons. They take an active interest in the affairs of men, and insinuate themselves into the most profound secrets. They feast on the essence of food, especially that offered in sacrifice. Their bodies are aerial and impalpable, and they have been known to raise the dead. These they carry away to spirit land with their ghost bodies; and some of them have been seen after the manner of the minister of Aberfoyle, who appeared once, after he went to his own herd.

Let us now illustrate these general statements. The priest of primitive man was lord of the world at will, and regulated the powers of nature for the benefit of his people. He was spoken of as king, and his sphere of action as a kingdom, and, so far as we know, all early kings performed priestly functions. With the growth of thought, the offices were separated, and the priesthood remained the sacred order who had to do with all supernatural phenomena.

The divine right of kings appeared at a later period of the world's history, and after men had ceased to fear the supernatural power of the priest. The savage man of to-day, like his savage forefather, does not distinguish accurately between the natural and supernatural. To him the whole world is regulated by supernatural agents, that is, by persons who act on impulses like his own; and these agents can be influenced by appeals made to them. This speedily leads to the idea of a man god, and passes in process of time into ancestor worship. These stages of progress we can trace among existing races. Sacred men worshipped here, retire unto the unknown by natural death or violence – more frequently the latter – when the spirit of the departed king is supposed to enter his successor, and still continue to take an interest in human affairs. A weak king professes to have seen his predecessor and received oracles from him, and the spot becomes a shrine. At these sacred places spirits reveal the future to seers, and popular imagination makes the shrine the home of the ancestors; a kind of dwelling place for deity. The deities of primitive man, in other words the priests, could control nature at will, and this power every savage man has less or more. A Fiji Islander, who fears to be belated, ties the tops of a handful of reeds together, and this delays the going down of the sun. An Indian of Yucatan pulls out a few of his eyelashes, and throw's them sunward for a like purpose. By placing a handful of grass on the path and a stone over it, the African both retards the sunset and causes his friends at home to keep the evening meal waiting his arrival. Conversely the setting of the sun can be hastened when that is desired, as in a doubtful engagement. By similar processes wind and rain, heat and cold, can be controlled, all of which goes to show that savage man fails to recognise those limitations to his own powers which are so obvious to us. But with the advance of thought, and the evolution of a sacred caste, we find methods of attaining to inspiration and power which bring us nearer our

friends the fairies. In the temple of Apollo at Argos, a lamb was slain once a month. The prophetess tasted the blood, and then divined, being god-inspired. In Achaia the earth priestess drank from the blood of a bull, just slain, before descending into the cave of prophecy. In Southern India the devil dancer drinks the blood of a slain goat, putting his mouth to its throat, and is then inspired. He snorts, he stares, he dances and gyrates. The demon takes complete possession of him, and he is then worshipped as a present deity. All this brings us nearer to Kirk's account of fairy food as being the essence or life-giving properties of our common fare.

Nor is this till. In the religious history of the Aryan races tree worship was one of the most potent factors of national and domestic life, and supposes the forest glades were the first sanctuaries of the human race. This we can easily understand; for even at the dawn of our own era the larger portion of Europe consisted of dense forests, and what clearings were made must have appeared as islets in an ocean of green. Need we wonder that fairy folk ever dress in the universal nature colour. The Lithuanians, who were not converted to Christianity till the fourteenth century, were at that date tree worshippers, and begged St Jerome not to cut down their sacred groves. A form of worship so common and so widespread must have had some basis in which it rested – a philosophy such as satisfied the instincts of millions, and that philosophy came down from savage man. To him all nature is animate. The spirit of reproduction dwells in trees, in corn, and grass. Spirits of men do not differ essentially from these, for here, too, reproduction is the great factor of existence, and as the spirit of the decayed vegetation lives through the winter and re-animates the world in spring, so human spirits retire to the unknown depths of the forest, but not to perish. They live and re-appear. Siamese monks believe trees have souls, and that to lop off a branch is equivalent to severing a man's hand from his body. These monks are, of course, Buddhists; but the Animism of Buddhism is not a philosophic theory evolved by itself. It is simply a common savage dogma incorporated into the system of an historical religion. Buddhism simply borrowed it from pagan savagery. And pagan savagery treats a clove tree in blossom as it does a pregnant woman. No noise must be made near it, and no light carried past it; whoever approaches it must uncover his head. In the Philippine Islands the souls of the ancestors inhabit well-known trees. In Kabongo the reigning monarch has a safe keeping place for his soul in a grove. In Assam, when a child is lost, it has been stolen by the spirits of the wood. In Sumatra, when a native fells a tree he plants a young one in its place, and hangs some betel root upon it. This is the new home offered to the spirit that dwelt in the tree that has been cut down, and who otherwise might be homeless.

In these beliefs and customs the tree itself is animate under the earlier forms of religious thought. Then an important advance is made, and the tree becomes the abode of a spirit, which can leave it and take up its home elsewhere. These spirits dwelling in trees gradually resolve themselves into departed souls, giving us the material on which the whole system of ancestor worship is founded. It explains why the old Prussians believed gods inhabited high oak trees, and why the Lithuanians begged St Jerome not to cut down their sacred groves, as from the spirits dwelling there they had obtained sunshine and rain, summer heat and winter snows. It throws light on the well known dogma that tree spirits make horses multiply and bless women with offspring.

At Gilgit there is an annual custom at wheat-sowing, of which the following are the essential facts: – Branches of the sacred cedar are brought from the mountain forest. After various ceremonies each villager goes home with a few sprigs of the cedar, but to find the door of his house shut in his face. The wife asks from within, "What do you bring," to which he replies,

“Children if you wish them; food if you require it; cattle; whatever you want;” she then opens the door and says, “Son of the fairies, you have come from far,” and sprinkles him all over with flour. Among civilized peoples tree festivals are continued in May-day and midsummer customs. Men’s opinions change; their philosophy develops; religious revolutions come suddenly or slowly; but customs and ceremonial acts remain, and the old order weaves itself into myth and legend, and myth is always most graphic when it describes what actually took place and colours it in the imaginations of many centuries.

Our brief survey of tree spirits leads us to this: – The tree spirit passes into a person. This person is king of the wood; under his influence vegetation revives, rain falls, domestic animals increase, and people multiply. Festivals are held in honour of this sylvan deity, who presently emerges into the doctrine of souls and ancestral worship. Man at this stage has travelled a long way on that upward ladder of progress which the race has followed from its cradle.

The soul of primitive man was exposed to various forms of danger, and against these precautions were taken. A safe keeping-place for his soul was an essential to a ruler. The soul was an exact reproduction of the body in miniature. It was invisible except to seers. During sleep or a swoon it was absent from the body, and its return might be prevented by an enemy who was a magician, or through the person being removed from the place where the soul left him. Then if a man saw his own reflection in a dark pool or reflecting surface his soul might be snatched away and lost; so men, kings more particularly, were surrounded with taboos to secure their safety. Nor did this always suffice, for many rulers selected secure keeping-places for their souls at a distance from their residence, as a sacred grove, a spring, or an inaccessible pinnacle of rock. These places the imagination peoples with spirits, the souls of the living and the dead, for what more natural when a man died than that his soul should continue to reside where he had placed it. It knew the locality, and took an interest in it while its owner lived. And if it remained there its interest would continue unabated, and would influence the course of events as when the king lived. It entered his successor it is true, but duality of existence presents no difficulties to savage philosophy. But there were frequently rival chieftains, and so a rivalry among souls would naturally follow, and this suggests two things – first, the frequent trials of strength among the gods of mythology, and the doctrine of beneficent and evil spirits. To follow this further is foreign to our present purpose.

While the country was largely forest-clad, woodland deities ruled supreme, and could hardly be said to divide their power with water spirits, which figure in all mythologies. As clearings increase and forest fires laid bare large tracts of country, or as men wandered northwards to regions of ice and snow, the altered conditions necessitated a re-adjustment of sacred places and the homes of divinity. Where a sylvan shrine existed before a great fire the spot would remain sacred, or the gods would betake themselves to the shelter of an over-hanging cliff. Tradition peoples such spots with the self-same divinities who dwelt in the forest glades when youths and maidens worshipped dancing in the glinting moonlight.

Nor is this mere conjecture, for we only need a haunted room in some baronial hall to make it in after ages the scene of midnight revel and the home of ghosts, whose pale outlines are seen by the fearful as a fitful light shows athwart the open casements when winter winds are high. The mountain slopes and low-lying fens, once covered with forests and resonant with the songs of birds, now bare and lifeless, presented to the cowering savage a picture of awful desolation, and

he peopled them with those spirits which his imagination pictured as solitary and evil, while the good clung to any remaining clusters of trees or raised green mounds.

Next comes the rude hand and new religion of the conqueror to shatter all that remained of the ancient faith. It perishes, vanishing as if it had never been, and the new takes its place and retains it. But the memory of the old remains, and men look back in a kindly way to the past, and children hear with awestruck wonder stories of the ancient days when spirits walked at noonday. They learn to reverence the spots where they dwelt, and in their play rehearse the doings of the gods. And then some one hears in the green mound where the ancestors hide, the strains of a forgotten music, and before his fevered vision ghostly figures glint in the moonlight, and he dreams dreams of a vanished glory. As he recounts his vision, his enthusiasm kindles, his narrative becomes real, and the youth who hear know he has been to fairyland. He saw the mighty dead; he heard music sung by immortals; he is inspired: a seer for evermore.

By such processes does tradition weave together the imaginary and the real, blending them into a golden web of the past and a mysterious present, till with rude hand the fabric is thrown down, and men make a new advance in thought. They do not forget the past; they adapt it, and the adaptation is determined by the new cult. Buddhism seizes on it, and claims it as its own. Christianity bans it as of the devil, indulgently at first, then with stern visage and legal sanctions. The dreams of the past are banished into hidden comers, and men, women especially, fear the thumbscrew and the faggot, if it should be suspected that they hold converse with this forbidden world and eat its baneful fruit. If men do recount the deeds of the past, and the frolics of spirits in the green woods, they are careful to weave a kind of latter-day moral into the tale.

As the memory of sylvan deities and guardian ancestors wanes and waxes dim while tradition persists, men imagine that the tradition is but the distorted history of a race of men who lived, and felt, and suffered, and vanished. Races of men are created and then exterminated, leaving a few solitary wanderers, the sole witnesses of a vanished world. A burrow is made and a human dwelling found. It was the home of a chief of the vanished race. A name of doubtful derivation is met with. It is a word preserved from a lost language. The man who dwelt in that house was a fairy – the lost language his speech; and so our sylvan denizens become mere eaters of flesh and abductors of children to avenge political wrongs.

It has already been said that our familiar fairy cult is a complex thing. It is composed of materials supplied by tradition, and has no doubt drawn from stories of battle, murder, and revenge; and here prehistoric materials are to be met with. But on the other hand it contains a vast mass of legend regarding the older religious beliefs and unexplained phenomena. Man as he advanced left behind him at each stage a whole world of unexplained facts. He progressed along certain lines, and left collateral branches of knowledge to be the sport of tradition. This entered into popular folk-lore, and became in a measure the common heritage of all nations. We have also to take account of sudden noises, rattings, musical sounds, movement of objects without apparent cause, and that curious group of experiences we may class under second sight, as well as prolonged trance or suspended animation. All these and many other factors enter into our familiar legends, and give to the fairies a local colour and historic setting. That many unexplained facts exist, we, most of us, have had experience, and though science may be moving in the direction of a more rational explanation than hitherto, nothing very satisfactory has yet appeared. The noises heard in Wesley's house at Epworth are as well authenticated as any fact can be, and yet no better

than many similar phenomena elsewhere. Our modern telepathy may do something to explain the facts, or it may find itself worsted as the Wesleys did in their attempts to set the spirits to do some useful work.

We now return to the fairies and their habits as these are described by Kirk and Martin. The former went to his own herd in 1692; the latter wrote about 1695, so that their evidence is contemporary. Both men were close observers, and each in his own way had rare glimpses of science. To them fairy bodies are congealed air, impalpable and invisible except to seers. They know nothing of their having any built dwellings. Their habitations are fairy hills, nothing more. They are diminutive and have the human form reproduced in their miniature bodies. To the savage in Africa, India, the South Seas, America, and Tartary the soul is a reproduction of the body. It is in miniature, but is fat or lean, long or short as the man is. It is aerial and impalpable; it is invisible except to the magician; it is capable of living apart from the body and going long journeys in an incredible short space of time; it may breakfast in Senegal and dine in America; it feeds on the essence of our grosser fare and impoverishes what it eats of.

In fairy stories men are often placed under spells and lose sense and reason till restored with infinite labour by a seer. So are men whose souls are stolen and detained in savage lands. When a funeral passes through a village the Karens of Burmah tie their children to an article of furniture with a special kind of string lest their souls should be drawn away with the dead. And at the grave those who bring the body provide themselves with a bamboo slit lengthwise, and a small stick. When the earth is filled in each man thrusts his bamboo down into the grave and draws his stick along the groove to show his soul the way out should it by any chance be down with the dead.

