The Folklore, Myths And Legends Of Old Limerick

Introduction

Life in Nineteenth Century Limerick revolved around the hearth where storytelling became a fine art. Indeed, these tales of wandering schoolmasters, poets, and musicians, have survived to this day, entertaining and frightening us in equal measure. This is the first article in a two-part series, dealing with what has been referred to as the 'oral tradition of the ancients', (Béaloidheas na Súna). While Part One explores folk tradition in a rural context, Part Two will look at folklore in an increasingly urbanised environment.

Part One by John Rainsford

...the neck of a child or a lamb likewise protected both.

The fairies, forced to live in a parallel world, were always resentful of human kind. Indeed, they frequently lured musicians and singers into their Rathas on the understanding that they would reward their musical performances with a 'Crock of Gold'. Once outside, however, this gold soon turned to manure in their pockets. Indeed, the Irish National Archives are filled with jigs, reels and pipes, recorded by people who claimed that they were in fact 'fairy tunes'. 'Changelings' might, also, be used to steal your child away. Despite scientific advances in the Nineteenth Century, parents still covered the faces of their children with ash, as fairies disliked dirty children. Fairy 'Changelings' spoke or acted in a manner, which we might associate today, with mental or physical disability. In rural places boys rarely got their first pair of trousers before the age of seven, as girls, were less likely to be spirited away. The introduction of Christianity, to Ireland, in the Fifth Century, did little to alter this belief system. The historian Timothy P. O'Neill observed:

As in most countries children's clothes were borrowed copies of adult garb. The exceptions of this was that small boys commonly wore dresses until the age of seven and little boys and girls were indistinguishable except for the way in which their hair was cut. The explanation usually offered for this was that the fairy, who sometimes took infant boys away to the land of youth, would mistake the small boy with the dress for a girl and so would take no further interest. Parents frequently drew a circle with chalk around their baby's crib, in order to create a protected area. This did not guarantee the child's safety however. The tried and trusted means of getting your child back was to threaten the imposer with death or pain. The fairies would, then, appear and take the 'Changeling' away. Some parents, would, therefore, leave a baby alone in the woods or hold it over a fire. Many babies must have died through these methods. However, for ordinary people, it was the fairy who died and the human baby, who was missing. These age old beliefs managed to survive into the modern era, sometimes, with disastrous results.

In 1855, for example, Bridget Cleary who lived near a Fairy Fort, or medieval hill settlement, with her husband, was burned to death by him, for being a 'Fairy Changeling'. Michael Cleary was subsequently found guilty of manslaughter and served 15 years in Maryborough (Portarlington) prison. Eventually, he emigrated to Montreal, in Canada, on 28 April 1916. He

Away With The Fairies

Some of our greatest folk tales involve the fairies (Sídh) and their close and often tense relationship with humans, whom they resembled, while being more malevolent. The Tuatha Dé Danann were said to have been one of the earliest inhabitants of Ireland but were dispossessed by the Milesians. Forced to exist underground, they became associated with the fairy host. For others, the fairies were the victims of a battle between God and the devil. Barrows and Tumuli were their earthly homes, with many of these surviving today, because of fears surrounding their destruction. The fairies were known to fire 'elf shot' (a tiny arrow or spear) which carried a disease inducing toxin into the human body. Inevitably, there would be a sudden pain when the victim was 'Struck', and according to one source, gave rise to the medical term 'Stroke' (Robinson, 2011). Arrow heads from Neolithic times were regularly found by medieval farmers and were credited with causing skin ailments, fever, malaria, madness, and swelling of the brain.

The word 'Pagan', itself, refers to ownership of the land. The fairies worked the land before Christ but were driven out by invaders with superior iron weapons. Iron Tungs and Shears, therefore, were often laid over the tops of cradles with horse-shoes being attached to cottage doors as a deterrent against them. Iron was, also, seen to be magical and could be used to locate lost goods. Mountain Ash (Rowan) and Hazel twigs protected people against the fairies while a red string hung around
had buried his wife, Bridget, in a shallow grave, reflecting a tradition that dated back over 2,000 years. The Clonmel Witch Case was covered formally by The Limerick Leader on 5 April 1895.

