The Folklore, Myths and Legends of Old Limerick (Part 2)

by John Rainford

Introduction

The late Ruth O'Leary lived under the spire of St. John's Cathedral, in Limerick. She recounted, that one night, she awoke, to hear the sound of horse's hooves clattering towards her door. As the nocturnal visitor got ever closer, beads of perspiration began to form on her brow. Could this be the much feared 'Death Coach'? ("Siúr Bodair?") Worse still, would it stop? Much relieved, when it moved off; the next day she asked neighbours about that night's events. In fact, in one sense, she had been right all along. A funeral was due to take place early that morning, and the undertaker, needed horses, from Doyle's yard nearby, to draw the hearse!

As outlined in Part One, of this two-part series on Limerick's folk traditions, much of our folklore (like the tale above) has a rural context. With, the steady flow of people from country to city, however, a treasure trove of folktales was grafted onto an emerging urban identity.

A Haunted City

Limerick's strong association with bloodshed, down the centuries, may well have contributed to reports of paranormal manifestations, stalking the 'Old City'. Indeed, the historian, and former Mayor of Limerick, Maurice Lenihan (1811-1895), provided a psychological explanation for them.

The people were greatly troubled with a singular apprehension. Extraordinary fears occupied the people's imaginations, and the visions we must attribute more to their comparative ignorance than to reality.

By way of example, O'Daly, in his History of the Geraldines, wrote of three portraits of misfortune, which were seen during a particular siege of Limerick.

The first was a luminous globe, brighter than the moon and a little inferior to the sun, which for two leagues and a half shed a vertical light on the city, and then faded into darkness over the enemy's camp; the second was the apparition of the Virgin, accompanied by several of the Saints; and the third was a human nature of the Siamese-twins type.

'Strange luminous lights' ('Oírla') also, captured on security cameras, located in the arch, just above the main gate of Limerick's 200-year-old Milk Market, in 2012. Built by the Pery family, in 1792, the area became closely associated with the Great Famine and its workhouses, down through the years. Indeed, it has, often, been said, that the stones of old buildings fatefully retain the sounds ("aeonetics") of the past.

The Limerick Leader newspaper wrote about one creepy incident as follows:

A local security guard who has stayed overnight in the market when concerts have taken place concurred that he had seen "moving lights" in the Milk Market which "freaked" him out. "I was getting a feeling that someone was watching me. I just saw a bright light in the corner, constantly moving, on the left hand side, over towards the gate," said the guard, who did not wish to be named.

Likewise, in the 1970s, the premises of Stokes and McKiernan on Sarsfield Street (formerly Spillane's tobacco factory), was taken over by Dunne's Stores. Thereafter, several ghastly apparitions were reported, by the Limerick Leader. In the early days when the electricians went in they 'got scared', "the life", one man told the paper, "had a habit of closing the gates itself and going up and down on its own." Another evening, an employee working in the loft, was said to have been approached by a man dressed in a tweed suit, and sporting grey hair, who suddenly vanished into thin air. The Gardaí were also, called-in to investigate a figure apparently seen on the roof, but according to eye witnesses, they walked right past it, without seeing a thing.

'Urban Myths', concerning people being buried alive in Limerick's cemeteries, abound. The mortuary of St. Mary's Church, for example, was once used as a 'Dead House', where corpses were stored. One time, it was said that a woman was locked inside by accident. When the caretaker, Willie Bartlett, opened-up the next morning, he found the unfortunate lady with all her hair pulled out and evidence of frothing at the mouth. She was speedily dispatched to the mental home and never heard from again. Another case, involved the funeral of a young girl who had lived in England. In this case, her sealed coffin was opened, so as to allow the grieving father, one last chance to see her. The scene that greeted him, however, was quite horrific. The white lace interior was stained with blood, and the deceased person's finger nails were worn to the bone. The Countess of Desmond was said to have been similarly 'buried alive' following the capture of Shanid Castle. In this tale, the Earl of Desmond, and his wife made good their escape from the doomed fortress through a 'Postern Gate'. Sadly, one of the Burials, as they passed, drew a bow at a venture and the arrow, passing over the Earl's shoulder, imbedded itself with deadly effect on his lady. The Countess's body was hastily buried under the altar of the chapel. In a nearby abbey, while the heart-broken Earl rode on to his castle in Askleton. Strange noises accompanied by the ghostly presence of a 'White Lady' soon began to plague the Old Abbey.

So it was decided to open the tomb under the altar. When the stone was rolled back, what a scene of horror presented itself to the eyes of the shocked beholders! The body of the Countess was found just inside the opening, lying in a twisted and contorted fashion, the finger bones torn and broken. The dreadful conclusion was forced on the nun's in their haste that they had buried the unfortunate woman alive. It was obvious [sic] that when consciousness returned she had dragged herself towards the opening and there, hammering with useless hands against the unyielding stone and shouting to ears that could not hear, she died in a paroxysm of fear and frenzy. And so her spirit was impelled night after night to visit the scene of her dreadful end.