The good people of Aberfoil heard a noise as if men were working on anvils, but the Polynesian ancestral spirits can remodel a whole village in a single night, while a Wazerema sylvan deity can box an offender's ears till he sees new constellations; and a Bougo spirit can make the forest resound again to the beat of drum. Fairies change their abode quarterly; but the Gaboon spirits are made to change, being driven out by the long-suffering inhabitants. They, too, can float on air, and make a low, musical noise, or a crepitating sound, should they leave in anger. Fairies have their orders. African spirits have theirs, and settle faction-fights like any Irish pigmies of them all. But these are the usual trappings of ancestral deities the world over. Even men's souls, temporarily absent from their bodies, may meet and fight, with much damage to their owners; and stories are on record of Burmese souls doing each other grievous harm. Nor are such wandering souls absent at banquets and funerals. They hover round the corpse to snatch away the soul to join their own company. When seen, they may appear in any guise, and seers have difficulty in distinguishing between the soul of a living person and a disembodied spirit. The minister of Aberfoil does not record the method of restoring the stolen, but the Karens know all about the recapture of an abducted soul; and a Samoan seer can fit a man with another soul should his own be lost or stolen beyond hope of recovery. In Hawaii souls were caught and shut up in calabashes; and the seers of Danger Island set soul traps fitted to catch those of different sizes. Against these dangers charms must be used, from bits of reed to iron; and when these fail, the lost may be restored by means well known to every savage man.

The death messenger from Elf-land, so Mr Kirk tells us, might be appeased by the death of an animal. A Pondo condemned to die may, with the consent of his chief, redeem his life by the sacrifice of an ox and a fine; among other tribes, by the substitution of a slave. Wounds inflicted

by elf arrows were mortal, and woe betide the savage who is touched by a weapon from the spirit world. And the spirits of savage man have then-local habitations, places where they have lived time out of mind, like our own little hill folk.

In our fairy cult we meet with facts not easily explained from the analogy of savage custom. Men whose souls are stolen, and wander in forests in a kind of waking sleep, give a clue to fairy spells; but the abduction of wives and children must belong to a later era, and may be a faint re-echo of old classic stories, or the record of an experience not at all uncommon in lawless lands. The changeling would follow as a kind of corollary to the abduction; or it is a faint and fading memory of the savage dictum that animals, as wolves, may, under the influence of evil spirits or wicked magicians, substitute their own cubs for children they devour.

These parallel illustrations, or some of them, are capable of being pushed too far; but in regard to a world-wide cult, they appear to afford a more rational explanation than the extermination of the inhabitants of whole continents. For, if the theory holds good in regard to, the “Pechts,” it must be true regarding aboriginal races the world over, whose very names and memory have perished utterly. Yes, and their bones too, for of fossil dwarfs we have none.

That the earliest objects of worship were the chiefs who ruled and regulated nature for the benefit of the tribe there seems no reasonable doubt. That this merged into nature-worship, and that into adoration of ancestral spirits we have ample evidence to support in the condition of savage lands of to-day. To this rule the nations of Europe were no exception. From well-known facts the world over, we are not permitted to doubt the residence of ancestral spirits in particular localities, and by all the rules of reasoning, in our own country also. These ancestral spirits were diminutive, corresponding to the souls of living men. They migrated from place to place, and their influence was felt in all directions.

A savage is nothing if he is not religious, and when, with the development of thought, higher religions claimed his homage, the past remained as a fading memory. Imagination clothed it with a halo of glory, and the midnight revels of elves and fauns and fairies preserve to us the more human and social aspects of what was to primitive man a stem reality. Christianity, first tolerant, for whatever be the merits or demerits of the Roman form of it, it was in the early days wisely human and tolerant of the vanishing paganism which it displaced, then less tolerant, and, finally reformed and austere with its rigid code of morals and conduct, it obliterated the last traces of pagan pageantry in its own worship and in social life. It almost compelled fireside stories to take a kind of Hanoverian hue to the glory of the Prince of Orange. So Scotland bade farewell, a sorrowful farewell, it may be, to its satyrs and its elves; its fauns and its fairies; its sunset wanderers and midnight revellers, and left it to this and kindred societies to rescue from oblivion the last remnants of a world to which we can hardly look back without a sigh, and wish we could feel

*“As free as nature first made man,
When wild in woods the noble savage ran.”*

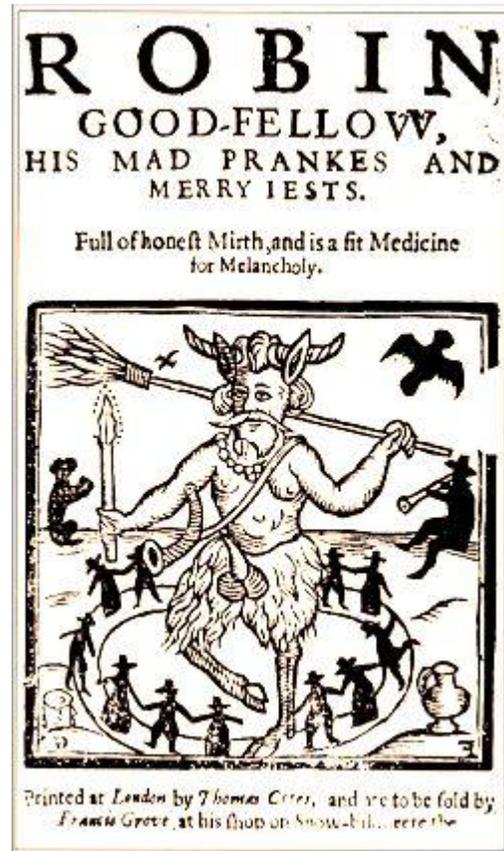
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The Traveller's Guide to Fairy Sites

The Landscape and Folklore of Fairyland

In England, Wales and Scotland

Janet Bord



"An inspiring introduction to the ancient fairy sites of Britain's magical landscape. An important addition to the renaissance of respecting, protecting and celebrating our sacred ecology" - William Bloom

This is a guidebook to over 500 places in the British Isles where fairies have actually been seen. Concentrating on places that are identifiable and able to be visited today, the sources drawn on range from traditional folklore to modern first-hand sighting reports. The entries give precise locations, usually including Ordnance Survey map references.

All the different types of Little People are represented. They are mostly not the pretty winged fairies that appear in children's picture books. "Real" fairies can be frightening.

By reading these stories and travelling to the fairy sites, the reader will gain a sense of what it is to inhabit that Otherworld of the fairies.

This is a call to get up and explore the Fairyland that is all around us.

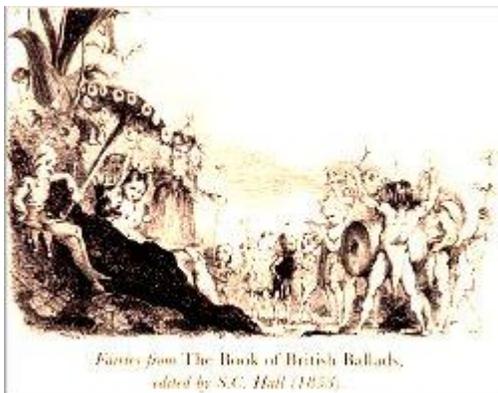
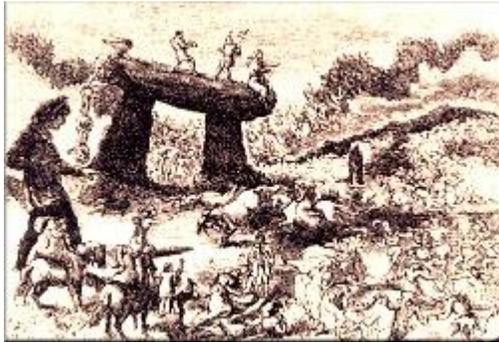
JANET BORD has lived in rural North Wales for the past 30 years and is well known for writing *Fairies: Real Encounters with Little People, Mazes and Labyrinths of the World, Footprints in*

Stone and seventeen further books over a period of 25 years with her husband, Colin Bord. They also created the Fortean Picture Library, a pictorial archive of mysteries and strange phenomena.

The Traveller's Guide to Fairy Sites

Janet Bord

215 x 110 mm, 296 pages, fully illustrated in black and white with colour codes by county, plus user-friendly maps. (ISBN 0 906362 64 4, £12.99 / \$25.95 September 2004)



INTRODUCTION

"When we were on holiday in Cornwall my daughter and I came down a winding lane, and all of a sudden there was a small green man by a gate watching us. All in green, with a pointed hood and ears.... We were cold with terror. We ran for the ferry below... I don't think I have ever been so frightened."

This first-hand account of a 20th-century fairy sighting contains several elements that will become familiar: the quiet rural location, the unexpectedness of the encounter, the 'small' man watching the interlopers, the green clothing, the fear experienced by the witnesses. In many ways this is a typical sighting. It is intriguing, and to many people unbelievable – yet many apparently sane people claim similar sightings in recent times, and in addition such sightings go back through the centuries, and are also legion in folklore.

I have taken an interest in fairy folklore and fairy sightings for many years, and my first book on the Little People was published in 1997 – *Fairies: Real Encounters with the Little People*. In that

book I presented first-hand reports of sightings of fairies and Little People all around the world, in addition discussing the nature and origins of the Little People, Fairyland and other worlds, and whether reported UFO entities had any link with fairies. I ended that book with a brief list of some fairy sites in Britain, and so in one respect this new book carries on where the last one left off, in that I have in this new book tried to present an (admittedly unscientific) survey of identifiable sites in England, Wales and Scotland which have either been linked with fairies in folklore, or which are modern locations of fairy sightings. My main criterion was that the site should be identifiable, either in such detail that it is possible to give a map reference, or at least in enough detail that anyone interested can go to the general area where the sighting took place. Following these criteria closely meant that there are very many other accounts in fairy lore which have had to be omitted, mainly because the location was not given precisely enough. However, the coverage of fairy lore within the stories that have been included is probably representative, in that from my reading of fairy lore it is clear that the same themes are continually repeated, and so the tales included in this collection are likely to be quite representative of fairy lore as it now survives throughout England, Wales and Scotland.

Some of the facts about fairies that have revealed themselves may be surprising to some readers. The first and most notable is that the great majority of fairies are not tiny pretty beings with diaphanous wings. Those fairies are not the ones described in traditional fairy lore, nor are they the ones seen by people in the 20th century and more recently. However... there are of course exceptions to every rule, and it is true that there are a few reports of tiny winged fairies, indeed one was seen by a friend of mine, Nona Rees, when she was a small child. She was living by the sea at St Davids in Pembrokeshire, and on a hot summer's day in 1947 when she was five years old, she was walking home from the beach with her mother. They were in unspoilt countryside very close to the rocky shore, and approaching a stone stile, when they saw, to the right of the path, 'hovering over a gorse bush, a tiny pure white creature, with wings, like the traditional Christmas Tree fairy but perhaps only an inch to an inch and a half high.' Nona specifically commented that it 'hovered upright'; because both she and her mother were interested in natural history, they were quite sure it was not a moth or butterfly that they were looking at: 'To us, it was definitely a fairy.'

Despite this and no doubt other similar cases, it is generally true that winged fairies were a Victorian creation, and illustrations from that time usually show them as childlike and innocent as well as sporting the inevitable wings. However, this is a sanitised view of the fairies, for in traditional folklore, as well as in modern first-hand sightings, the Little People often carry a hint of menace, and people tend to feel frightened when they see them. Many traditional accounts contain information on how to protect oneself against fairies, which also indicates that the pretty winged fairy seen in Victorian paintings is many miles away from the true fairy.

A brief analysis of the 500 accounts in this book reveals some interesting, and often surprising, facts.

Fairy Names

The Little People are known by a great variety of names, some more familiar to us than others. Ones we often come across include fairies, pixies, elves, gnomes, brownies, and hobgoblins. The country people, wishing not to offend the Little People, would sometimes refer to them by names such as the Good People, the Good Neighbours, the Honest Folk, the Gentry, the Men of Peace, and similar euphemistic names. In Wales they were the Bendith Y Mamau (The Mother's Blessing), or the Tylwyth Teg (The Fair Family), again these names being given so as not to

antagonise the fairies. The best collection of fairy names can be found in Katharine Briggs' comprehensive and fascinating book *A Dictionary of Fairies*, where she explains the varying natures of creatures going by such unusual names as Asrai (water fairies from the Welsh Border), Bean Si (Gaelic for 'fairy woman' and the same as 'banshee'), Boggart (a mischievous brownie), Buggane (the Isle of Man shape-shifting goblin), Ellyllon (Welsh elves), Farisees (Suffolk fairies), Fenoderee (Manx brownie – large, hairy and ugly), Gruagach (fairy lady with golden hair in the Scottish Highlands), Gwyllion (evil mountain fairies of Wales), Habetrot (the Scottish Border spinning fairy), Hob or Hobthrust (North Country brownies), Knockers (Cornish mine spirits), Loireag (Hebridean water-fairy), Pigsies (another name for pixies), Plant Annwn (Welsh Underworld fairies who travel into our world through the lakes), Pwca (Welsh version of Puck), Redcap (evil Scottish Border goblin), Robin Goodfellow (well-known English hobgoblin), Sidh/Sith/Si (the Gaelic name for fairies in the Scottish Highlands, and in Ireland), Spriggans (ugly Cornish treasure guardians), the Strangers (a Lincolnshire name for the fairies), and Yarthkins (fertility spirits of the Lincolnshire fens), among many others.