The Clonmel (Co. Tipperary) witch case was returned today. Dr. Dean of Pethard, deposed to attending Mrs. Cleary for bronchitis and nervousness on the 13th of March. At the post-mortem he found an effusion of blood on the brain. The skin-covering of [the] stomach was burned through, and the intestines were protruding. There were no symptoms of poison. Death resulted from burns. She was a perfectly healthy woman, but awfully nervous and irritable, due to dyspepsia. Dr. Heffernan, of Kilcarnaul (Co. Tipperary), confirmed the evidence as to the post-mortem.

The fairies were, also, associated with certain magical animals. The Pica, for example, was a demon or fairy horse, which could throw you onto its back without warning. Diving into a magical lake, its victim might be forced to sleep for centuries. The creature was said to be a cross between a goat and a horned horse, had fiery eyes, and could only be deterred by wearing silver spurs. One is famously said to have haunted a bridge over the River Blackwater between Limerick City and Clonlara. Fairies rode such horses for sport, while headless spectral horses, floated menacingly, above county roads. The elusive Broc-Sithe (Demon Badger), on the other hand, could save an entire field of hay, overnight, if so desired.

Those building homes, in the Nineteenth Century, needed to avoid fairy paths at all costs. Wise people, often, buried sticks upright on such potential sites. If these went undisturbed, it was taken as a sign that the fairies had no objection to the construction. A less desirable alternative was to leave the front and rear doors of your property open, at all times, in order to placate them. Milk and food could also, be left out at night, as a sort of bribe. However, there were others who were less respectful of the fairies and suffered for it. Carroll O'Daly, for example, journeying towards Kilnamoole, in Co. Limerick, decided to test the fairies, by climbing their stronghold of Knockfierna. T.C. Croker recorded the tale thus:

"But," thought O'Daly, "these are old women's stories and since I've come up so far, I'll just knock at the castle door and see if the fairies are at home." No sooner said than done; for, seizing a large stone, as big, ay, bigger than his two hands, he flung it with all his strength down into the Pool-duff of Knockfierna. He heard it bounding and thundering shout from one rock to another with a terrible noise, and he leant his head over to try and hear when it would reach the bottom, and what should the very stone he had thrown in do but come up again with an

much force as it had gone down, and gave him such a blow full in the face, that it sent him rolling down the side of Knockfierna, head over heels, tumbling from one crag to another, much faster than he came up. And in the morning Carroll O'Daly was found lying beside his horse: the bridge of his nose broken, which disfigured him for life; his head all cut and bruised, and both his eyes closed up, and as black as if Sir Daniel Donnelly had painted them for him. In the Nineteenth Century, foundation sacrifices were common when building new homes, with ox or horse heads being buried under the floorboards, for luck. Other charms included St. Benedict medals, eggs, playing cards, candles, vegetables, wine, newspapers, tobacco, iron, horse shoes, and whiskey. It has been said that the concept of the "Leprechaun" was introduced into Ireland in the Twelfth Century, along with his celebrated 'Crock of Gold'. Fairies were, often, called 'Leprechauns' in Leinster and 'Cluricauns' in the South of Ireland. However, the latter were, sometimes, said to have been wilder and more nocturnal than the former, with a fondness for drink, and the riding of dogs and sheep. Both, the Limerick-based 'Frenka Steel Cord Factory' and the 'DeLorean Motor Company (DMC)', located in Durnamurty, Bally, had remarkably short lives. Sacred fairy sites had been disturbed; it seems, during their construction. In 1868, two County Limerick labourers, Jim Quinn and Paddy Flanagan, famously, risked the wrath of the fairies by sowing potatoes near a Fairy Fort. However, when they went to dig them up, they found the Ardagh hoard (a type of 'Crock of Gold'), which had lain hidden since 8-9 AD. Strange lands beyond the horizon were,
Piscogs:
Bad Versus Good Luck

Despite their former high status, Druids were regarded as being sorcerers and foes of God in Christian times. Indeed, the terms 'little druid' or 'old druid' were, often, used in a derogatory fashion, towards people who were disliked in their communities. It was even said, that black cocks 'without a white feather', and other beasts, were sacrificed to the Devil, on Druids' altars (Dolmens). O'Neill contended that:

There seems little doubt that animal sacrifice replaced human sacrifice, in yet another example, of the continuity of folk custom.