Bleated bodies, in shallow graves, have long been known to make noises as they decayed. This, often, led grave diggers in olden times to dig them-up, only to find the stomach of the 'Revenants' engorged...
with blood, together with newly grown nails and facial hair. In fact, these well-known phenomena are caused by decay and the resulting contraction of the corpse's skin in death.

Other tales, like the Glentworth Hotel 'Poltergeist', for example, are less easy to explain away. 'Poltergeist' is a German word meaning a noisy, boisterous spirit. These, 'little demons', seek out a source of natural energy (radiant centre), usually in the form of an adolescent.

By contrast, Peter Morris, was a professional navigator who, having spent a year up the Amazon, decided to spend a week in Limerick's Glentworth Hotel, in March 1962. This was part of what might be described today, as a 'Tax Avoidance Scheme'.

Unfortunately, his room was damp and cold, and he requested a move to an unoccupied front room, over the main entrance, which had a radiator. The girl, at reception, was strangely reluctant to move him but finally relented. As late as September 1981, despite substantial renovations to the hotel, this same room remained unoccupied. On his first night in the infamous room, Morris turned the light out, in order to get some sleep, but heard a 'scratching' sound, with no trace of vermin to be seen anywhere.

As I stood up, the word 'poltergeist' came into my head. In an instant I had a vision of a creature, not of this world, as large as a badger, with long hair and long claws at the ends of its feet. Satisfied that I had solved the mystery, I returned to bed and switched off the light.

The same experience was repeated each night, with Mr. Morris allowing the poltergeist to climb onto his bed, while wishing it 'a peaceful night'. Finally, with his 'holiday' ended, he paid ten shillings to the girl at reception and thanked her for 'a very pleasant stay'. Years before, the city was rife with tales of a mysterious stranger, commonly referred to, as the 'Mystery Man'. Indeed, although, seen frequently around Limerick City no one knew his name. Such mystery men continue to exist, however. On 12 June, 2009, for example, 'Peter Bergmann', whose true identity remains unknown, arrived in Sligo only to be found dead four days later. He paid his hotel bill in advance, mixed with no one, but was seen to remove his private possessions, in plastic bags, from the room, regularly. When his body was, subsequently, found in the sea, an autopsy could find no water in his lungs. He had terminal cancer, but amazingly, was taking no medication!

**Horrors of the Sea**

St. Mary's Cathedral, on King's Island, founded in the Twelfth Century on the ruins of the late King of Munster, Dónal Mór Ó Briain's palace, is home to a bizarre collection of 'Bestiaries'. Carved into the Fifteenth Century wooden stalls, called Misericordia (Acts of Mercy), their true origin refers to a time when 'pesteis' and 'water snakes' abounded in our lakes and seas. The serpent or dragon, for example, symbolises the 'Anti-Christ' or 'Devil'. Other bizarre creatures include, 'Griffins' with cock's combs, 'Wyverns', and 'Lindworms', said to devour the bodies of the dead in graveyards. The 'Basilisk' could dart venom from its eyes and take the form of a reptile but was defeated by the Virgin Mary, who, using a vessel to catch the poison, was able to hurl it back upon the unsuspecting beast.

Similarly, a Fifteenth Century cathedral on Scattery Island, at the mouth of the River Shannon, is home to a carving of a large-eyed dragon with crocodile jaws. Another carving on a 'Pattern Stone' taken from the same island to Kilkee, depicts a strange beast with a spiked back, scales, fish-tail and clawed forefeet. This monster's name was 'Cata' (a type of 'Sea Cat'), named after the Island of Inis Cathaigh (The Island of Cata), or 'Scattery Island', just two miles from the town of Kilrush. It may well be that such collective memories were rekindled, in July 1922, when the Captain of a schooner, herthed in Limerick Docks, saw a sight unknown except to pre-history. Later, the same Captain Hugh Shaw wrote a letter about what he had witnessed that day:

The most amazing sea creature I had ever seen or read about. My first impression on seeing it was of its resemblance in size and shape to a small submarine. It was large and black and shining and it had a very long neck and at least twelve feet long, held proudly erect and shaped like a swan's. It waved its smallish head from side to side and its bright shining eyes seemed to express alarm.

Behind its long neck for a distance of ten or twelve feet was a massive black conelike hump, which rose a few feet out of the water, but no part of the creature's body could be seen between the hump and the neck, this part being submerged.

Sea gulls in the vicinity flew off in fright.

Eventually, the creature left the docks, but was seen again, in the gathering gloom, by the same vessel, near Foynes, rising and blowing like a porpoise. Similarly, a 'giant horse'-like monster, was reported, in the Limerick Chronicle, as having been spotted by a Northern Ireland clergyman, together with other ladies and gentlemen, at the 'Diamond Rocks', in Kilkee, on 19 September, 1871. It was seen, previously, just 70 yards from shore, near Spanish Point in County Clare, during the Summer of 1869. Mr. Graham Middleton, of the
Science Department at Sir Thomas Rich's School, in Gloucester, UK, had an interest in the case of the 'Loch Ness Monster'. Later, he made inquiries about the 'Limerick Monster', uncovering a letter in the process. This detailed the events of that day, and was sent by the son of the master, to his nephew, Mr. E. A. Aldridge, in Gloucester, in 1922.