Fairy Appearance

The fairies vary greatly in height from only a few inches tall to human-sized and even larger, though generally their height is in between these extremes, and they are often described as being child-sized, though looking like old adults, often with beards. However they are sometimes capable of shape-shifting, and all in all the fairies' appearance can take a multiplicity of forms. They often appear 'earthy', and wear clothes made from natural materials such as moss and leaves, and their garments are sometimes described as jerkins, hose, leggings, breeches, etc. The clothing colour most often recorded is green (which is the Celtic colour of death), but red and brown, both natural earthy colours, are also reported frequently, and other colours have been seen too. Pointed caps are described surprisingly often in modern accounts, but despite the general public perception of fairies as winged and able to fly, wings are rarely reported and fairies are basically flightless. However, they are sometimes able to 'trans-locate' in a magical way, and they have also been reported as flying on twigs or plant stems, using a magic password to make this happen.

Fairy Dwelling-Places

Hills and mountains, and natural and man-made mounds, are the locations most often associated with the fairies, though some are linked to standing stones, groups of rocks, stone crosses and other stone features, natural and artificial. Some reports link fairies with woods and individual trees; and a considerable number of their chosen habitats are watery, either wells or springs, lakes or pools, rivers or streams. Man-made sites are often chosen, as fairies do not necessarily avoid structures associated with man. The man-made structure most often associated with the fairies is the prehistoric burial mound, a feature of fairylore which may reflect the belief that fairies are closely linked to the dead, maybe even being themselves the spirits of the dead. Fairyland may equate to the Underworld where the dead people congregate; and the caves, mines, holes and tunnels which sometimes feature may also be part of this theme.

Fairy Activities

The stories depict the fairies in a variety of activities, all of which have parallels in the human world. The fairies' favourite pastime is certainly dancing, which crops up in about a fifth of the reports in this book. Music also features in many stories, sometimes performed by the fairies themselves, but often simply heard as a supernatural accompaniment to their activities. The fairy celebrations of dancing and feasting often take place at night: the darkness conceals them from human eyes, but it could also be another link with their possible status as the human dead. When the fairies are seen at work, they are performing a wide variety of tasks, often domestic, such as washing. They also attend fairs and markets, help humans with the housework, and tend their fairy cattle. There are numerous accounts that involve association with animals, usually fairy cattle but sometimes fairy dogs and fairy horses. It is interesting that fairy animals are a 'Celtic' feature, being associated only with tales from Wales, Scotland and the Isle of Man.

Human/Fairy Interactions

Many interactions are involuntary on the part of the humans, and also undesirable. Fairies were known to abduct humans, or in other ways to inhibit their freedom, and interestingly most of the abduction reports in this collection took place in Celtic lands. Could this be a memory of the hostage-taking which was such a prominent aspect of the elite culture of early medieval Ireland and other Celtic areas? Fairies sometimes compel humans to act as midwives at fairy births, or to be domestic servants. Some human mothers have had their babies stolen by the fairies, and changelings substituted. However there are also cases of intermarriage of fairies with humans – though sometimes the fairy wife had to return to her family when her husband accidentally broke the rules controlling their relationship. (See, for example, Corwrion, Gwynedd.)

The bad fortune which humans often experienced at the hands of fairies resulted in the widespread use of charms and rituals to try and keep them away. Iron was widely believed to have the power to repel the fairies, and there are numerous examples in this collection. Mothers would hang a pair of open scissors above a cradle to stop the baby being stolen by the fairies: not only were the scissors of iron, but when open they form a cross which is also a protective symbol. People would also make offerings to the fairies, such as leaving pins at wells, or food-offerings, these all intended to keep the fairies in a good mood.

Many human/fairy interactions have shown there to be a multi-dimensional reality in the experience of Fairyland – the person who has stepped over the boundary between 'them' and 'us' is in both places at the same time. Many trespassers into Fairyland have experienced a dislocation in time: a short while spent in Fairyland may be months or even years in human time. But some who have interacted with the fairies have brought back fairy artefacts or relics as proof of the reality of their experience. Drinking cups are most often mentioned, including the 'lucks', but objects stolen from the fairies, or coins given in payment, usually disappear or turn into leaves when taken out of fairyland.

Most of this information comes from the fairy lore and sighting reports I have collected together in this book. Other researchers who have surveyed in detail the whole vast range of fairy lore, rather than the limited coverage I have attempted, have been able to draw more conclusions, and fascinating accounts of their work can be found in the books listed in my bibliography. I have also provided sources for all the stories and reports, and these are given at the end of each county. Where only brief details of a book are given, the full publication details can be found in the bibliography.

I have never seen any fairies myself, but I know people who have, and they are all people I can trust. So I am sure that 'normal' people do see fairies, though quite what causes these unexpected sightings is hard to explain. Are the fairies really there, living among us in another dimension of existence that we dull humans are occasionally able to penetrate? Or are they merely human mental creations which our minds externalise so that we think we are seeing them? These are questions I do not feel qualified to answer, even though I wish I could offer a simple and definitive explanation of fairy sightings. If fairies do exist all around us, but in a separate dimension, certain people visiting fairy haunts may be able to sense their presence, and perhaps even glimpse them.

It is certainly true that once you are aware of the possibility of a fairy presence, you experience a familiar landscape in a different way, and may even be conscious of a life-force operating beyond our everyday spectrum. It may also be possible to train oneself to see fairies: Moyra Doorly practised techniques that enabled her to see nature spirits when she was living on the Scottish island of Arran. Although I have never (yet) seen fairies, I had a strange experience when I was writing my earlier book on them, which I mentioned in that book: a field gate was closed for me in a way I have been unable to explain, and at the time I jokingly said that it must have been the fairies. In times past that would have been the conclusion of the country people too: the fairies were often thought of as kindly folk, living apart from but interacting with their human neighbours and being mutually helpful. While doing the research for this book, I discovered to my surprise that the area of Wales where the gate-closing incident occurred once had a strong fairy connection, although I wasn't aware of that at the time. So I still like to think that I may have had an encounter with the fairies, even though they didn't reveal themselves to me – or maybe I just wasn't able to see them.

Many of the fairy haunts in this book are atmospheric places, and the visitor who is sensitive to the spirit of a place may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of its fairy inhabitants. But I would ask, if you do visit any of these places, please be a thoughtful visitor, do not disturb anything or anybody, and pass lightly by.

Janet Bord
North Wales
January 2004

Sources

- The Cornish sighting quoted at the beginning of the Introduction was told by a President of the Women's Institute in Wellington, Somerset, to R.L. Tongue and quoted in Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 132.
- The details of Nona Rees' fairy sighting were provided by her in a letter to the author in autumn 2003.
- More information on fairy names can be found in Katharine Briggs' book *A Dictionary of Fairies*.
- Moyra Doorly's experiences are described in her article 'Invitation to Elfland', published in *Fortean Times* no.179 (January 2004).

TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND NARRATIVES OF A CONTEMPORARY IRISH TRADITION BEARER

Patricia Lysaght. Dublin, Ireland

Belief in the supernatural has been an integral part of the world view of the Irish people over many centuries. Irish literature from the early Christian period offers testimony to the existence of such belief in ancient times¹ and thus also to its antiquity since much of its content clearly predates the Christian era in Ireland. Irish and Anglo-Irish literature² also bears witness to the continuation of such belief in Ireland down the centuries and into modern times. But it is modern folk belief and the large body of oral tradition collected over the last hundred years³ in Ireland which documents in the most comprehensive and intimate way the persistence of belief in the supernatural, as well as the very richness and the variety of its expression and its continuing importance in the lives of the people who share its precepts. The widespread distribution of the belief in the supernatural in Ireland in modern times⁴ is a clear indication that belief in the supernatural has been a common property of the Irish people over the many centuries. Even today such belief has retained its position as an active element in the thoughts and habits of some people, in the *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking) and *Galltacht* (English-speaking) areas of Ireland, and among active as well as passive bearers of tradition.

Since the Irish imagination has had for centuries full play in conjuring up a supernatural world close to the human world including a wide variety of supernatural beings whose activities often brought them into contact with human beings, it is not surprising that the mythological tradition in Ireland is wonderfully rich and varied. Although categorisation of this abundant material is not without difficulties and uncertainties, nevertheless, thanks to it, has been possible to establish categories of supernatural beings and phenomena which have a basis in the folk philosophy in Ireland,⁵ as well as patterns of belief and also supernatural tale and legend types. Firm belief in the supernatural due to its enduring personal and social relevance has clearly been a key factor in its persistence down the centuries; nevertheless in Ireland, as no doubt elsewhere, individual attitudes to the various reflexes of the mythological tradition undoubtedly differed and changed over time and in space. Here we will consider the responses of one individual – a modern Irish tradition bearer – to traditional beliefs about the supernatural. The tradition orientation and

¹ 1 Cross T.P. *Motif Index of Early Irish Literature*. Bloomington, Indiana, 1952. esp. section A-F. See also T. F. O'Rahilly. *Early Irish History and Mythology*. Dublin, 1946.

² 2 Cronin J. *The Anglo-Irish Novel*. Belfast, 1980. Nineteenth and early twentieth century collections of folklore in English and fictional works incorporating folklore as mentioned in: R. M. Dorson: 'Foreword', in Sean O'Sullivan: *Folktales of Ireland*. London, 1966, pp. V-XXXII. Folklore motifs and themes in the work of one well-known Anglo-Irish writer, W. B. Yeats, are analysed in, Thunete M. H. *Yeats and Irish Folklore*. London, 1980, New Jersey, 1981.

³ 3 cf. Dorson, op. cit., and Almqvist B. Irish Folklore Commission - Achievement and Legacy. *Béaloides* 45-47, 1977-9, 6-26.

⁴ 4 The manuscript material in the archive of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin is clear evidence of this as some published collections of fairy lore from different areas, e.g. S. Ó hEochaidh, *Màire Ní Néill, Séamas Ó Catháin Sí-Scéalta ó Thír Chonaill*. Dublin, 1977; S. Ó Duilearga *Leabhar Sheáin Uí Chonaill*. Dublin, 1977, pp. 291-322, 434-440, 484-488. (Engl. Summary); S. Ó Catháin *Scéalta Chois Cladaigh. Stories of Sea and Shore*. Dublin, 1983.

⁵ 5 See in this connection S. Ó Súilleabháin. *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*. Dublin, 1942, Detroit, 1970, esp. pp. 440-519.

narrative tendencies of the tradition bearer in question have already been dealt with in some detail in previous articles,⁶ therefore I will confine myself to a summary of her background.

Mrs. McGlynn, a housewife and mother in her early fifties, was born into a working class family in a small town in the midlands of Ireland – an area, like many another in the province of Leinster, which could not be intensively covered by the Irish Folklore Commission's collecting activities because of its limited financial resources.⁷ Apart from a few years spent away from the town in her early childhood she has lived all her life there. She is thus a product of an English-language environment and cultural milieu and is, therefore, an exponent of folk traditions learned and transmitted through the medium of the English language in Ireland. But, as we shall see, her traditions, though possessing strong local colouring, are part of the common stock of mythological traditions known throughout Ireland and even further afield.

This tradition bearer's attitudes to folklore, her choice of repertoire themes and her interpretations of traditional motifs have largely been influenced and determined by the tradition area in which she spent her formative years and also by the experience of her later married life. Prior to her marriage in 1961 at the age of twenty-two years, she has live virtually all the time in the family home in the town with her maternal grandmother. From her, as well as from her parents, and neighbours who regularly visited the house at night, she learned much supernatural lore.

In the storytelling environment of her new home after marriage she added considerably to her repertoire of supernatural lore and became an active bearer of tradition. From her mother- and father-in-law, as well as from the men who regularly gathered in the house at night, she learned much supernatural lore concentrated in the landscape, particularly in relation to ghosts and the fairy world.

In a tradition environment conducive to storytelling and in which supernatural lore had a prominent place, it is not so surprising that the mythological tradition should become a repertoire dominant for Jenny. In the years after her marriage when – despite her youth – she gradually became an active bearer of tradition and performed for discerning adult audiences who gathered in the house at night, she was considered an expert performer of her preferred genre – ghost lore. Although most of that lore was garnered from the collective local repertoire, personal experiences of her own, especially in relation to the banshee and other omens of death, have also contributed to her store of mythological lore. These omens, together with her beliefs and legends about the return of the dead, the devil, the fairy world, and other supernatural phenomena, will be dealt with in this essay.