More recently, a 'black beast' might be cut into quarters and offered to Satan, at the four corners of a field, in order to bring bad luck on the owners. Tying a Hazel stick to a single sheaf and placing it in an untilled field, would take a person's butter. If a hen died of disease, it was, sometimes, thrown onto a neighbour's land to transfer the bad luck elsewhere. Likewise, rotting eggs or potatoes could appear, malevolently, in hay stacks or fields. While eggs offered for sale would never be washed, lest the hens stop laying. Cursing Stones and Round Stones found common at old abbey and wells, could, also, prove fatal. Their original purpose was as Rosary Beads to help penitents keep count of their prayers. However, if you cursed a person with them, your wish might come true. The antiquarian T. J. Westropp recorded that:

It was believed, that if a person went fasting to the place, and did seven rounds against the sun, turning each stone in the same unlucky direction, the mouth of the person against whom the stones were turned, would be twisted under his ear and his face permanently distorted.

People wanting good fortune could wish upon a shooting star before its flash had faded. On a new moon, first seen, a person should turn thrice 'Sunward' (left to right) bowing and spitting, at each turn. The four leaf Shamrock, also, brought luck, if found accidentally. Spitting on a child wearing a new suit of clothes was common, as was throwing a horse-shoe, or a piece of iron, over your left shoulder, to bring good fortune. Your wish would fail if you spoke it aloud or if you saw where the iron fell. Prayers were said when eating a new vegetable, or if you saw a new flower, for the first time in a year. Alternatively, good fortune could be had by witnessing the arrival of a Swallow, a Cuckoo or by counting nine stars, on nine successive nights. All harvests were blessed with Holy Water and the salute 'God save all here', was given on entering a cottage, with the standard reply being 'except the cat'. O'Neill maintained that:

Throughout Europe, during medieval times, people travelled with holy pictures around the fields to invoke blessings on the growing crops, and in parts of Ireland, it is still the custom to place medals of saints in the four corners of a field, for similar purposes.

It was regarded as being unlucky to kill a bird or animal on St. Martin's Eve (10 November). However, the blood of a hen was, often, sprinkled at the four corners of a house. The remainder was mopped-up with a rag, to be hidden in the rafters. Blood sacrifices were common in many societies in order to bring a good harvest and were enforced, particularly, in South America's
Mayan culture, in order to placate the ‘Maize God’. In Celtic times, sacrificial victims were first stoned, then garroted, before, finally, having their throats cut. Thrown into lakes and bogs, they became known as ‘Bog Bodies’. The more violence that was used, in the execution of these people, the more the gods would be appeased. Phrases for good luck included: God bless us; glory be to God, good hour be it spoken; good word be it spoken; and the Lord be with us. In the Nineteenth Century grain sewn into an infant’s clothing, after baptism, would grant it good luck for life. A small wooden image of the infant Jesus was believed to prevent a house from burning and would extinguish a fire. Visiting a new house, also, bestowed the gift of luck. A pipe lit in a house needed to be finished, inside, lest the fire be stolen. To bathe in the waters of the Shannon was said to confer the gift of impudence, while a leaf from the Alder (Elder) tree, preserved a boat from being wrecked at sea. If your right ear tingled it meant that you were being praised, but if your left ear tingled it was the opposite. If your right hand itched you would lose money but if it was your left hand, you received it. This was dependent, however, on you rubbing or scratching the affected part on a piece of wood after sunset. The more dirt you got on your hand, the more money you would receive. To stumble upstairs or to be looked at by a cat, after it had washed its face, were signs of an approaching marriage. Other feline practices, however, were less hygienic, as Westropp recorded:

If a cat looks fixedly at a person, without apparent reason, it forebodes sickness or death but if it does so to an unmarried person, after making its toilet, it foretells marriage.