In a letter to the Limerick Leader, in 1974, Stephen O'Gorman from Birmingham corroborated that account. O'Gorman was a teenager playing handball with some friends on Shannon Street when he saw crowds gathering along the quays. He joined them, and saw the creature in the middle of the river travelling towards Sarsfield Bridge. He noted its swan-like neck moving from side to side and made a sketch. The creature turned back at the Limerick Boat Club, and Stephen crossed to the Cleeve's factory side of the river, in order to pursue it. Indeed, a group of Free State soldiers, from the Strand Barracks, opened fire near the old St. Michael's Rowing Club, in order to encourage it along.

In reality, perhaps, we would do better to consider the actions of our fellow human beings to be far more monstrous. Take Timothy Gorman, the skipper of the Limerick registered barque, the Francis Spaight,15 for example. This ill-fated vessel was owned, and named after, a local Justice of the Peace, who was, also, a leading merchant of his time. He purchased the over-populated Derry Castle Estate, above Ballina, in County Tipperary, around 1843, and was anxious, thereafter, to encourage mass emigration to Canada. A total of 2,160 passengers boarded the Francis Spaight, on its voyage to New Brunswick, in May 1835. The return voyage was delayed in St. Johns as a cargo of timber was not available until 25 November. Only nine days out of New Brunswick, however, the ship was wrecked in a snowstorm on 3 December, 1835. William Griffiths, the mate, and two hands, Pat Cusack and Pat Behane, were washed overboard and drowned. Worse still, all the provisions on board were lost, and the drinking water hopelessly fouled. Only a single bottle of wine remained between fifteen survivors. After two hellish weeks, Captain Gorman presented a fait accompli to those remaining, namely, to kill and eat a helpless crew member (the so-called 'Custom of the Sea'). Lots were, subsequently, cast to see who would die.

Sadly, it was fifteen year old Patrick O'Brien, who lived with his widowed mother in Thomondgate, who drew the short straw. He was tied up and his eyes bandaged. In a ghastly scene the ship's cook, John Gorman, on the orders of the captain, (no relation) tried to cut the victim's wrists using a penknife. The blood did not flow and the unfortunate boy was made to try and cut his own wrists before the captain ordered the cook to cut his throat. The crew lived well on the boy's innards for a few days, thereafter. Ironically, the cook, himself, was killed next, followed by George Byrnes, another apprentice and Michael Behane. Mercifully, the latter died beforehand. Finally, on 23 December 1835, two days before Christmas, the American registered brig, Angora, under Captain John Jillard, saved the crew in a longboat after risking their lives in terrible weather. Taken to Falmouth workhouse, in the first instance, the survivors were fed, given clothes and the benefit of a collection, before arriving back in Limerick, in January 1836. The Limerick Chronicle, of 23 January 1836, reported incorrectly that all of the dead had been drowned with no mention of cannibalism.

The widow O'Brien, however, claimed that her son, Patrick, was killed as a result of rigged lots and mercilessly harassed Captain Gorman. Indeed, he was forced to take out a court order to bind her to the peace. In one instance, Frank Prendergast (1933-2015), a former Mayor of Limerick, recounted how the widow fell to her knees before the captain as he brought his family to Mass. She, then, opened out her hair, which was in the nature of 'Keening', (mourning the dead), while cursing the perpetrator. As with other troubled ships, like the infamous Mary (Maria) Celeste (1872), the Francis Spaight was eventually salvaged and returned to service. However, it was to founder off the coast of South Africa with the loss of just four lives, (exactly the same number as its cannibalised former crew).

Captain Timothy Gorman finally moved from his home, at 77 O'Connell Street, Limerick, to Dublin, where he died in 1874. He was buried in an unmarked grave. His brother, Daniel, (ironically called the 'Tacky Captain'), was also employed by Francis Spaight. It was said that he ferried 10,000 emigrants across the Atlantic Ocean without losing a single ship. He lies buried, today, in St. Munchin's graveyard opposite King John's Castle.

The 'Custom of the Sea' was finally rejected in the summer of 1884, when the Mignonne, a yacht being delivered to Australia, capsized and sank. The surviving crew, in a lifeboat, soon turned to cannibalism. In this case, also, a defenceless cabin boy, Richard Parker, was the victim. Lying in a coma, after drinking salt water, he had his throat cut by the captain. Twenty-four days after the wreck the survivors were rescued, and having told their story openly, were put on trial. This time, however, a tribunal of five judges decided that; 'necessity was not a defence against cannibalism and murder'. They were each sentenced to death, which was later commuted to six months in jail.