Death Omens

There is a wide variety of death omens of Irish tradition and although no formal classification of them has yet been made they appear to fall fairly naturally into certain categories according to formal type and content and the nature of the sign considered significant. There are, for example, ominous dreams, visions and smells, observations of supernatural beings or objects, deceased people, one's own fetch, birds etc., or a combination of any of these.⁸ A common death omen is

⁶ 6 Lysaght, P. A Tradition Bearer in Contemporary Ireland. In: Rörich, L., Wienken-Piepo, S. (eds.). *Storytelling in Contemporary Societies*. Tübingen, 1990, pp. 199-214; Lysaght P. Fairy Lore from the Midlands of Ireland. In: Narvaez, P. (ed.). *The Fairy Faith: New Fairy Lore Essays*.

⁷ 7 See Note 3, Ahlqvist.

⁸ 8 See Note 5, Ó Súilleabháin, p. 216, and the catalogue in the archive of the Department of Irish Folklore for a survey of the variety of death omens in Ireland. About the special relationship between the beliefs and death omens, see also Ahlqvist, B. The Death Forebodings of Saint Óláfr, King of Norway and Rögnvaldr, Earl of Orkney.

the fetch or wraith and in the following narrative Jenny recalls her mother's personal experience of that particular death signal:

Well, my mother was washing one day at the back window of the cottage at home and a distant cousin of hers used to stop [i.e. stay] with her and she saw him coming up the garden and she was waiting for him to come in and he didn't come. So she went out to see where he was and there was no sign of him anywhere. And, she thought, maybe then she was only imagining it and that night when she went to get his bed ready for him word came that he had been found dead where he'd gone off for a walk across the roads. He was found dead: he died, and he came back to her to let her know that he was going. She believes that.⁹

Her own earliest recollection of experiencing a death premonition was at the decease of a neighbour. She and her mother-in-law heard the sounds of the 'phantom death-coach' as they say by the kitchen fire late one night. She heard it again subsequently at the death of her cousin in England. She describes that occurrence of the omen as follows:

I was up sitting one night reading and Gus [i.e. her brother-in-law] was in bed and there was this sudden gush of wind – it burst in the door – but I jumped up as fast as I could and put the bolt on so that it wouldn't knock anything over, and the next thing, I could hear the clip-clop of the horses. The hair started to stand up on the back of my neck – I was in an awful state with fear. Gus woke up – he heard the noise too. And he came out. And he got weak because he'd heard it before. And he said, 'that's the Dead Coach and we're going to hear news of somebody dying now.' And I think it was a fortnight after a cousin of mine died in England... Tom Conroy...¹⁰

She also believes that she received a foresign of the death of her mother-in-law with whom she had a close personal relationship, and from whom she learned much supernatural tradition. Her personal narrative describes the significant event which occurred as she lay in her hospital bed: When my mother-in-law died I was in hospital. It was April, the 1st of April, and I was in hospital on the birth of the last child, and got word earlier in the day that she wasn't too well. I wasn't told that she was bad, or she was dying, but that she wasn't too well. And I was after getting sleeping tablets from the nurse. About half past eleven or a quarter to twelve, an awful blast of wind came and it opened up the windows – you know the windows in the hospital that open down, the small little windows, they open down? It fell in, and the curtain went right up to the roof and the next morning I got the nurse to phone up the hospital, you know – 'I'd like to find out how the mother-in-law was', and she had died at the time that the blast of wind came to me... Probably it was because I was thinking of her, but I thought I saw her at the foot of me bed after the blast of wind. I had to call the nurses and everything. I really was upset over it and ... she had died that exact time that I thought she was there with the blast of wind. It definitely happened to me.¹¹

Some of her most dramatic personal experience narratives spring from her continuing deep and firm belief in the banshee, an Irish female supernatural death-messenger popularly believed to forebode death in certain Irish families. She ranks as one of the best exponents of this widespread belief and claims to have both heard and seen the banshee, prior to a number of deaths in her own, as well as in neighbouring families. Her belief statements, memorates and legends centering on the banshee have been referred to in extenso elsewhere; here we will give only her description of the cry of the supernatural death-messenger – a motif of fundamental importance in the

Béaloides, 1974-1976, Nos 42-44, and especially pp. 23-38. Some of the death omens are discussed in Lysaght, P. *The Banshee. The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger*. Dublin, 1986.

⁹ Lysaght, P. June 1, 1976 quotation from a recording.

¹⁰ 10 *ibid.*

¹¹ 11 See Note 9.

complex of beliefs about the banshee. Elaborating on her description of the cry as 'a terrible weird wall' and her reaction to it, she says:

Oh, the dogs kick up an awful racket and if there are any dogs on the street when she is around, they are around her, and they are barking, and she's wailing.. People would say it is a dog howling, but there's a big difference in the sound. You can actually make out the sound of it. It's like a desperate human cry, as if someone was in terrible stress, and ... screaming for ... someone to come to them. And that's the sound it has...¹²

Well, when I heard it first, I had very cold sensation all over me, it was like there was death near me; now I can't describe exactly how I felt but it's a terrible sensation. You'd feel cold all over and you'd get a chill going through you when you'd hear the ... the roar first. You'd imagine then there was somebody going to call for help any minute. You'd be just waiting for that cry for help with the roar...¹³

The Returning Dead

Our storyteller is a firm believer in the Catholic doctrine of the after-life. Yet she also subscribes to the widespread a-Christian notions about the dead in Irish Tradition including the belief that the dead can – and do – return. She states: I do believe the dead can come back, without a doubt... I do believe in ghosts... ghosts are the dead; some are good and some are evil...¹⁴ Even though she rationalises the return of the dead in some of her 'purgatorial narratives', in terms of punishment for contravention of the will of God, and also points to an enigmatic biblical passage which refers to the resurrection and appearance of the dead after the death and resurrection of Christ, as an overall validation for her belief in ghosts and spirits, nevertheless her belief is essentially based mainly on received secular folk traditions.

The belief statements and narratives in which she expresses her belief in the returning dead recount many personal experiences of family members. Given her professed (and locally acknowledged) propensity to experience and identify the supernatural – as discussed in the previous section – it may be considered surprising that her belief in the returning dead is not based also on personal experiences of her own. Some reasons why this is not so may be put forward here. Sightings as well as physical encounters between the living and the dead are significant elements in traditions about the return of the dead in Irish tradition.¹⁵ However, her special power in relation to the supernatural – according to her own estimation, and something which also her narratives reflect – is her ability to perceive and interpret supernatural sounds rather than to see or otherwise physically interact with supernatural beings or forces. She states: Some people are born to hear and see; other people can't hear or see anything... I've heard things – I've never actually seen anything, but I've heard...¹⁶ Thus in view of her auditive capabilities in relation to the supernatural, it is understandable that she might lack personal experience narratives about the returning dead which involve visualisation of, or encounters with, such supernatural beings.

Another reason – though less important than the previous one – why Jenny lacks personal experience narratives about the returning dead relates to the fusing of beliefs about the fairies and the dead in Irish tradition. For a tradition bearer like Jenny who tends to evaluate critically all

¹² 12 See Note 12, Lysaght, P. 1986.

¹³ 13 Lysaght, P. Recording 1, 1976.

¹⁴ 14 Lysaght P. Quotation from Recording 20, August 18, 1989.

¹⁵ 15 See various subdivisions of Ó Súilleabháin 1970, pp. 244-250. 'The Return of the Dead.'

¹⁶ 16 Lysaght P. quotation, tape No. 1, 1976.

aspects of experiences described as supernatural before subscribing to them, supernatural events may well remain at the numen¹⁷ stage for a long period of time. This is clearly illustrated in the following personal narrative; several decades after the event which she considers supernormal she is still reluctant to ascribe her experience to the returning dead – despite the interpretation to that effect by her mother-in-law whom she respected as a bearer and sharer of supernatural traditions:

...And another night before my mother-in-law went to bed, I was sitting reading, and she said, 'do you want to go to bed now, Jenny, before midnight and leave the kitchen to the dead? They do ramble,' she said. So I got carried away reading ... and the time went by and Tom called me and he said: 'It's time you were in bed now,' I stood up to go across to the room and I was just at the room door when the frying pan hit me on the back of the legs. My mother-in-law had left it up against the hob for convenience for the morning. And it hit me on the back of the legs going out the back room... And there was nobody, but no-one in the kitchen, only me at the time. So I had been disturbing somebody that wanted to sit down.¹⁸

We have already stated that our tradition bearer's beliefs concerning the dead are based on received folk tradition as well as on the teaching of the Catholic Church. She thus shares many of the ancient and persistent notions about the dead which are characteristic of Irish folk tradition. One of these concerns the ubiquity of the dead. Although particular locations on both the domestic and the wild landscape such as hills, rocks, ringforts, cemeteries, islands etc., were, and perhaps still are, considered the specific abodes or kingdoms of the dead, nevertheless, another parallel notion is that the otherworld of the dead is coextensive with the human world.

Consequently, the dead may be everywhere and anywhere, in particular places or wandering about on the landscape. A favoured location was near the family home; thus it was necessary according to tradition to shout a warning (*seachain*: 'beware!') when throwing out water at night, or as she says, such water should be 'poured away' on the ground. The vicinity of the house may also be the particularised abode – perhaps a purgatorial one – of the dead. The following is Jenny's version of a legend told elsewhere in Ireland, which illustrates this point:

Well, an uncle of mine used to come up to play cards in Mammy's and bring a few of his companions. It's a long time ago – it was during the last war. And every night when he'd be coming in one of the men would say, 'I wonder who that man is at the gate?' I always say 'good night' to him and he never answers. So me uncle got fed up of them saying it and he said he'd have a man there one of these nights. And it was a moonlight night and he went out and he stood at the gate exactly where Paddy had said the man was standing. And Paddy came up anyway and he was coming through the gate and he says, 'good evening to you both'... Me uncle had to be brought in unconscious! He got weak with the fright of Paddy saying 'good evening to ye both'. There seemingly was somebody [else] at the gate and that's up the Manor. The gate is still there.¹⁹ It is also widely believed that the dead might return to life haunts. Stories are told of dead people seen after death in places where they had worked or spent their lives – like the landowner in the following legend who continued to guard his property after death:

Well, he was very fond of his land ... and he was so possessive of it that no-one could even walk on it. One of the boys said that when he was gone they would do this that, or the other. And he

¹⁷ 17 Honko L. Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs. In: *Journal of the Folklore Institute*. 1964, No. 1, pp. 16-17.

¹⁸ 18 Lysaght P. Tape No. 20, quotation, September 18, 1989.

¹⁹ 19 Lysaght P. Tape No. 1, quotation.1976.

said 'dead or alive I'll be on the land'. And he has been seen by many people since he died and he's about forty years dead now.²⁰

It is perhaps an almost universal belief that the grey and dark hours – twilight and night-time – are the preserve of otherworld beings. These were the manifestation times par préférence for ghosts and spirits. Any infringement of that right by humans was believed to be resented, and the indignation of the supranormal beings was often conveyed directly by them to the offending humans by means of the familiar admonitory formula: 'the day is for the living and the night is for the dead'.²¹ Thus human in the open at night, particularly towards the midnight hour, ran the risk of encountering the dead – sometimes, it must be said, to the advantage of the latter, as we shall see presently. The following narrative which purports to describe the personal experience of the tradition bearers' father-in-law, incorporates these beliefs and ideas:

... my father-in-law, the Lord have mercy on him, he was very young and they had no fire. And him and his neighbour, they used to go into the farmer's field. And there was this particular *brang* (branch) leaning right over a laneway and the father-in-law was afraid to cut it down because it would be too obvious that it was after being taken. But the other man, he was so desperate for a fire, he said he'd get it. So he was up on the brang – and the father-in-law was across the field – and he was up on the brang leaning over the road and a man came along and he says, 'the night is for the dead and day is for the living, go home!' Now, of course, the man got a bit frightened; he did go home and the father-in-law and him went the next night again and he said they were going to try and take that bough no matter who was there. The father-in-law said he'd wait with him. The man was up on the tree – 'here's your man again', he says and the father-in-law only heard the voice saying 'the night is for the dead. And don't have me to tell you for the third time, or you'll be out every night'.