Unlucky dreams included seeing a woman with red hair, a hare or a fox, first thing in the morning. Churches, clergy and the sacraments tended to foretell misfortune, a cat symbolised an enemy, a dog, a friend, crows or finch meant riches, silver disappointment, while dirty or stormy water, meant trouble. Birds were seen as an omen of death. Bats were depicted as being a type of bird, so if a bat flew into your face, it foretold sickness. A Robin, a stray cat or a Cricket, coming into your house usually bestowed luck, but in Dublin, the Cricket or Robin were omens of death. The Stoat (Weasel) or Magpie were unlucky, also, unless you wished them good morning by bowing and raising your hat. Stoats were vengeful and would try and spit into your milk, or food, if their young ones were threatened. It was unlucky to view a new moon through glass. Throwing dust or slops out of a house on New Year’s Day stole your luck, as did throwing dust or slops towards a neighbouring house.

It was unlucky to eat certain meat, also, but given the nature of recent food scares, this taboo is not one to which contemporary Irish people appear to have been adhering, at least knowingly. O’Neill had previously written:

Horse flesh, which early churchmen regarded as being associated with pagan rites, is still not eaten in Ireland.

To Kill Or To Cure?

Shamanistic traditions pre-date St. Patrick’s arrival in Ireland (c.432). Indeed, Christian sites were, often, located near older Pagan places of worship, becoming Holy Wells, thereafter. Most of these wells around County Limerick have now been abandoned, but St. Patrick’s Well at Sineal, remains a fine example of what once was. A ‘White Bee’ or ‘White Fish’ was said to live at the bottom of such wells that could, according to circumstance, kill or cure you. In Celtic mythology the circle was symbolic of the transcendence of life and the familiar cycles of birth, death and the seasons. Penicils, walked around such wells, nine times before sunset and sunrise, gave offerings, drank the water or washed in it. Offerings at Holy Wells included rags hung on the branches of the blessed Elder, on Hawthorn bushes or put under stones. Other items offered included rosaries, religious medals, necklaces, ribbons, broken or whole plaster, china figures and vessels, glass, buttons, pins, nails, bits of leather, crockery or pots. Cures could be had by applying the mud taken from these wells or the water gathered from the sockets of Holy Crosses. The milk of the Seven Sisters plant applied seven times, with prayers, could cure warts and heal wounds. Alternatively, a piece of meat rubbed three times to a wart, in the name of the Holy Trinity, if buried, would decay as the wart did. Boiling the milk of the Seven Sisters plant, also, cured people and animals of parasitic worms. Seven strips of Plantain leaf stopped bleeding as would Fern Dust seeds. Rushes and Dock leaves were seen as a cure for Nettle stings. Chewing the bark of a Hawthorn bush, at a Holy Well, cured toothache, as would rubbing the affected area with a finger bone, taken from a graveyard. To cure whooping cough, a child was brought to running water and a frog, held by its hind legs, three times, over its mouth. The frog swam away unhurt, and took the child’s disease with it.

Other remedies included using food, or a cure, recommended by a man you met accidentally riding a white horse. Passing an ill child under an ass, or feeding it the ‘leavings of a ferret’ (food left uneaten by the creature), was, also, regarded as being curative. The dew on grass could even be used to treat corns and chillblains. The clothing of a man, whose wife was repeatedly unfaithful to him, could be hung on the bed of a woman in childbirth, in order to ease her pain. The gift of healing would be handed down, through certain families, especially if an ancestor once helped a saint. Such people, (seven sons) frequently became Veterinary Practitioners, who were called, ‘knowing men’ or ‘wise
men'. Delmns were long associated with the passionate romance of folk heroes, Diarmuid and Grína, Westropp noted that:

A woman could refuse nothing to a man at one of these monuments. Some such reason probably lay behind the belief that if a couple, unblest with children, went to a 'labha'; the defect in their household was amended.8

Later, a 'Plenary indulgence' was granted for walking anti-clockwise around 'Standing Stones' but while an angry priest, or a Druid, could put a curse on you, a widow's curse, was the most lethal of all.