Thereafter, the Birkenhead model of self-sacrifice (referring to a steamship that sank off South Africa, on 26 February, 1852) was held to be superior to any alternatives based on expediency. This concept of putting 'women and children first', would most famously be seen in action with the sinking of the Titanic, in April 1912.

Messengers of Death

As was seen in the case of the Francis Spaight, Mrs. O'Brien publicly mourned her son, Patrick, by employing ancient ritual. However, 'Keening' was, generally, frowned upon by the clergy and 'Keeners' were rarely allowed past the church gate.

This was understandable as their emotional ecstasy, sometimes, extended to drinking the corpse's blood. Indeed, the skulls of relatives were, frequently, taken out at wakes, in order to intensify the family's feelings of grief.9 Typically, such 'old criers', would recite verses in which the deceased person was praised. Initially, the corpse, itself, would be laid out at home with any mirrors being covered. All the windows and doors would, then, be opened, so as to allow the unimpeded passage of the dead person's soul into the afterlife. A hole might even be made in a thatched roof to further facilitate this process, while every clock in the house would be stopped at the time of death. Any surviving daughters of the deceased would 'Keen' or sing at the burial and talk out loud to the corpse, so as to express their grief, at his or her, death. Music and singing were, also, said to appease the dead who might not, as a result, resent the living. 'Keeners' were usually old women, who were hired for their expertise in the art.

'Wake-games' or 'wake-tricks',97 might be played near where the corpse was laid out. No disrespect was intended; rather it was seen as a symbol of the triumph of life over death. Courting and sex were meant to have the upper hand. Such games were largely abandoned; however, in more moralistic Victorian times, whisking in an era in which death would become a lot more frightening.

At funerals, the twigs of the Hawthorn tree were often placed on the coffin in the shape of a cross. Typically, the body was, then, carried feet first (foremost) around the graveyard 'sun-wise' three times. The contents of the grave were, subsequently, dug out with the old coffin planks being thrown away and any human remains placed in a new coffin. The spirit of the last comer, buried in a graveyard, by tradition, was predestined to watch the place and to bring water to the 'Holy Souls' in purgatory.16

Omens were, also, often sought to predict a person's death. These signs acknowledged that nature and the supernatural world were aware of it. Animals and birds, therefore,
would often behave strangely as a result
(such as repeatedly striking a window while
in flight). However, the most famous death
messenger of them all was the 'bansidhe'.
She was known by various names, for
example, the 'badh', 'badbh', or 'bean
chaoithe'. Indeed, the very concept may
have been imported from the Gauls, who
worshipped the 'cataodbia' or war Goddess.
The 'badh' frequently took the form of a
crow, scald-crow, Royston crow, a vulture,
carrion-crow, or other ravenous creatures
from mythology, who were seen as 'birds
of ill-omen'. Other explanations for the
'bansidhe' envisage her as being a Guardian
Angel, a dead relative, (young or old), sent
back from paradise to protect her kin,
an evil spirit, a descendant of the magical
Tuatha Dé Danann, or even a fallen angel.

However, a distinction must be made, here,
from the fairies who were said to be social
beings, living in communities. Indeed, the
latter were, often, depicted as being married,
with children, while simultaneously,
enjoying friendly (or unfriendly) relations
with humans, including the odd love affair.
By contrast, the 'bansidhe' was usually
depicted as being an unmarried, solitary,
figure. Furthermore, no comparable male
counterpart has ever been imagined to exist.
'Bansidhe's', were also, not known for doing
good deeds for humans, as the fairies had
occasionally done. The 'bansidhe', may
have been a living person once, but was
put into the supernatural realm as a form
of punishment for misdeeds. Alternatively,
she may have been abducted by the fairies
at some point. She was, however, allowed
to return to the world, in order to monitor
the kin of respected Gaelic families. In this
way, she would sit upon a rock, with her
face to the sea, combing her long hair.
She has been described, variously, as being old
or young, with white, fair or golden-hair.
Her comb may have been made of gold,
silver, iron, steel or bone and her garments
were reported as being white, red or dark
in colour. Her favourite haunts, or dwelling
places, were often hollow trees or caves.

The Scottish-Gaelic 'bean-nighe' or
supernatural washerwoman (washer at
the ford) was a forerunner of death. Such
women would, typically, be seen near
streams turned blood red from the gore of
battle and containing the severed limbs of
the soon to be deceased. The 'bean-nighe'
were, also, said to have been the spirits of
women who died in childbirth, and who
were now doomed to spend what would
have been their normal life-span, doing this
horrendous work. On Good Friday (1914
AD), for example, the aged monarch Brian
Boru knelt in his tent praying as the Battle
of Clontarf raged in North County Dublin.
After his son fell in battle he was urged by
advisors to ride back to camp, but he refused
siting a prophecy.