Adding that they were afraid to go back the third night, she continued: Those were the words that were used; for there is such a thing as people wandering the streets at night, perhaps for penance or something like that.²²

The penitential dead as a category of the returning dead figure largely in Irish folk belief. These restless earthbound dead may be subject to specific periods, as well as types of punishment and, as the innocent dead, may be released by human intervention. The release is effected by human assistance given on their request to the dead. The human help sought by the dead varies; in our tradition bearer's narratives what is required by them are prayers and assistance to complete or carry out a task for which payment had been received prior to death. In fact a cycle of legends has grown up around the idea that the 'innocent' dead need human assistance to bring about a final release from their earthbound purgatory. A number of these legends have in common a dialogue between the living and the returned dead, almost a sine qua non of the legend type. The human person makes contact with, or indeed forces the dead person to speak, by using the traditionally prescribed formula consisting of a pious invocation in the form of a question: *In ainm Dé cad atá ag cur isteach ort?* ('In the name of God what is troubling you?') The dead person can then communicate his circumstances and need to the human, and on being assisted, vanishes.

One of our tradition bearer's narratives conforms almost completely to this pattern. Relating it as a personal experience of her grandfather's she says:

²⁰ 20 Lysaght. P. Tape No. 7, quotation. 1981.

²¹ 21 In Gaelic, *Is libhse an lá, is linne an oíche*; in German, *Der Tag ist dein, die Nacht ist mein*. See, Hoffman-Krayer, H. and Bächtold-Stäubli, H. *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Aberglaubens*. VI. Berlin, Leipzig 1934-1935. p. 776.

²² 22 Lysaght P. Tape No. 7, 1981.

He used to work on the bog late at night saving the bit of turf for the winter. And every night for a week there was a man walking behind the back of the car. He wouldn't speak to him. My grandfather was a very friendly type of a person, he spoke to everyone. And he was getting nervous of the man walking behind him, so after a week he stopped the car and said: 'In the name of God, man, if you're alive speak to me, but if you are dead, will you go to Heaven!' And then a voice came – but it wasn't the man's voice because he said he didn't see the man's mouth moving – and said, 'I've been waiting for someone to tell me where to go' and then he vanished. Shortly after that my grandfather died.²³

The belief that a person who died without having fulfilled his earthly obligations would return is firmly rooted in the collective tradition. Still earthbound because of human affairs he is destined to be restless until he himself fulfils his obligations with human assistance or until they are performed for him by a human person. The following two narratives involving Catholic priests illustrate this belief. In the first, the cause of the priest's restlessness is a unfinished grotto to the Virgin Mary for which he had collected money prior to his death:

I heard tell of a priest coming back; he was to have a grotto built and had collected money for it. And he was supposed to have come back to see that it was done. And they had a special Mass and procession and all at the opening of it. And the priest hasn't been heard tell of since. He was supposed to have come back, to have definitely come back to get the grotto built and it has been done.²⁴

The second narrative is a variant of a legend, well-known in Ireland, of the dead priest who returns to celebrate a Mass he had promised someone before he died. He cannot celebrate the Mass, however, without the assistance of a human to serve the Mass and thereby witness the fulfilment of the priest's pre-death promise.

In the more usual versions of this legend a woman is inadvertently locked into the church at night, and on being awakened by the sudden illumination of the church at the midnight hour, sees a priest fully vested for Mass, coming from the sacristy into the altar. He faces into the body of the Church and asks 'is there anyone there who will serve my Mass?' The woman becomes frightened, leaves the church in the morning and reports the experience to the parish priest. He accompanies her to the church on the following night and when the dead priest re-appears, and asks – often three times – for a server the parish priest replies that he will serve the Mass. At the end of the Mass he asks the dead priest why he has returned and he replies that he could not enter heaven until he had fulfilled his obligation to say a Mass for which he had been paid. He then vanishes. The following is our tradition bearer's version:

That happened here in Mountmellick, in the old graveyard up in Chapel Street. The men used to sit out, years ago, on the bridge playing cards and having sing-songs and things like that. And my father-in-law was one of the men that was up at the bridge one night and they could hear a chant. And the louder the chant got, the more nervous they got. And they went away terrified. The next morning the father-in-law and a neighbour went down to the priest and told the priest what happened... 'Why didn't you go and serve the Mass?' he said, 'you are putting an awful lot of trouble on me now.' And they had to go back up the following night for to say the Mass with the priest...²⁵

²³ 23 Lysaght P. Tape No. 8, July 1981.

²⁴ 24 Lysaght P. Tape No. 6, 1981.

²⁵ 25 Ibid.

The Dead return To Give Help

As well as accounts of the dead who return to seek help of one kind or another from the living, there are also many stories told of dead persons appearing to give help or advice or indeed a warning to the living. Our tradition bearer has a few narratives of this nature. One tells of the friendly return of a dead mother to care for her children, a legend rarely noted from Irish oral tradition to date.

Yes. I heard tell of a story about four children – they were between the ages of a month and five years old. And the father had to work to keep going, to keep the house going and keep the children fed. And he couldn't get over how the children were able to manage, have the house clean and the fire lit and a meal ready for him every evening. So, he asked the eldest girl one night, how did she do it? They were sitting in the dark with the fire lighting and the meal cooked. And they said that they didn't do it, that Mammy had been there with them; she had been with them for two or three years before he realised that she had been there. She definitely was there helping them, because they were too small to be left on their own.²⁶

Another legend reiterates the importance generally attached by people to the reception of the Last Sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Penance, before death, by expressing the common belief that even the dead may return to procure the services of a priest for a dying human relative. Our tradition bearer's narrative tells how a dead mother brought the priest to her dying son in prison. After the priest had collected the Blessed Sacrament from the church ... he went down with the woman and she went ahead of him. When they came up near the gates, she opened the gates for the priest to get in and brought him to the cell. And after hearing the prisoner's confession and giving him the last rites he asked who was the young woman that was after bringing the priest to him. He described the woman to the man and he says 'That was my mother; she died 20 years ago.' So the mother had come to save her son, to give him the chance of the last rites.²⁷

Since people tended to delay the administration of the Last Sacraments until the person was already in extremis, the fear that he would actually die without receiving them was ever present. A variety of legends in Irish tradition – many portraying the Devil as the central evil character and enemy of the dying – reflect this anxiety and will be dealt with later.

That the dead man may come back to give advice or perhaps a warning to relatives to change their ways, is the theme of the following legend:

I remember a man telling me a story about some person that wasn't leading a good life. They had lost a daughter And they were all very cruel people, everything for themselves. Even if they had to beg, borrow or steal it, they'd take it and they had plenty. And they were very hard people. And one of the daughters died and the father continued with his evil way. And she came back and left the imprint of her hand at the foot of his bed in case he might think it was a dream. She came back and told him to change his way, that once in her life she had given charity and that piece of charity was coming between her and the deepest flame in hell.²⁸

²⁶ 26 See Note 24 and Christiansen, R. Th. *The Migratory Legends*. Helsinki, 1958, No. 4030 'The Dead Mother Visiting Her Children.'

²⁷ 27 See Note 26.

²⁸ 28 Lysaght P. Tape No. 20, 1989.

The Malevolent Dead

Evil spirits figure prominently in the Irish supernatural beliefs. The causes of their evil disposition were not always known but they were regarded as suffering everlasting punishment for some heinous crime – hence their malice towards humans who encountered them late at night. Some of them are closely identified with particular places in the landscape from which they have derived their names. They could appear in male or female form or as various animals or birds. They could be restrained or banished by a variety of means but the priest's power was considered especially efficacious against them. It was believed that he could banish them to some narrow confine, or condemn them to a never-ending task such as placing a gad um ghainimh, ('a rope around sand'). The following two legends involving encounters with evil spirits in zoomorphic forms illustrate many of these motifs. In the first one the evil spirit appears in the form of a turkey. Irish folklore reveals ambivalent attitudes as an important domestic fowl was accompanied by an initial apprehension and a certain underlying fear of it. These reactions may have arisen because of its foreign origin, its dark colour, its appearance and because of aspects of its behaviour, during the initial period of familiarisation with it as a farmyard fowl. In folk belief it was sometimes regarded as a protection against supernatural beings, particularly against the devil and evil spirits; conversely it was also thought to have a demonic nature and could be, or could become, possessed by an evil spirit.²⁹ The following legend illustrates this latter belief: A big turkey was supposed to have been an evil spirit. Seemingly the person that was in the house wasn't a very good living person and died without repenting and came back and took possession of the turkey. Every time they tried to catch the turkey to kill it, it vanished. They couldn't find it anywhere. It used to get up on the rafters – you remember the old houses, they had rafters – he used to get on it at night and keep them awake all night long. And they had to get a priest down and the priest said that it was an evil spirit that had possessed the bird. 'There was no real bird there at all', he said, 'it was an evil spirit.'

Well, he banished it to a shed and locked up the shed and there was no more about it.³⁰

In the second, the evil spirit has the shape of a black dog. The dog is considered man's faithful companion. He is also frequently credited with the ability to perceive supernatural presences and forces and of warning and protecting his master from them. But in popular belief, the dog has also a demonic nature. This is often expressed in stories of fiendish dogs with fiery eyes, mostly black in colour and often of enormous size, which are thought to frequent particular locations in the landscape. Such dogs are often considered to be evil spirits, and like all such spirits everywhere, they should be avoided and left undisturbed.³¹ The following is our tradition bearer's legend of such a black dog:

Well, in Manor Lane, at the turn of the lane there's two iron gates, one straight opposite the other, right on the turn. And each night around midnight, this black dog or a form of a dog, jumps over the gate with two big balls of fire for eyes. And one particular night a neighbour of mine who was very drunk coming home made a kick at the dog and he ended up with a pair of black eyes and a

²⁹ 29 See the catalogue of the Archive of the Department of Irish Folklore: turcaithe/turkey.

³⁰ 30 Lysaght P. Tape No. 6, 1981.

³¹ 31 See motif No. 303.3.3.1.1. The Devil as a Dog. Thompson, S. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. 1-6. Copenhagen, 1955-1958; Tubach F. C. *Index Exemplorum. A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*. FFC 204. Helsinki 1969, Nos. 1538, 1568, 1644, 1813; also, Woods, B. A. *The Devil in Dog Form: A Partial Type-Index of Devil Legends*. University of California Folklore Series Nr. 11, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1959; see also, *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Aberglaubens*. IV. p 484.

couple of broken ribs. So it's supposed to have been just a passway for some spirit or other that had the shape of the dog and because he was interfered on [sic] he struck back. It is supposed to be very dangerous to interfere with anything that isn't able to be accounted for – in the line of spirits – you know?³²

The Devil

In popular belief the devil too is sometimes thought to appear as a black dog.³³ Cat shape is also attributed to him in Irish tradition.³⁴ A strange black cat in particular was viewed with apprehension. The cat has long been considered a sinister animal. In Greek and Roman traditions it was perceived as the concomitant of supernatural evil. In the Christian tradition its predominant association was with wickedness, darkness and the occult. To medieval preachers the cat was a symbol of Satan³⁵ and this image has persisted in folk belief.

The power of the priest to banish evil spirits has already been mentioned. In Irish legend the priest is also depicted as the powerful and successful adversary of the devil. The following legend is representative of narratives detailing the banishment of a cat-devil by a priest in Irish tradition: ... it was about the old woman, her husband died and this cat strayed in – an old black cat strayed in and she used to feed it. Priests used to go around those times visiting the houses and he came in one evening and she was making tea or something and the cat came in and she left the tea down; instead of continuing to feed the priest she left the tea down and went on to feed the cat. And she came back anyway and the priest and her had their tea. He asked her how long was the cat there, and she said like, that he's only come in since the husband died, and kept her company. And the priest said, 'get rid of it'. And she says, 'ah, what harm is it doing, sure what harm can it do there'. And the priest said, 'it's not a cat'. 'What else is it?' she says, 'it's there now and it'll stay there'. The priest says, 'I wouldn't advise you, I'll show you,' he says, 'what it is'. So he put on his stole, started to pray and the next thing the cat began to get real big, man-sized, shaped into a man and went through the door and vanished. And there wasn't another word about the cat after. It terrified the woman; she was terrified of black cats after that.³⁶

The devil was also believed to appear in human shape. According to our tradition bearer the devil can have any form, – cats, dogs, man, animals of any kind, even birds. He can take any form.³⁷ One of the many notions about the devil in folk belief generally is that he is a gambler,³⁸ and card-playing is thus depicted as the devil's pastime.³⁹ In a legend which has grown up around this belief the devil is recognised by his cloven hoof. In Christiansen's list of Norwegian migratory legends this legend (no. 3015) is entitled 'The Card-players and the Devil'.⁴⁰ In the following version of the legend from our tradition bearer's repertoire the card-playing scene is set in Maynooth College, the major Catholic seminary in Ireland, and it is incorporated in an

³² 32 Lysaght P. Tape No. 7, 1981.

³³ 33 See the catalogue of the Archive of the Department of Irish Folklore: Diabhail/Devil; S. Ó hEochaidh and Ó Laoire, L.L. An Diabhail i Seanchas Thír Chonnaill' (The Devil in Donegal Lore). *Béaloidéas*. 1989, No. 57, p. 4. (No. 6). In English, p. 74, No. 6, Notes p. 102.

³⁴ 34 See Note 33.

³⁵ 35 Rowland, B. *Animals with Human Faces. A Guide to Animal Symbolism*. London 1974, pp. 51-52.