Pagan And Religious Festivals

While, Christianity was dominant in Ireland by 700AD, the old pagan festivals still remained. At the end of the growing season, with the leaves falling from the trees, the skeleton of the world was revealed. This seemed to confirm, that only a thin veil separated us, from the supernatural world. On 31 October, Halloween (Samhain) marked the turning point of the year and the first day of winter. At this time, also, pre-historic farmers left their Summer residences for Winter Bats, with animals coming down off the hills. The High King of Ireland was, traditionally, inaugurated on this date. Food and games came to mark the festival, with apples, nuts, Barnbrack and fortune telling being traditional. A ring, coin, bean or red rag was hidden in the 'Bread'. The person finding the ring would be the first to marry. Nuts were, often, placed by family members on the hearth and the first to jump out indicated the first person to leave home. Children went about in masks, assisting their integration into the adult world, while keeping the old customs and ways of life alive. For example, a blind folded person would touch one of several saucers containing: earth, water, salt and a bean which symbolised, respectively, death, emigration, luck, and marriage. On Halloween lead was melted and poured into water for fortune telling. The key to a bachelor's house/room, or a piece of wedding cake, was put under a girl's pillow, to invoke a prophetic dream about her future husband or lover. A sling or small put on a slate or cabbage leaf, which had been sprinkled with tursh, ashes or flour, traced that person's initials. Wandering beggar women, often, engaged in 'cup-tossing' or 'cup-turning', in order to read a person's tea leaves. Ripe apples and nuts were associated with summer fertility and young people ate them with relish. Young girls plucked the first Cabbage they saw. If the root was knotted and weak, it indicated a weak husband and if strong, vice versa. Food was hidden in socks and hung near the front door. This link between food and a greater power was explored by O'Neill when he wrote:

Just as God had to be thanked for his gifts, it was also believed that famine was due to the will of God, and it was for this reason that Irish people accepted crop failure and starvation, so piously.9

On Halloween night, as a door opened to a world beyond, people hurried home before dark, because the dead stalked the land, and resented the living. The devil, also, came at night, when people were at their most vulnerable. The first man to enter the front door of a house would marry the girl, therein. The 'Barnbrack' was named after the marriage 'bargain'. Thence, the ring and match stick, hidden inside. O'Neill explained that:

The ban on marriage ceremonies for Catholics during Lent meant that unmarried Catholics remained in that state until the following Easter at least and probably longer. In the past, when people were encouraged to marry, this Lenten ban, led to the custom, on the first Sunday of Lent, of marking the unmarried with chalk as they went to church, giving that day the name, Chalk Sunday.10

In these times, story telling broke the drudgery of life, as did card games. The poet was an important person in Irish life, recording folk beliefs, as well as births, marriages and deaths.

On St. Martin's Eve, (10 November), Cocks were sometimes killed and their blood sprinkled on the doors of houses. O'Neill maintained that:

This practice was probably a survival from a period when animals were killed before the winter when fodder was difficult to obtain.11

Christmas time saw people bring evergreen foliage, like Ivy and Holly, into the house to decorate it. It was the 1930s, however, before the first artificial Christmas tree, was sold in department stores. Christmas was originally, the Bunna Festival of 'Saturnalia', when masters and servants were treated as equals, for one week. However, Shepherds, in Judea, did not keep their sheep outside in December, as the story of the Nativity states. In fact, Christians merely wanted a feast day in Mid-Winter, so they adopted this pagan date. The Christmas log was a Viking symbol of the god, Odin, stripped of its branches, in celebration of 'Yule'. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), attempted to ban the festival, using his Justices of the Peace to suppress it. However, ordinary people liked the celebrations, so much, that Christmas continues to thrive. O'Neill explained that:

Drink, it must be said, played an important part in many of the folk festivals and this possibly accounts for the unusually high proportion of our national income, which is still spent on alcohol.12