Oh, God, thou boy, retreat becomes us
not and I myself know that I shall not
depart alive, for Aibhil of Crag Liath
came to me last night and she told me
that I should be killed today.31

He had met the same spirit previously,
several years later, near the start of his reign, on the battlefield
of Crag Liath (9AD), near the fort of
Prince Lachtna (820-840AD), where he
fought the Norsemen. She was, then,
famously described as the 'High Crag'
or 'Cragannah'. She was, also, known
variously as 'Aibhlí' 'Ahibhinn' (Achibneall)
(the lovely one), Goddess of the 'House of
Cais' and 'Queen' over some twenty-five
lesser 'bansidhe'. Her appearance, at this
crucial time, was said to be designed to help
in the process of succession, by deciding
which of King Brian's sons was worthy to
succeed him, to the Kingship of Ireland.

Leo Bowes, wrote of a more contemporary
tale, involving the scion Limerick's famous
Barrington family.31

One of the strangest banshee stories of all
had its beginning in Dublin at 2.30am on
August 6, 1891, when Lord Rossmore,
Commander-in-Chief of the British
Forces in Ireland, died at his home. The
evening before, he had attended a vice-
regal party in Dublin Castle. To the
people he met there, including Sir Jonah
and Lady Barrington, he seemed in the
best of health, and stayed at the party
until near midnight. Before leaving, he
invited the Barringtons to join a party
he was holding in his house at Mount
Kennedy, Co. Wicklow.

In fact, for a man of his background and
position, he had spent a fairly ordinary
evening—one that seemed to contain no
hint at all of the strange things to come.

At two o'clock in the morning, Sir Jonah
Barrington awoke and heard what were
described as 'plaintiff sounds' coming
from outside the window, from a grass
plot underneath it. He was to remember
the banshee-like sounds all his life. Lady
Barrington heard the sounds, too, [sic]
and so did a maid. And finally, at 2.30
am, Barrington heard a voice call,
"Rossmore! Rossmore!" Then there was
silence.

Next day, the Barringtons were told that
Lord Rossmore was dead. A servant had
heard strange sounds coming from his room
and, rushing in, had found him dying. He had died at 2.30 a.m. ‘Lord Rossmore was dying at the moment I heard his name pronounced’ Sir Jonah wrote later. It was a most terrifying experience for him. To the Irish, however, it was no mystery, for they knew, it was the bansidhe, Barrington had heard.

The black or death coach (còiste bodhar) can also forewarn a family of an impending death and may, according to some accounts, be accompanied in its travels, by one or more, ‘bansidhes’. It, seemingly, keeps irregular hours and if confronted by a witness on the road, rushes past or reverses, eventually disappearing at break-neck pace. It may have a headless driver, be pulled by headless horses, carry children all dressed in white or have ghostly ladies adorned with flowers in their hair.

‘Death coaches’ are known to be of three main types, namely:

The black or death coach, like the ‘bansidhe’, follows particular clans or families and foretells disaster. A man has sometimes been reported as being seated on the box. He may be tall and slender, dark or pale, in complexion and is known by the ‘fairy’ name of ‘Dullahan’.

The fairy coach has lights, carries boisterous ‘fairy folk’ and attempts to lure mortal men to their revels.

Apparitional coaches which are linked to specific tragic events.

Others have described the death coach as appearing in the form of a four feet high box or cart, but without any lights, sound, horses, or drivers. It normally stops at a house in which a person is about to pass over. This folk tale may have originated from descriptions of chariots in ancient times such as that driven by the legendary, Cú Chulainn.

The Devil’s in the Detail

Back in 1974, the Devil came to Limerick, albeit, in the format of the ‘big screen’.

The showing of The Exorcist corresponded with the opening of the ‘Movieland Twins’ cinemas, in Roxboro, on 16 October, 1974, where it played on Screen One for eight weeks. Indeed, so popular was it that the Devil returned to the Lyric Cinema, again in September of 1975, and played to captive audiences for another week. The film was loosely based upon real events that occurred in St. Louis, Missouri in 1949 which were supposedly witnessed by some 26 people. Subsequently, Thomas B. Allen wrote a book, entitled Possessed, which formed the basis of the film script. The image portrayed of the Devil, however, did not correspond with traditional Irish folklore. In fact, in Ireland, the Devil was seen more as a trickster in the business of acquiring souls.

At Ballinaclare, in County Limerick, for example, at the residence of the Croker family, a typical tale unfolded. However, it had many similarities to other tales, involving Great Houses, such as the ‘Legend of Loftsus Hall’, in County Wexford, in the Eighteenth Century. The head of the household, Mr. Croker, after hunting all day, met a dark stranger on a magnificent black horse. Delighted by his hunting prowess, he extended an invitation to him, to visit his home, where festivities lasted well into the night. Afterwards, the stranger was shown to his bedroom, where a servant proceeded to pull off his riding boots, only to reveal a cloven hoof. In the morning, the same servant belatedly told his master and the pair proceeded swiftly to the room. However, both man and horse had vanished leaving only a sulphurous smell, the imprint of a red-hot cloven hoof and another four in the horse’s tail. Hence, the origin of the old saying: ‘As sure as the devil was in Ballinaclare’.