³⁶ 36 Lysaght P. Quotation, tape No. 7, 1981.

³⁷ 37 Lysaght P. Quotation, tape No. 6, 1981.

³⁸ 38 See Note 31, Thompson, Motif N. 4; Tubach, 745, 2238.

³⁹ 39 See Note 31, Thompson, Motif G 303.6.1.5. The devil appearing to the card-players.

⁴⁰ 40 See Note 26, Christiansen, pp. 24-28.

aetiological legend explaining a cloven-hoof impression said to have been visible on a floor in the seminary:

I've heard tell of the cloven foot. There is a story about it in Maynooth College. It seems as though the students were studying and it was their last studying before they became the priests. And instead of studying they were playing cards. And a strange student came on the scene to play cards with them. And, of course, as always happens with these stories, the Ace of Spades fell and one of the boys stooped down for to pick up the card and saw the cloven foot. And two of them committed suicide and one of them lived long enough for to tell the story. And there is supposed to be something about the footmark being still there in the College. I've seen a mark that looks like that of a cow's foot. I've seen it in the College. Me brother-in-law brought me up to it one time and showed it to me and he laughed when I said, 'how did the cow's footmark get into the tile?' It was supposed to have been the devil himself coming to tease the boys before they became priests, you know?⁴¹

Attempts by the devil to delay a priest on a sick call is a common theme in Irish devil-lore and has given rise to a number of legends. The delaying tactics credited to the devil are many and varied and among them may be enumerated such tricks as, causing a thick fog to surround the priest, appearing in the shape of a black dog and physically attacking him, placing imaginary physical obstacles in the priest's path or, as in the following legends, creating the illusion of gold coins on the road, or singing sweetly, in order to delay the priest.

In the first legend which comments on this theme the priest who is wearing his stole recognises the devil's evil snare and keeps going on his journey of mercy and arrives in time to administer the Last Sacraments to the dying person:

Well, he's supposed to be on the road here, down here – a country road. And he won't let people pass by. There was a woman dying one night and a man came in for the priest. And at that time the priest used to go on horses. And they went up this laneway. It was the shortest way to the woman's home and it was a moonlit night and there was two crowns shining on the ground. Now, the priest, of course, had his stole on him especially when he was going to visit the sick. And he says to the man 'keep the horse going', he says, 'and don't stop, you can get your crowns coming back'. So the man was very reluctant, of course, when he saw the two crowns there lying on the ground and he very badly off; he needed money. But he went on anyway, he done the priest's bidding and when they were coming back the priest stopped the horse himself and told him to go down and get the crowns. And it was two horseshoe nails that had taken the shape. And he said 'It was the devil was there trying to stop him from getting on time to save the woman's soul'.⁴²

The second legend-type, however, illustrates how the priest is often beguiled by the singing (sometimes said to have been performed by two black dogs)⁴³ to the extent that he listens until the song⁴⁴ is finished and thus arrives to find that the person is already dead. The implication of the legend is, of course, that the devil may have won the person's soul.

... A story goes that one night – it was the time that the priests used to go on horseback to attend the dying – and this priest was sent for in the night. And on his way he could hear a beautiful

⁴¹ 41 Lysaght P. Quotation, tape No. 1, June 1976. About this legend in the Irish tradition, see É Ní Anluain. An Cearrbhach agus an Diabhail: ML 3015 in Éirinn (The Gambler and the Devil: ML 3015 in Ireland). Student essay in the Department of Irish Folklore.

⁴² 42 Lysaght P. Quotation, tape No. 1, 1976.

⁴³ 43 See Note 31.

⁴⁴ 44 In South Wexford there is a song used in this context: Arise Bonnie Lassy, We'll Bundle and Go (IFC 107:387), but there is a more widespread one in Gaelic: Caillín deas crúite na mbó ('The Beautiful Milk-maid'). In places it is known as a 'cursed song' that was forbidden to sing.

sweet-singing voice out in the fields. So he stopped his horse for to listen and he waited for the song to be finished and by the time he got to the patient that he was sent for to give the last rites to, they were dead. He was too late.⁴⁵

The Fairy Faith

As well as having a continuing belief in death-omens, the returning dead and the devil, our tradition bearer also believes in certain aspects of the Fairy Faith. Reidar Th. Christiansen has defined the Fairy Faith as 'the complex of beliefs connected with the existence on earth of another race side by side with man but normally invisible to him...'⁴⁶ Belief in the existence of that second race once held in most countries, is perhaps as old as man himself. Such belief was very strong in former times in Ireland and still today it remains part of the unofficial world-view – of some people at least. Some sample collections of Irish fairy lore have been published⁴⁷ and from these it is evident that the fairy lore component of our tradition bearer's repertoire, although possessing strong local colouring (something which is to be expected in traditions dealing with nature-beings⁴⁸ such as the fairies) is nevertheless part of the fairy faith in Ireland. The thematic content of her fairy lore including the belief legends summarised here, and her responses to the various reflexes of the fairy faith, have been presented and analysed in some detail elsewhere. In the context of this wider discussion of the folk belief content of the tradition bearer's repertoire, it is thus necessary only to present a summary of our previous examinations and conclusions here. The main themes comprising the storyteller's fairy-lore are: locations of the fairy world, fairy origin and hope of salvation, social organisation and way of life of the fairy world, fairy physique and dress, and interaction between the fairy world and the human world. Our analysis shows that in terms of belief, her attitudes to these various themes range from firm belief in the existence of the fairy world, and an equally firm conviction that it is unwise to interfere with it in any way, through uncertainty and fluctuation of belief about the origin of the fairy-race and details of daily life in the fairy world, until finally a state of total disbelief is reached on her part in relation to traditional ideas about abduction of humans – children and adults – by the fairies.

In general terms it is probably true to say that in Ireland the fairy faith remains strongest in situations in which it is tied to a landscape feature – as our storyteller's repertoire illustrates. For her firm belief in the existence of the fairy world is linked to a dominant local landscape monument, an earthen mound in the vicinity of her home. This place she considers 'sacred' or set apart, and her repertoire includes legends of revenge arising from interference with it.

Her attitude to the traditional explanation of the origin of the fairy race in Irish tradition, that is, that they are the bad angels cast out of heaven by God and the Archangel Michael, during the war in heaven, is more ambivalent, however. Although she knows and has told me this traditional account of the origin of the fairies many times, she is not sure about it – she feels rather that the fairies are in some way connected with the dead and that they may in fact be the ancient dead who live on in the mounds and hills.

Linked to the question of the origin of the fairies is their final fate on the Day of Judgement. In Irish tradition their fate is inextricably linked to their origin – as the fallen angels there is no hope of salvation for them. Although the storyteller is ambivalent about their origin, she knows,

⁴⁵ 45 Lysaght P. Quotation, tape No. 7, 1981.

⁴⁶ 46 *Béaloides*, 1971-1973, No. 39-41, p. 95.

⁴⁷ 47 See Note 4.

⁴⁸ 48 See, von Sydow, C. W. Övernaturliga vasen. *Nordisk Kultur* XIX. Folketro. 1935, pp. 91-159; see also, Hultkrantz, Å. *The Supernatural Owners of Nature*. 1961.

nevertheless, and also tells, a variant of a legend common in Ireland which is based on the belief that fairies are the fallen angels, and which confirms the hopelessness of the fairy peoples continuing expectations of re-admittance to heaven on the Last Day. Her narrative may be summarised as follows: A priest encounters a fairy man on a lonely road. He asks if he will go to heaven on the Day of Judgement. The priest tells him to cut his finger and when no blood comes the priest says that he will not be saved since he has not enough blood in his body to write his name.

The theme of abduction of humans into the fairy world has several reflexes in Irish tradition. Our storyteller mentions two – the abduction of young children into the otherworld and the attempted abduction of brides. Both themes have found expression in legends. The Changeling Legend, an international migratory legend (no. 5085)⁴⁹ is well attested in Ireland and has grown out of the belief that the fairies could abduct human beings (and animals) and leave some sickly substitute (known in Gaelic as an *iarlais*) or changeling behind. Our tradition bearer's version can be summarised as follows: the child was continually crying and not thriving. Music was heard from her room. Relatives decided that it was a changeling because of its physical characteristics and strange behaviour. Having asked the mother to leave the house, the father heated a fire-iron until red hot and threatened to assault the child with the hot iron as well as uttering many curses. The 'child' then disappeared, emitting a terrible scream, and the little girl was returned.

Our storyteller does not believe this story. Her view is that the condition of children which gave rise to the notion that they were changelings could be explained in the normal way. She feels that these children may have had an incorrect diet, for example. Thus when the child got the right food it 'returned' to normal again.

The storyteller's pragmatic attitude to the changeling belief is also evident from her explanation of the factors which she considers gave rise to the belief that fairies attempt to abduct brides. Jenny's version of a legend arising from this belief can be summarised as follows: The fairies were trying to abduct a bride and they had a human helping them to get into the house where the wedding feast was being held. The fairies were perched on the rafters and while the bride was dancing one of them moved and scattered dust. The bride sneezed once, twice and at the third sneeze the human helper said 'God Bless' – at which the fairies were compelled to vanish.

Our tradition bearer's reaction to this legend was that it was only 'an old wives tale' and feels that the belief in the abduction of brides could have been used to explain altered behaviour of women after marriage who had difficulty coping with their new situation in life.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of the folk belief content of the repertoire of a modern Irish female tradition bearer shows that belief in the supernatural remains an important aspect of her present-day world view. Having been raised in a home and local environment conducive to fostering firm belief in the supernatural, it is understandable that supernatural lore became a repertoire dominant for her. However, she has not reacted uncritically to the home and community repertoire in relation to the supernatural – some themes in the collective local store of mythological traditions she has accepted fully, while she has rejected or remains ambivalent about other aspects of it; for example, she believes firmly in death omens, the return of the dead and in the Devil. Her attitudes to the fairy faith, however, varies a from firm belief in the existence of the fairy world, tempered by doubt as to the origin and final fate of the fairy race and their social organisation, to total

⁴⁹ 49 See Note 26, Christiansen, pp. 109-113.

disbelief about the abduction of humans into the fairy world. Although possessing strong local colouring the storyteller's folk beliefs and legends are appropriate to the collective supernatural tradition in Ireland – in Gaelic speaking as well as in anglicised Ireland – and are part also of a wider European belief tradition.

Our storyteller is an intelligent and discerning woman for whom belief in aspects of the supernatural is a fact of life, something which must be taken into consideration in assessing the continuation of folk beliefs into modern times and their impact on modern-day thought.

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Petrie and the Music of Clare

by Brendan Breathnach⁵⁰

Petrie travelled through Clare in 1821 and his biographer, William Stokes,⁵¹ tells us that his visit to Kilfenora in that year was attended with the saddest recollections. The abject poverty and misery of the people he encountered depressed his spirits, but, if that were so, the music which he heard had an entirely different effect on him. He was literally fascinated by it, so much so that for long afterwards he entertained the idea that the music of Clare possessed distinctive qualities not possessed by that of other counties. Indeed, Stokes tells us that Petrie visited the county not only to collect music towards its preservation, but to pursue his theory about its particular distinctiveness. This enthusiasm finds lyrical expression again and again in the notes he added to the airs in his 'Ancient Music of Ireland' and in the fragment of Volume II published posthumously in 1882. Commenting on the air 'Ag an mBóithrín Buí' which he had notated from the singing of Teige MacMahon, Petrie writes:

With respect to the melody to which these words have been united, I should, perhaps, remark that it appears to me to be a good example, both in its structure and in its tone of sentiment, of a class of tunes which are very abundant in the county of Clare, and which, to some extent at least, may be considered as peculiar to the ancient territory of Thomond. They are usually of that compound structure known as six-eight measure, have an animated movement, and, even when blended with cadence of tenderness or sorrow, breathe a manly buoyancy of spirits, in a high degree characteristic of a vigorous race, and such as it might be expected would emanate from and be expressive of, the feelings of the great warlike and unconquered tribes of Dal-Cais. He returns again to his fancy when commenting on 'Bímíd ag Ól', another air obtained from Teige MacMahon. He writes:

I may remark that vocal melodies of this spirited character would appear to have been anciently more abundant in the county of Clare than, perhaps, in any other county in Ireland, and if this be the fact, and viewing national melody as an exponent of national character, it is only such as we might naturally expect to find in the ancient territory of the Dal-Cais.

Commenting on a ploughman's whistle Petrie says:

It is known in the county Clare as The Whistle of the Ploughman and Carters, for it is commonly used by both, to soothe and cheer their horses at their tedious and unexciting labours; and of its extreme antiquity I cannot entertain a doubt. This precious specimen of an ancient pastoral music – so full of deep and solemn tenderness, and, of its kind, such as no country but Ireland has produced, or, as I believe, could produce – was noted from the whistling of the blind Clare peasant, Teighe MacMahon, who, previous to his loss of sight, had for many years been a ploughman.