Hunting traditionally began on Michaelmas Day, when animals like geese would be killed. Midnight processions of music, also, took place in the week before Christmas, involving Mummers and Wren Boys, with bull baiting being traditional on St. Stephen's Day. Mummers wore disguises and used theatrical language, in order to fool their neighbours, who had fun finding out who lay behind the mask. Typically, 'Mumming' was a relic of the miracle plays, performed in medieval times. In Munster, the 'Hobby Horse' or 'Laith Bhian' was a popular character, but its true purpose has been lost in the mists of time. Another character was that of a 'Knight' slain and brought back to life by the potions of a doctor. This tale paralleled the farmers' faith in summer returning each year. 'Rhymer's' and 'Mummers', typically had their faces blackened with Tar, wore bizarre costumes, and used incantations to bring back the season of growth. Wicker makers made masks for them. The tradition of 'Mumming' was passed from father to son and involved music, song and drink in abundance. Wren Boys' went around in bands of two to six with the 'Wren Bush', usually taking the form of a branch with rags, streamers and a dead bird hung in a cage. Wren dances, on St. Stephen's Night, saw money collected to bury the Wren
and pay for drink, food, singing, dancing, storytelling and ritual rhymes. The legend behind the 'Wren Boys' is that St. Stephen once took refuge in a cave and was betrayed by a Wren. Before the fanlight, however, a scarecrow figure was used in place of the unfortunate bird. A typical rhyme of the 'Wren Boys' went as follows:

Landlady, Landlady, give us some cheer,
Landlady, Landlady, give us some beer.
If you give us of the best,
We'll pray your soul in Heaven may rest.
If you give us of the worse,
We'll pray it may be quite the reverse.13

On 1 February, St. Brigid's Day (Lá Pháidil Bride) marked the transition from Winter to Spring. This saint was the daughter of a Druid, who plucked out one of her eyes, in order to make herself unattractive to men. Subsequently, she became a Christian-Pagan deity, around 5000 BC, when the Catholic Church adopted her as a saint and virgin. St. Brigid famously fooled a local chieftain by asking only for sufficient land for her cloak to cover. Subsequently, the cloak grew and grew over a huge area. Once, a pagan godess of fertility (called Brigantia), her Cross protected the farm and its animals from evil. Even today, you can tell the age of old cottages by counting the number of these crosses, hidden in the thatch. Although, St. Brigid became the role model for female chastity, her feast day coincided with the pagan festival of Imbolc or Imbolc (in the stomach). This was associated with lactation, in humans and animals, with jackdaws being said to mate on this day. 'Biddy Boys', similar to 'Morriss Dancers' and 'Mummers', were also, traditional at this time. O'Neill recorded that:

St. Brigid became the symbol of the season and the year's agricultural prospects were regarded as depending on her intercession and consequently her feast day was celebrated with due reverence.14

By this date, also, half of all Winter stocks of food and fuel, were used up on delicacies like 'Apple Cakes' and 'Spotted Dog'. O'Neill believed:

This reliance on God's bounty was also acknowledged in other ways, such as when baking, a cross was always made on top of the cake and not to do so was, and indeed still is, regarded as unlucky.15

St. Brigid remains our female Patron Saint, and an Irish version of the Virgin Mary. A straw doll, made in her likeness, called the Bridie, was also carried from house to house, with gifts and donations being collected along the way. It was traditional to visit Holy Wells on St. Brigid's Day, with penitents walking the 'right way', around them. A piece of cloth, called the 'Brat Bhride', was tied to bushes at these wells, and indeed, place names, like 'Bridewell' (Brigid's Well), still abound in Ireland, today.

For the farming community, this day was marked by leaving rushes, in a cloth, outside a cottage door. It was traditional, then, for a young girl to circle the house with them, before bowing down and being welcomed inside. Telling the inhabitants to prepare for the visit of St. Brigid, prayers were then said and a feast of buttered potatoes prepared for all. The girl carried the rushes around the house, before leaving them outside, until morning, as a protection against storms. Traditionally, St. Brigid was given the best seat at the fire, as she traveled around the world. Her day, also, saw the 'Bainin' wedding ceremony, long associated with female virginity. St. Patrick's Day falls on 17 March. It is the only day, during Lent, when a person's fast can be broken. The tradition of drowning the Shannock has long been associated with this date. St. Patrick, was, originally, taken as a slave from Wales but escaped, and returned to convert the Irish. Around this time (500AD) the world experienced climate change, with famine, assisting this conversion process. The Druids would not allow fires before the May Festival but St. Patrick famously lit an Easter fire on the Hill of Tara. He also, banished the snakes, defeated the Druids, and fought the devil, in all his forms.