An island in the middle of Askeaton village contains the remains of a so-called ‘Hellsfire Club’ dating from the 1700s. These clubs were originally established by the First Duke of Wharton (1698-1731), throughout Britain (1719) but were soon outlawed. However, the Askeaton club, founded in 1740, and some other branches, probably survived until the end of the century. No records remain of their activities, but locals were said to have been terrified by lurid nightly events with screams and animal roars being audible. Apparently, victims were forced to take part in obscene rituals (and subsequently to haunt the place) with the Devil himself making the occasional guest appearance. Indeed, the President of each club was the Devil, and although he was not worshipped by members per se, he did act as their chief role model. Ceremonial feasts frequently took place, washed down with copious amounts of alcohol and intermingled with orgies of one sort or another. These activities recalled the infamous Roman festivals.
called 'Bacchanalia'. It may be assumed, therefore, that 'Hellfire Clubs' attempted to parody religiosity by dedicating themselves to the occult. For example, 'kissing the Devil's fundament' located under his tail, also called the 'Gaps of Shame' (Osculum Infame), was a sign of their: obeisance and humility. The Lord's prayer might have been recited backwards and the Devil praised, followed by blasphemies, a mock sermon and absolution using the left hand. This was an inverted cross, referring to the words: 'Hoc Est Corpus' meaning 'this is my body', (hence the origin of the words, Hocus Pocus).37

Another offshoot of such tales was the famous 'Devil at the Dance'. The Stella Ballroom, in Limerick City, was packed during the showband era of the 1950s and 1960s. One Saturday night, in the early 1950s, a handsome stranger asked a local girl to dance there. He was a charmer, and as the dance finished, he asked her to take refreshments with him, in the mineral bar. She agreed but fainted suddenly. When she came around, after being revived by friends, she told of how she happened to look down and saw that the stranger had eleven hooves for feet. Indeed, he vanished just as suddenly as he had appeared. The story swept the city and a well-known Franciscan Friar was called in to bless the hall. Later, a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary was erected to mark the Marian Year of 1954, or to deter the 'Evil One'.

A similar story was reported from a dance hall run by the famous parish priest, (later Monsignor), James Horan (1911-1986), of Knock Airport fame, at Tooreen, in County Mayo, on 6 June, 1958. There may have been strong morality elements to such tales. Strangers, particularly, those from the United States may have had access to drugs that caused hallucinations, such as the infamous 'Mickey Finn' (Chloral Hydrate).38

Supernatural Nature

Recently, a television documentary explored a condition whereby those afflicted with 'bird phobia' explained that they could see 'evil in their eyes'.39 Their observations are an interesting reminder of how fears surrounding animals can take on supernatural dimensions. Indeed, T. J. Westropp recorded the following.

A Clare woman told me that a man whose love was rejected by a girl living in Limerick city died and his soul went into a rat and used to bite her throat until she had to emigrate. The rat tried to follow her and was drowned and the persecution ended.40

About the same time [1820] certain men in Limerick City were famous for being able to free ships in that port from rats. Their method was to fix a razor, edge upwards, on the ship and by their charms to force the rats to cut their throats on it.41

Alternatively, a 'spectral dog' called; the 'black dog of Cratloe', was said to accompany the D'Esterre coach and mail car. One witness was Ralph Hugo Westropp, the brother of T. J. Westropp (1860-1922), who travelled with his mother, through the great Shannon flood of 1 February, 1869. His story was, subsequently, confirmed by both the driver and by the guide of the D'Esterre's, who piloted them along the flooded uncustomed road East of Bunratty.

A large dark shadowy dog seemed to run upon the moonlight water, first to one side and then to the other of the carriage and was more than once lashed by the driver.42

The creature, finally, disappeared at the foot of the Cratloe Hills. The Westropp's servant Mrs. Julia MacHugh explained that the apparition was a good omen if the dog ran alongside the coach but was a bad omen if it leaped at the carriage or its horses. It did leap at the mail car and soon afterwards the driver was thrown off and killed at that very same spot.43

A 'shying bridge', at Middleton in County Cork, is famous for the apparent fact that horses in olden times refused to cross it, and frequently, in a state of high anxiety, would rear up. Animals were long believed to be sensitive to the realm of the supernatural. Indeed it was said, that the bridge in question, was the location of a man's suicide. His body was, subsequently, trapped in the weeds below. The unhappy spirit wanted others to join him and keep him company in death.44 Strangely, Baal's Bridge in Limerick was said to have had a similar problem in the Nineteenth Century.

Legend has it that when John Scanlan, convicted of the murder of the Colleen Bawn in 1820, was being transported for execution from the City Courthouse in Quay Lane to Gallows Green, the horses drawing the carriage containing Scanlan refused to cross Baal's Bridge. Despite being whipped, and prodded with bayonets, by the soldiers, the horses refused to budge and Scanlan was obliged to walk the rest of the way to his execution. Some of the onlookers felt it was a sign that Scanlan was innocent and called for his release.45

Likewise, if a horse shied at a grave it was seen as a sign of the presence of a restless spirit.