While Petrie travelled through the county and heard this music at first hand, it may well be that the contributions representing the county in his collection were taken down in Dublin. Eugene O'Curry was a colleague over the years in the Ordnance Survey and in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. Teige MacMahon lived for many years in the city and Frank Keane, our third worthy,

⁵⁰ Petrie and the Music of Clare by Brendan Breathnach first appeared in Dal gCais vol. 2. (1976).

⁵¹ I. William Stokes, 'The Life and Labours in Art and Archaeology of George Petrie LLD., M.R.I.A.' (London 1868)

had settled and married in Dublin, earning his living there as a lawyer's clerk. In his and in MacMahon's case there is some evidence that music was obtained from them in the city.

Eugene O'Curry and the Petrie Collection

It is hardly necessary in the pages of 'Dal-Cais' to offer more than a few details about Eugene O'Curry whose achievements in the field of Irish studies do indeed merit comparison with those of Daniel O'Connell in the political sphere.⁵² He was born in Doonaha in 1794, the third son of Eoghan O Comhraidhe and Cáit Ní Mhadagáin. His schooling began and ended among the Irish manuscripts possessed by his father and he spent the rest of his life examining, collating, extracting and cataloguing the Irish manuscripts in the libraries of Dublin, London and Oxford. Besides the work published under his own name, on the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish and Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History, O'Curry made major contributions to Irish learning by the assistance he gave to other scholars, as we shall see in the case of Petrie.

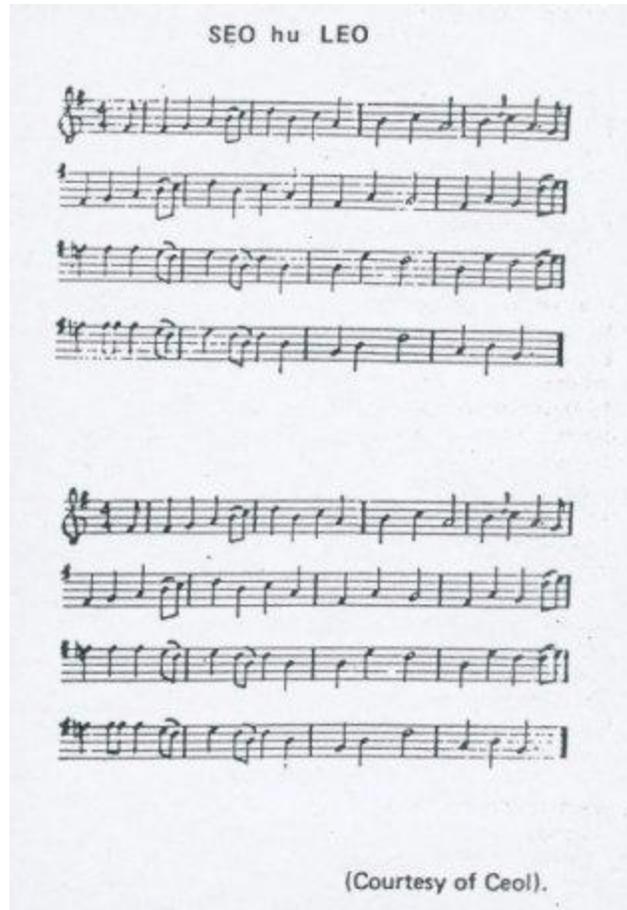
Petrie was ignorant of Irish. He relied on O'Curry to write down the words of the Irish songs and their translation, and he was indebted to him also for providing texts for airs already notated. Without O'Curry at his side, Petrie would have failed to provide the many song texts and fragments of verse which adorn his collection. But O'Curry's contribution did not end there. He supplied notes and lengthy essays on the subject matter of some of these songs and these, with the exception of a misguided surmise on the derivation of 'planctsy' are of inestimable value. They are complete, precise, and authoritative and they offer information on matters which otherwise would have been totally lost. Their scope may be seen by a brief reference to the subjects covered; the derivation of the word 'pleraca', 'raca' a Hibernicised form of the English 'rake', as in like manner 'ple', a corruption of the word 'play'; the old method of ploughing; three men with a set of four or six horses; fairy abductions and anti-fairy charms.

Superstitions about changelings and fairy abductions underline the theme of the song, 'Seo hu leo', or, as it is more commonly called, 'A bhean ud thíos'. The song was written down by George Petrie from the singing of Mary Madden, a poor blind country woman from County Limerick but then resident in Dublin, and it was published by him in his 'Ancient Music of Ireland'. Eugene O'Curry furnished a lengthy commentary on the theme of this song and the words, with a translation and O'Curry's commentary, are here reproduced from Petrie's volume for the light they shed on the strange beliefs held on these matters in the Clare of a century and a half ago. The spell of the words has been left unaltered; the air is a West Cork version noted by Prionsias O Ceallaigh and is somewhat more developed than that published by Petrie.

⁵² 2. 'Eugene O'Curry: the neglected scholar', by Muiris O Rochain, in the first issue of 'Dal gCais', 1972.

Seo hu leo

<p style="text-align: center;">1.</p> <p>A bean sú éifor ar bpuac an o-ppodán, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, An o-cuirgeann túra pác mo géaradán, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, 'Sgur bliacáin 'ra lá 'nu 'fuabaig mé óom' gearradán, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, 'Sda puas arcead mé a lior an Chnocáin, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó. Seó hín, feó hín, feó hín, feó hín, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Seó hín, feó hín, feó hín, feó hín, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2.</p> <p>'Seo é annro mo éeag mór mairead, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Ar iomda leann úr agus leann sean ann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Ar iomda míl buíde agus céir bead ann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Ar iomda sean duine ar a narg ann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Seó hín, feó hín, feó hín, &c.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3.</p> <p>Ar iomda buabail cúl-bonn car ann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Ar iomda cailín cail-buíde deap ann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, 'Cá dá bean déag agus iomdair mac ann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, 'Cá an arcead eile ro na n-air ann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Seó hín, feó hín, feó hín, &c.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4.</p> <p>Absar léim' déile ceact a márad, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, 'San éinneall éirad a g-epoíde a beápnann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Scian éirde buíde 'éabairde na léim leir, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, 'San capall coraig do bualad 'ran m-beápnann, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Seó hín, feó hín, feó hín, &c.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5.</p> <p>An lúib a buain 'cá a n-bopur an leara, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Mar fúil ro Dia go raíann leir a baile, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Nó mar a o-cuirse ró pá'n tréid rin, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, 'Dó m-biaora am bairplogain ar na mná ro, Seó hú leó, feó hú leó, Seó hín, feó hín, feó hín, &c.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1.</p> <p>O woman below on the brink of the stream, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Do you understand the cause of my wailing? Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, A year and this day I was whipt off my palfrey, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, And was carried into <i>Lios-an-Chnocain</i>, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2.</p> <p>Here is here my beautiful great-house, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Abundant is new ale there and old ale, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Abundant is yellow honey and bees' wax there, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Many is the old man tightly bound there, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, &c.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3.</p> <p>Many is the curling brown-haired boy there, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Many is the yellow-haired comely girl there, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, There are twelve women bearing sons there, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, And as many more are there besides them, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, &c.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4.</p> <p>Say to my husband to come to-morrow, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, With the wax candle in the centre of his palm, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, And in his hand bring a black-bafted knife, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, And beat the first horse out of the gap, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, &c.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5.</p> <p>To pluck the herb that's in the door of the fort, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, With trust in God that I would go home with him, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Or if he does not come within that time, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, That I will be queen over all these women, Sho hoo lo, sho hoo lo, Sho-heen, sho-heen, sho-heen, &c.</p>
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O'Curry's Commentary: From Petrie's Collection⁵³

The preceding rare and remarkable poem contains, I am bold to say, more of authentic fairy fact and doctrine than, with some few exceptions, has ever been published in Ireland. The incident here clearly narrated was believed, at all times, to be of frequent occurrence. It was for the last sixteen hundred years, at least, and is still, as firmly believed in as any other fact in the history of this country, that the Tuatha de Dananns, after their overthrow by the Milesians, had gone to reside in their hills and ancient forts, or in their dwellings in lakes and rivers – that they were in possession of a mortal immortality - and that they had the power to carry off from this visible world men and women in a living state, but sometimes under the semblance of death. The persons taken off were generally beautiful infants, wanted for those in the hills who had no children, fine young women before marriage, and often on the day of the marriage, for the young men of the hills who had been invisibly feasting on their growing beauties – perhaps from childhood; – young men in the same way for languishing damsels of fairyland; – fresh well-looking nurses for their nurseries. The usual mode of abduction was by throwing the object into a sudden fit or trance, and substituting in its place an old man or woman, or sickly child, as the case might require; but apparently there was no exchange. At other times the object died to all appearance, and was buried in the usual way, but people generally guessed whether it was a real death or not. In other cases the person was whipt off the brink of a river, lake, or the sea, by a

⁵³ 3. For reasons of space the text of O'Curry's commentary, kindly supplied by the author, has been reduced. (Ed. Note).

gust of wind, and apparently drowned and lost, but had only been taken down to some noble mansion and plain, over which the water was but a transparent atmosphere.

The poem tells its own story fully and clearly. The allusions to the luxuries of the fairy mansion carry it back to a period anterior to the general use of the more modern inventions of wine and whiskey, &c. Now whiskey, or 'Uisge Beatha', is known to have been commonly used in Ireland for three hundred years; and if it had been an ordinary luxury at the time of writing the poem, there can be no doubt that it would be included in the list of good things of fairydom.

It may be further observed, that the poem is not written in the language of the poets of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, and there is not one corrupt word or 'Anglicism' in it, defects from which very few Irish poems of the last two hundred years are free. The abducted person in this poem seems to have been a married woman, and a nurse. She also appears to have been snatched off her horse, probably under the semblance of a fall and death; and that her rank was respectable is shown by her having ridden her own palfrey. She sees from within 'Lios-a-Chnocain', or the Fort of the Hillock, a woman, probably a neighbour, standing on the brink of a stream which passes by the fort, and in the intervals of her 'Seo hu leo', or hushaby, for her new nurseling, she contrives to convey to the listener her wishes line after line to the end of each stanza, and then, in order to gain time for further thought, and see if she is still unobserved within, she finishes with a more prolonged and endearing 'Seo hu leo', addressed to her infant.

The old men tied in fetters, in the second stanza, are men who had been formerly carried off in the prime of life, but were kept to be substituted for other young men when carried off from their young wives or friends.

The bit of wax candle which her husband was to carry securely in the palm of his hand was – in more modern times – a candle blessed on Candlemass-day, and with which no house in Ireland was unprovided. The black-hafted knife was the only formidable mortal weapon in fairy warfare – a single thrust or stab from it was fatal; but a second rendered the first one harmless.

The use of the black-hafted knife in our poem appears to have been to strike the leading horse of the woman's fairy chariot when going out through the gap or door of the fort the next day, by which the magic veil which concealed her would be destroyed; and the possession of the herb which grew at the door of the fort was to guard her from all future attempts at her recapture. Her urgent request for an immediate release was in accordance with a belief that fairy captives are redeemable within a year and a day, but after that they are lost for ever.

The belief in the fairy influence, and in the ordinary means of counteracting it by the agency of herb-men and herb-women, was not confined to the votaries of one form of Christianity. I remember when Father Mathew Molony, parish priest of Moyarta and Kilballyowen, was drowned in crossing on horseback at 'Bealbunadh', the inlet of Oystercove, or Skeagh, on the lower Shannon, Clare side, about three miles below Kiltrush, his mother, and his brothers, who were sensible and 'well informed' men, continued not only for a year and a day, but for seven years, to put in action all the available anti-fairy force of the whole province of Munster for his recovery, and this with a confidence that was sickening to my father and mother, who were the only two people I ever knew in that country who were total unbelievers in such doctrines. It is hardly necessary to say that poor Father Molony never came back.

The popular belief in the abduction of fine healthy young women to become fairy nurses, which is the subject of this little poem, is so well known that it scarcely requires an illustration, yet, as an example of the tenacity with which the Irish peasantry still cling to this superstition, I may relate an occurrence which came within my own knowledge, though it has already been given to the public in Mr Wilde's 'Popular Superstitions of the Irish Peasantry'. I well remember in the year 1818, Mary, the wife of Daniel Kelly, a bouncing, full, auburn-haired, snow-white-skinned woman, about twenty-eight years of age, died suddenly on a summer's day while in the act of cutting cabbages in her garden. Great was the consternation throughout the whole parish of Moyarta, in the south-west of Clare, at this sad event, the more particularly as several persons, who were in a westerly direction from her at the time, declared that they had seen and felt a violent gust of wind pass by and through them in the exact direction of Kelly's house, carrying with it all the dust and straws, &c., which came in its way. This confirmed the husband and friend of the deceased in their impression that she had been carried off to nurse for the fairies. Immediately Mary Quinn, alias 'The Pet' (Maire an Pheata), and Margaret M'Inerheny, alias 'Black Peg', two famous fairy women in the neighbourhood, were called in, who, for three days and three nights, kept up a constant but unavailing assault on a neighbouring fort, or rath, for the recovery of the abducted woman. But at the end of that time it was found that the body, or what in their belief appeared to be the body, of Mary Kelly, could not be any longer kept over ground, wherefore it was placed in the grave, but still with a total unbelief of its identity. Her bereaved husband and her brothers watched her grave day and night for three weeks after; and they opened it, in the full conviction of finding only a birch broom, a log of wood, or the skeleton of some deformed monster, in it. In this, however – I need scarcely add – they were grievously mistaken; for they found in it only what they had placed there, but in a much more advanced state of decomposition.