Lent was a period of abstinence dictated by church law and its beginning was marked by a meal of pancakes, on Shrove Tuesday. A ring was hidden inside the pancakes, to indicate who might marry. Veal, young lamb and kid goat were popular at this time, as they were in Pagan times and April Fool's Day (1 April) saw tricks being played on friends. The Easter egg, also, had its origins in the church's decision to ban dairy produce and meat at Lent. The wealthy, however, liked to have eggs made of marzipan, as a substitute. Ordinary people, painted their eggs, as a treat after 40 days of Lent. Buttering these eggs preserved them, by making them airtight, a practice that continues in Co. Cork today. As winter ended, Bonfire Night saw the symbolic burning of old things, as summer began.

On 1 May (May Day), bonfires were, also, placed outside people's homes. Locals often danced around the resulting 'Bonfires' while driving cattle between them! This cleansed the creatures of evil and illness. The name 'Bonfire' itself comes from 'Bere Fire', when animal bones were burned and crackled, therein. Blood was, often, taken from healthy bulls on May Day, 50 April, mixed with cereals and eaten. Certain foods like animal hearts and offal, however, were not eaten, as they had the stigma of poverty about them. On this date (Bealtaine), milk and butter rics were common, as were races and sports. Visits were frequently made on Pattern Days, to Holy Wells, which were dedicated to local saints. Typically, people went around these wells 'sunrise' on their knees, prayed and washed their hands, feet and faces in the pure water. It was, also, traditional to have bonfires on St. John's Eve, St. John's Day (23 June), Midsummer's Eve, and on the feast of SS. Peter and St. Paul, on 28 June. The last Sunday, in July, saw the ancient Festival of Lugnasa (Lughnasaadh), which marked the start of harvesting.

Harvest Lore

Since the first farmers arrived on these shores, 4,000 years ago, animals have played a vital role in Irish folklore. Dark birds were seen to be of an 'evil wing' and white cows with red ears, as being otherworldly. Witches would, often, assume the form of 'Witch Hares' in order to steal milk from cows. One tale tells of a hunter who once wounded such a hare and followed it to an isolated cottage. There, he found an old...
woman, lying inside, dying of her wounds. Farmers ploughing the fields sometimes found old arrow heads, which they believed, were being used by the fairies to injure their cattle. Petrifed snails, in fossilised form, were often interpreted as being snakes, which St. Patrick had turned to stone. The fox, was depicted as being cunning, while the badger, salmon and trout were wise. The wolf went extinct in the Eighteenth Century, but was respected in earlier times. However, a beetle, called the ‘Devil’s coach horse’, could kill, simply by looking at you, or by raising its tail.

The harvest was a mysterious process requiring speed and urgency to complete. Bad luck was always a problem, however, as crops could fail due to bad weather or through diseases, like blight. Harvest bowls were often made as fertility symbols, with plentiful supplies of grain, seen as a sign of fertility. People, themselves, were symbolically depicted as standing corn, awaiting the harvest. Straw Boys wore straw hats, made from uncrushed straw, called ‘Crowns of the Harvest’ and used them to gain access to wedding feasts, in disguise. Faction fighting, at harvest fair, was a barbaric reminder of the bloodlust of the past.

During the summer months, activities on the land increased, as food and fuel were gathered in, for the winter. The ‘hungry months’ came about because old stocks of potatoes, and other foods, had run out, while farmers awaited the new harvest. However, there were greater dangers awaiting those who walked, unexpectedly, on areas of ground where famine victims were once buried. Westropp recorded that:

The ‘hungry grass’ grows on mountains and if trodden on causes a sickness called ‘liver weakness’ which kills if not relieved. I know of one woman in Co. Clare who said she knew it to happen to another man on the Clare Hills and the victim got food in bare time to save him.16