The terrifying powers of nature are, also, to be seen in the seas, storms and thunder that stir the human imagination. Ephesians were supernatural signs of doom, while waves or river swells encouraged people, in times past, to believe that terrifying creatures lurked there, such as the infamous 'Péist'.

Newts, lizards, caterpillars (Puss Moths) and worms were all said to be varieties of 'Péist'. One could be stung by a worm, while flies and various parasites in sheeps and cattle might lead to human illnesses. These were seen when expelled from diseased animals and exaggerated by story tellers into the monsters of legend. Such creatures could, justifiably, be tortured in order to free sufferers from an infestation.46 A rabbit could be a fairy thief, and steal a ring, while seal women and enchanted birds spoke with human voices. Ravens and owls, meanwhile, were seen as portents of doom. The 'Pica', and 'Spectral Dogs' were long associated with being the appointed 'guardians' of bridges. A red dog, (Madra Rua), or fox had supernatural qualities, while hares could eat human flesh taken from graveyards and easily transform into witches to suckle cows. Seals were seen as enchanted humans, the 'Cumara' was a 'Sea Hound' while the 'Durracow' was the 'King of the Orcs'. Birds like the cuckoo could be harbingers of ill-omen. For example, if the cuckoo was heard too early it foretold bad weather. If heard in March, farmers should sell their cattle and buy grain. Indeed, if a person could survive 'March many weather' they were well placed to see the year out. For fishermen bad omens included low clouds, or a rainbow that met the land, at both ends. Birds were, also, seen to gather on sea shore rocks, with their backs to the Atlantic. Pollock stopped taking the fisherman's bait and cod were said to eat stones in order to weigh themselves down as a storm approached.47 For many sea-folk 'whistling' might even cause a gale. Seagulls carried the souls of the dead, while sailors would not learn to swim because, it was said, that the sea could acquire a taste for them and swallow them whole. Good Friday, the period of Christ's death, was often associated with bad luck, as were women, priests, and red heads.
For others, natural events could be the work of the Devil such as the infamous 'Night of the Big Wind' (6 January, 1839). Back then, people recalled hearing a 'banshie' in the sky, and fled their homes for the relative safety of the fields outside. The 'Big Wind' lasted from 2 a.m. until 5 a.m. Hundreds of thousands of trees were split like matchwood and many cottages were destroyed. Over 300 people died nationally as winds exceeded 180 m.p.h.

In 1923, another huge storm threw fish up on the Marine Parade which were gratefully taken home and eaten by Limerick's poor. Indeed, Holy Thursday and Good Friday of 1928, saw further storms strike Limerick. This time turbid, conger eels and pollock were caught between the slates of the city's roofs, while the West End of Kilkee and Lahinch had their sea walls breached. An American, John Reidy, living in 'The Bath House' near the pier, visited Colonel Patrick Brennan, nearby, on St. Stephen's Night. He found the man secured to his bed with the other end of the rope tied to a door knob. Only the narrowness of his front door actually prevented him from being washed into the Atlantic after the backdoor was crushed by a wave. At the height of the Christmas festivities. In 1951, another fierce storm coincided with Spring tides and 80 m.p.h. winds. The Shannon and Ballybunion Rivers surged and the city was flooded. While global warning is blamed for almost every weather event that occurs today, back then, it was often seen as evidence of the supernatural at work.

**Women and the Occult**

Rightly or wrongly, women have, down through the ages, been often associated with the occult as the infamous cases involving Florence Newton, in Youghal (1661), and earlier, Dame Alice Kydell (1280-1330), in Kilfenora (1324), show. One writer has drawn attention to the fact that:

In Celtic Ireland dealings with the unseen were not regarded with such abhorrence and indeed had the sanction of custom and antiquity. This was at odds with the experience of mainland Britain where the 'Witch Craze' (1588-1620) engineered the rise of tyrants such as Matthew Hopkins. As 'Witch Finder-General' this man made a fortune from persecuting and torturing women accused of occult practices. James I, ascended the throne in 1603, and introduced a Bill to Parliament which built upon previous legislation against witches by King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I. Such laws were also designed to control female sexuality. Victims of witchcraft (the bewitched) often complained of pains in their bowels while vomiting-up items such as needles, pins, hairs, feathers, buttons, thread, glass, window nails and shells. These common household items must have been swallowed at some point, indicating some sort of mental illness. Closely linked with birth and death, a birthmark was often regarded as being definitive proof of occult practices, when seen on a woman. Indeed, if a pregnant woman tripped in a graveyard her baby could be damaged in some way, exacerbated perhaps by the 'evil eye'.

Typically, babies were said to come into this world on boats, in boxes, under seaweed or cabbage, or from 'Baby Holes'. Those that died prematurely (or illegitimately) went unbaptised and had to be buried at mid-night (half-way between nightfall and sun-up) in special plots outside the churchyard. Mothertongues spoke of such plots. Even today, the Clilbeinach (Killeens) or unbaptised children's graveyards, are places of contention and controversy.