Petrie frankly acknowledged his indebtedness to his friend. Writing to O'Curry, who was then in London, he expresses the wish to have him beside him again; Petrie was proceeding with his second volume, "that is to say, between ourselves, as well as I can without you beside me. But in truth I can do nothing of consequence except in the way of preparation till I have you again to aid me."

Teige MacMahon, Songster and Shanachie

Some personal details about Teige MacMahon may be gleaned from a long forgotten article in the 'Irish Monthly', January, 1886, by Mrs Morgan John O'Connell and happily brought to light by Dr. Thomas Wall in an article on Teige MacMahon and Peter O'Connell in 'Bealoideas' (xxx) 1962.⁵⁴ Mrs. O'Connell's account, entitled 'The Last of the Shanachies', tells how she visited MacMahon in the Kildysart workhouse and she recalls the broad bent figure, the ruddy face, the long thick white hair and the wrinkled hands. As a youth Teige, who came from Kilmurry McMahon, worked at Money Point, not far from Kilrush, for a brother of Peter O'Connell, the famous lexicographer. He farmed and quarried there during "the year the oats were pulled out of the ground," some year of phenomenal dryness before the Clare election of 1826. He returned home to his own people who were cottier tenants, but - his sight failing - he came to Dublin where, cauched for cataract, he made a recovery. The recovery was not to be permanent and

⁵⁴ 4. 'Teige MacMahon and Peter O'Connell, Seanchai and Scholar in Co. Clare', 'Bealoideas', 1962.

gradually he sunk into total blindness. His chance meeting with O'Curry in Dublin, from which followed his introduction to Petrie, is related by Mrs. O'Connell;

Teague was walking one day outside Dublin talking Irish to another man when he was stopped, accosted in Irish, and asked where he was from. Teague immediately named his remote birth place. "I am a Kilmurry man too," said his interlocutor in Irish, and this was no less a person than Eugene O'Curry, probably the best Irish scholar of his day. The Irish professor of the Catholic University took up his old neighbour and was good to him, and made him known [to] richer men interested in Irish lore, and then Teague had fine times. He is fully convinced that but for his blindness they would have made him porter in the Royal Irish Academy. He knew Dr. Todd, and Dr. Lyons, and Stokes, and his son, the Councillor, and the late Mr. Pigott and Mr. O'Mahony, who keeps him in newspapers and tobacco, and Mr. Joyce; but his man is "The Doctor", the gentle kindly Dr. Petrie. Many a tumbler of punch has Teague partaken in a corner of his dining room while "singing songs and the doctor playing them on the fiddle, and some other tricean (?) taking them down."

In his old age Teague returned to Clare and entered the workhouse in Kildysart where he was regarded as a personage by the other inmates, receiving newspapers and tobacco all the way from Dublin and having his name printed by the learned Dr. Petrie. "He was, in fact," wrote Mrs. O'Connell, "the only thoroughly happy person I ever saw in a workhouse." In all Teague contributed over fifty airs to Petrie, only the smaller part surely of that blind man's repertoire.

Frank Keane and the Petrie Collection

A brief entry in a manuscript in the Royal Irish Academy identifies Frank Keane who contributed two airs, a double jig and a caoine to the 1855 volume. Prionsias O'Cathain, alias Francis Keane of Clare, married and living in Dublin (1868-'76) was a lawyer's clerk and, I believe, mostly self-educated. The manuscript in question is a translation of *Paradise Lost*, made by Keane himself.⁵⁵ Keane submitted two entries in a competition organised by the Royal Irish Academy for a report on the state of the Irish language. He was awarded first prize for his essay on Munster; his account on Ulster was really a second essay on Munster.

The address on the first essay is 29, North Frederick Street, Dublin, and that on the other essay is 20, Newcomen Avenue, North Strand, Dublin. Since he was lawyer's clerk the first address was most likely that of the office where he worked. In a manuscript collection of literary stories and poems, which he began compiling in the Autumn of 1844, Keane signs himself Francis Keane of Kilfenora, County Clare; otherwise Prionsias O'Cathain ó Baile Atha Cliath anois, acht, roimhe seo, ó Chill-iarrach, Cill-Chaoi, Contae an Chlair, Eirinn.

It is interesting to see that the request for remembrance which Irish scribes were wont to append to their transcriptions is, in Keane's formula as follows:

"Guidhgidhe lucht, eistighthe, trocaire ó Dia don sgríobhnoir, agus don leithoir leis (pray, listeners, for God's mercy for the writer and for the reader also). The person capable of reading

⁵⁵ 5. 'A translation of the first two books of Milton's 'Paradise Lost''. The title and opening lines read: 'Parrthas Cailte tarraingthe on Sacs-Bhearla go Grodhailge le Prionsias O'Cathain: Air chead easumhlach duine bParrthas Dé 's air thorea'n chrainn sin air a coisceadh e.'

such manuscripts was designated an “Irishian”, a word still current in the speech of the county to describe a person regarded as good at Irish. These manuscripts were not compiled for their private enjoyment by literary scribes but for the use of the whole community, and a comment by Keane in his essay on the language of Munster, concerning the practice of reading stories from them at gatherings of the people, is worth recording;

“They find great pleasure and amusement in reading those manuscripts, especially on winter nights, on which occasions the neighbours of the surrounding districts flock together for the purpose of hearing them read, the reader being often obliged to perform his task with no other light than that of what people commonly called “a sgiolpog of bogdeal” or the light of a bogrush dipped in oil extracted from fish livers.

The reader concluded his reading by speaking the prayer quoted above and his listeners responded with “Amen, a Thiarna.”

Frank Keane contributed a Munster double jig to the 1855 Volume, a tune he had learned from his brother, one of the best professional fiddlers in the south of Ireland. Elsewhere Petrie mentions Keane’s music book as the source of other tunes and Keane is credited with over eighty airs in the complete Petrie collection. His contribution is particularly valuable for the dialogue songs formerly sung by women at comhar for spinning, knitting, sewing or other such co-operative work. It may be said that the versions in the complete collection betray Petrie’s uncontrollable itch for amending airs he received, transposing from sharp to flat keys, effecting rhythmical and even melodic changes.

Assessment

An affected disdain for peasant effusions and Victorian squeamishness towards the Irish texts on Petrie’s part rendered the Clare contribution less valuable than it might have been. This attitude comes clearly through in his comments on these songs;

‘Ag an mBoithrin Bui;’ the words have but slender merit; but as a peasant composition, they are not wanting in delicacy of feeling.

‘As truagh gan peata an mhaoir agam;’ the words though of no high poetic merit, are not without interest, from their natural simplicity and as an illustration of the thoughts of Irish peasant life.

‘Suig anseo a mhuirin laimh liom;’ the words are unfit for publication.

‘Ar lorg na ngamhan do chuireasa mo leansbh;’ of the old Irish song sung to this melody, Mr. Curry had heard many versions, but all of them more or less corrupted and otherwise unfit for publication.

‘Da gcastai bean tanarai liom’: the Irish song to this air is not admissible in this work.

A similar verdict is passed on ‘Cearc agus Coileach a d’imigh le cheile’ and, after two verses of ‘An buachaill caol dubh’, contributed by O’Curry, Petrie breaks off, “this is enough, and, perhaps, too much,” and then goes on to declare that, “the song called ‘Cassideich Ban,’ or ‘White Cassidy,’ which is sung to the ‘Buachaill Caol Dubh’ in the province of Connaught is still less appropriate to the sentiment of the melody and, is moreover, of such a nature as will not allow even a specimen of it to be translated.” In respect of all this the reader ignorant of Irish can rest assured that most of these songs are utterly harmless.

To this prudishness Petrie allied an aversion from sentiments of disaffection which might seem to threaten the burgeoning empire for which he displayed a keen affection. The air, ‘O Bhean an tigde, nach suairc é sin?’ had been chosen by the White boys and other illegal combinations of southern peasantry as their choral song and night march.

Such rude ballads were not without a certain degree of interest, as expressive of a popular mind during periods of its excitement, and their preservation would not be without value to the historian.

Having commented thus, Petrie used only one of the few verses which O’Curry could remember of the song. Teige MacMahon, from whom he had written the air, could doubtless have supplied him with all other verses, and other songs of the kind, had Petrie a mind to write them.

Petrie hastens to add two verses of ‘A chuisle mo chroi,’ sung to the same air which, though modern, he has much pleasure in adding to the other fragments already given as exhibiting one of the better and abiding fruits of the Irish peasant nature, in strong contrast to those partially acquired and temporary ones which had been superinduced by untoward circumstances, happily not likely again to occur.

‘Slán cois Maighe,’ written from O’Curry’s singing is presented as;

An unobjectionable specimen of the talents and thoughts of one of the most distinguished of a class of men, usually hedge schoolmasters, who for nearly a century, by their writings, teachings, and, too generally, reckless lives, exercised an influence over the minds, and as may be feared, even the moral feelings of the finehearted but excitable peasantry of Munster, to which too little importance has been hitherto attached by the Irish historian.

‘The Ancient Music of Ireland’ was the first of three projected volumes which the Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland had hoped to present to the public. Petrie’s collection “consists of considerably more than five hundred unpublished airs, carefully selected from the results of many years investigation.”⁵⁶ The Society’s prospectus had announced that the collection would be accompanied by:

An introductory dissertation upon the history, antiquity, and characteristic structure of Irish Music, by that most eminent Irish antiquarian (Petrie), the former portions of which will also embrace the learning of another distinguished member of the Council, Eugene O’Curry M.R.I.A. A note in the 1885 volume refers to this dissertation being in preparation and added that it could not be satisfactorily published before the editor had completed his editorial work on the whole collection. Petrie was already working on the second volume in 1855 but had edited only thirty nine airs and sent them to the press when the Society broke up.

The Society’s prospectus shows that O’Curry was assigned a major part in the preparation of the proposed dissertation. We do not have to surmise about how valuable his contribution would have been. In all probability the lengthy chapters on the music of the ancient Irish with which he closed ‘On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish’ had been gathered in the first instances for use in this dissertation. That work shows his unrivalled knowledge of the manuscript material bearing on the subject and the notes furnished to Petrie for the ‘Ancient

⁵⁶ 6. ‘The Petrie collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland, arranged for pianoforte’, edited by George Petrie, LL.D., M.R.I.A. Vol 1 (Dublin 1855).

Music of Ireland' reveal his "extraordinary knowledge of the lore and customs of the old Celtic race," to quote Petrie.

A reading of Petrie's own editorial notes in his published collection provides us with no grounds for supposing that in regards to Irish music Petrie had combined knowledge with enthusiasm in full measure as asserted by Donal O'Sullivan. Enthusiasm he had in abundance but his knowledge of the music, as exemplified in his editorial comments, is largely encompassed in the word 'sentiment' which he appeared unable to desist from using; and his strictures on pipers for their ignorance of the major and minor modes betray a lack of understanding of even the basic elements of the music. Without O'Curry's transcription and notes Petrie's volume would be somewhat of a curiosity, affording us an insight into the social and political sentiments of its compiler. Shared sympathies, no doubt, led O'Sullivan into his extravagant claims about the achievement of his subject in the musical field.

http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/music/petrie_and_music_of_clare2.htm



In his 'Irish Folk Music Song and Dance', published by the Cultural Committee of Ireland, Donal O'Sullivan refers to George Petrie's 'Ancient Music of Ireland' in the following terms:

It would be difficult to speak too highly of this monumental work. It contains one hundred and forty seven airs with copious notes of the greatest value, both historical and analytical. Knowledge without enthusiasm may be cold and forbidding, but enthusiasm without knowledge can be a dreadful thing, and it has too often plagued this subject of Irish music. Petrie combined knowledge and enthusiasm in full measure, and on this book he should be rated a great nation-builder in the cultural sphere as was O'Connell in the sphere of politics.

This collection of Petrie's, published in 1885 by the Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland, should be of particular interest to music lovers in Clare. Petrie had an extraordinary esteem for the music of the county and major contributions to his collection were made by three Clare men, Eugene O'Curry, Teige MacMahon and Frank Keane. While elaborating on these two aspects of Petrie's work, the assessment of Petrie's achievement in the field of Irish music, just quoted, will also be noticed.