Harvests were, often, a race against time and the elements, with no one wanting to be the last worker to finish. Superstition, foretold that such men would be the first to leave this life, have poor marriage prospects, or go into the service of the Cailleach or Witch. The spirit of the corn harvest was said to take refuge in a small piece of land after the harvest was completed. The harvesters throw sickness at it, and whoever was the first to cut it down, became the possessor of the ‘Kilcarrig’. The end of the harvest was marked by cutting the last sheaf and by the creation of harvest knots, woven from straw, which were worn by men and women. The recorded lives of St. Brigid, St. Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, St. Colmcille and St. Mochuda, refer to the cooperative work of reapers in the fields. The word ‘Method’ is Gaelic for such co-operation, but it also, describes the community ethos necessary, to achieve common objectives. The term applies to different aspects of the harvest, such as, reaping, ploughing, and hay-making. After the day’s work there was music, celebration and food. People moved from one farm to another, thence, the phrase to ‘pitch-in’.

**Butter Charms**

The process of butter making was unpredictable, so Piseogs were frequently invoked, to explain why the butter did not form. As a result, the fairies or witches were often blamed. A donkey’s shoo, therefore, was placed at the bottom of a milk churn, because iron kept the fairies away. Leaving a house, where the occupants were busy changing, without putting your hand to the ‘daddy’, could take the occupants’ butter. The latter, could be smeared on your windows, or onto the latch of a door, in order to steal your cow. Cows, were often dried as a result. There were, also, certain ‘fairy men’ living locally who, if offended by the small folk, could take your butter. A sheaf with a Hazelt rod tied to it, when found in a field, was designed to inflict misfortune. Butter was, usually, taken by horse and cart along the ‘Butter Road’ from Kilkenny to Cork City, where it was sold to trading ships. The Butter Exchange, in Cork, was linked by Telegraph, to the London Stock Exchange, thus, setting world prices well into the Nineteenth Century. Myrtads of small route, from all over Munster, mingled with this main trading route. Butter was, often, mixed with Garlic and stored in Bogs, as ‘Bag Butter’. Archaeologists have Carbon-dated some samples to 1-206AD.

Armed Dragons, frequently, carried the butter from Cork to Cork, as Highwaymen were a continuing menace. Folktales, also, mention a strange ghost, taking the form of a dark shadow, which attacked travellers on the roads, beating them with a whip, and spilling their contents. One man was found, covered in blood, with the whip still embedded in his hands. ‘May Butter’ was a greasy substance found lying on dew soaked grass which was used to make milk charms near Cloonalane.

Human skulls would, often, have nails driven into them, in order to cure persistent headaches. Taking a human bone from a graveyard, for magical purposes, however, risked having a ghost haunt you, until it was returned to consecrated ground. Sickness and death would invariably fall on any village, from whose graveyard; a body was removed or desecrated. The ‘Hand of Glory’ (a corporeal hand) was a potent magical instrument in the Nineteenth Century, and was used by robbers, in the belief that it made them invisible, when entering houses. A candle was secured to the ghastly implement, but the correct magical preparation had to be employed, in order to make it effective. The device was, also, sought, widely, for the purposes of making your butter come. T.J. Westropp recorded:

> Interference with human remains is deeply and dangerously resented, yet spells are sometimes worked with them. The stealing of a dead man’s hand, for a butter charm, is said to have taken place near Kilkee (Co. Clare), and the bones of a Franciscan with the brown cloth of his gown still adhering, found during the repairs at Ennis Abbey (Co. Clare), were nearly all taken, but probably from most reverential motives.17

**Conclusions**

Although, physical evidence of our history is in steep decline, our interest in folklore remains largely intact. Such Folk Tales, from the past, reveal a great deal about who we are, today. Although, there are few now, who believe in the fairies, many still visit Holy Wells looking for cures. Indeed, while creatures, like the Puca, may have gone extinct, people still believe in horoscopes, fortune tellers and Friday the Thirteenth. The past, it seems, is not nearly so remote, as we once believed!

**REFERENCES**


**CITATIONS**

17. T.J. Westropp, 'Folklore of Clare', (op. cit. p. 70).
19. T.J. Westropp, 'Folklore of Clare', (op. cit. p. 100).
24. T.J. Westropp, 'Folklore of Clare', (op. cit. p. 70).