As a result of these beliefs, women, in the past, were not allowed into church to attend baptisms as they were regarded as being unclean. Indeed, they required a special liturgical service to be performed for them. Likewise, women who acquired power, were often exposed to heightened suspicion and fear. Maura (Maire) O'Brien (Maureen Rhue or Little Mary), for example, was credited with the murder of some twenty-five husbands. In fact, history records her as only having three. It is rumoured that she, also, changed her maid's by their cottage, from the cothels of an old well tower and cut-off their breasts. She lived in Lemanagh Castle, a mansion adorned with gardens, courtyards, fishponds and out-buildings, between Corofin and Kilfenora. Born Mary MacMahon (1615-1685), she married Conor O'Brien (1617-1651), who built a set of gates to restrict the movement of people living in the Burren. Infamously, locals had to request permission from him to come and go. As a result, one of the Burren gentry gathered a band of inhabitants to break down the gates and force O'Brien to grant 'a right of way', in perpetuity. Another story is that Conor O'Brien attacked the Cromwellian General but as a result the former fell mortally wounded. His servants took him back to Lemanagh Castle but his wife did not weep for him. Instead, she shouted from the tower: 'What do I want with dead men here?' After nursing him until he died, she put on a magnificent dress and called for her coach. She then, set out for Limerick City being besieged by Irton. On the outskirts of the city she was stopped by a sentinel but roared and cursed at him until Irton and his officers, who were at dinner, heard the noise and came out. She told them: 'I was Conor O'Brien's wife yesterday and his widow today.' Irton wanted proof that Conor was dead, so she said. 'I'll marry any of your officers that asks me.' Captain Cooper was a brave man and made an offer. They soon married, thereby, saving the O'Brien property for her son. Sir Donat. A different account tells how Irton sent five of his best men, disguised as sportsmen, to shoot Conor O'Brien and one wounded him. Maire O'Brien captured and hanged the man, then called her sons and advised them to surrender to Parliament. Only, then, did she set off in a coach to meet Irton in Limerick. One morning at Lemanagh Castle, after her marriage to Cooper, they quarrelled while he was shaving, about an insult to his late husband, Conor O'Brien, whom she still loved. Maire O'Brien jumped out of bed and gave Cooper a kick in the stomach from which he died. Finally, Maire O'Brien, was supposedly, taken by her enemies, after killing the last of her twenty-five husbands, and was fastened-up in a hollow tree, to starve to death. Now, her red haired ghost haunts the same area. Maire O'Brien is depicted in a portrait, now in Drumcliff Castle, wearing a pendant (from the Spanish Armada wreck) around her neck, showing a pair of 'mer-folk'. Indeed, her maiden name was, 'MacNamara' (Son of the Sea), from Clonagh Castle, near Newmarket-on-Fergus, a clear reference to mermaids being in her lineage.

According to the 'Dindsenchas', (Lore of Places), the River Shannon derives its name from 'Shinean', (Sea Lady), the daughter of the mermaid Ladan, who came over from Tir-Iarlingre (Tir na nOg) (Land of Youth). The former, was drowned at Tarshinon, on the Clare side of the River Shannon, to which she gave her name. Such mermaids, (merrow), were linked to the mythical 'Sea People' and to the Celtic God of the Sea (Manannan Mac Llwyd). Typically, they had a special enchanted cap, called the 'Cohueen Driath', which allowed them to dive to abodes deep beneath the waves and, or, a magic wand. Mermaids could predict the future, sing, lure, and seduce, with their beauty, sea-gos and sailors onto the rocks or coastline. The traditional image of the...
houses to listen as screams rang out from inside his cottage. The beating she gave him made him change his ways, or so the story goes.41

One of best known tales associating a female phantom with revenge, is that of the infamous 'Bishop's Lady'.

One of the city's better known spirits was the Bishop's Lady, who haunted Thomond Bridge and left an eternal mark. She was very fond of drinking, cavorting, gambling and all kinds of lawlessness. When she died, she returned to haunt anyone who crossed Thomond Bridge in a drunken state. It was in the [sic] Drunken Thady that the Bishop's Lady finally met her match. This man told his companions [that] he would get the better of her threatening spirit. One night he met her on the bridge where they fought and grappled; eventually Drunken Thady won and threw her over the bridge. Legend has it that the marks the Bishop's Lady made in her bid for survival are still to be seen.42

The Bard of Thomond's original version sees the outcome of the battle as going the other way, however.

'Twas vain - the Spirit, in her fury, To do her work was vain - And, rising, with a whirwind strength, Hurlcd him o'er the battlement.43

Conclusions

The folktales of the past have an enduring appeal even today. Perhaps, this is simply, due to the fact that they remain good yarns, no matter what the time or the place, in which they are told. The stories that have been recalled in this two-part series of articles will no doubt be discussed for as long as there are human beings around to appreciate them.

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