

# True Fairy Stories? Nineteenth-century Irish fairylore

SIMON YOUNG

## (i) Introduction

Let us start, as we mean to go on, with a *true* Irish fairy tale. A man in Tipperary, Ireland, is kidnapped by the fairies, who leave a fake body in his place. His family are oblivious, believing that he has died. After the body is buried, the father has a dream. The son appears and explains that he has in fact been taken by the Sidhe (the Irish fairies). To rescue him the father must come to the cross of Glendalough (Co. Tipperary, not Co. Wicklow) at midnight on Midsummer Night's Eve with some whisky, a black-hafted knife and a number of trusted companions. He is to wait till he sees his son mounted on a passing fairy horse. Then, the father and his friends are to surround the son's horse, cut off the enchanted horse's right ear, and only then will the father be able to rescue his boy from an eternity in fairyland. The father and companions gather, but the spell does not work: one of the father's companions had, unbeknownst to the father, murdered three men. This cursed individual prevents the rescue party from seeing the fairies as they pass, and the son is lost for ever. Irish fairy tales rarely end well ...

This story was told in many parts of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> But why say that this particular version is "true"? Well, for the simple reason that the events described, at least those we can test historically, did actually take place. In 1837 a young man named Keating from Newcastle in Tipperary died. He was buried but his father subsequently had a dream. In that dream the son asked his father to be rescued from the fairies on midnight on June 24th at the cross at Glendalough: he also gave instructions to bring friends, whisky and a black-hafted knife. The father, understandably distraught, but believing in the power of the fairies to spirit away humans, gathered his neighbours together: a dead body was often claimed to be a fairy substitute corpse. Some 1,200 locals assembled at the cross as darkness fell on June 24th, 1837 to restore the boy to his family. The hosting of the Sidhe did not show, though, and the inconvenient fact of the triple-murderer was revealed in a subsequent dream.<sup>2</sup> *1,200 locals!* It is a useful reminder that fairy beliefs were not just fireside chatter in Ireland two centuries ago. Many Irish men and women were prepared to act on these beliefs.

In the next pages I describe Irish fairy belief in the early-mid nineteenth century: the ideal arc of time to examine Irish fairylore. This was, after all, a period when fairies were still taken seriously in large parts of the island, but also one when fairies started to feature extensively in our records; in the previous centuries they had been largely ignored by British and Irish writers. Typically, scholars look at Irish fairylore through tales and superstitions collected by Irish antiquarians, often in the second half of the nineteenth century; or they comb through Ireland's extraordinary folklore archives, put together in the 1930s and 1940s, the best of their kind in the world.<sup>3</sup> They then look for patterns and connect these tales and superstitions with British and Continental equivalents. This is all worthwhile. But it can sometimes become rather bloodless and abstract. For example, for many folklorists the most important thing about the account above would be that it is a version of Motif F322.2; a story

that is also attested in Scotland in the same period, but that is absent from England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> Yet, surely what is really important here is that, just a year before Victoria's coronation, over a thousand men and women braved a chilly June night to battle the Sidhe.

I want to recount, in this article, lived fairylore rather than fairy tales: the 1,200 men and women, rather than Motif F322.2. I want to look at Irish individuals, Irish families, and Irish communities as, from about 1800 to 1860, they acted on their fairy convictions in ways that astounded the many in Irish society who did not share these convictions. Some of what follows is based on first- or second-hand accounts; some on newspaper stories; some on records of legal proceedings where fairies made rather sheepish appearances in Irish courtrooms: these are sources that do not typically appear in scholarship on Irish fairies. All this can be supplemented by the great works of Irish fairylore written between 1828 and partition in 1922: books by Elizabeth Andrews, Thomas Crofton Croker, Jeremiah Curtin, Walter Evans Wentz, the Halls, Lady Gregory, Patrick Kennedy, the Wildes, W. G. Wood-Martin, and Yeats.<sup>5</sup> There have been some attempts in the past two centuries to describe this fairy belief system as a religion or "faith": this is to go too far.<sup>6</sup> But it is also a pity that the mockery of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish establishment, the embarrassment of the Catholic Church, and the "modernising" priorities of Irish nationalists should reduce Irish fairy belief to the bare bones of tale types. Here we have something that was clearly an important part of Irish rural life in the nineteenth century and that in some areas continued to be important up until "the Emergency" (1939-1945) and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

## **(ii) A Fairy Landscape**

The Sidhe were said to be the fallen angels who had been thrown out of heaven at the time of Satan's rebellion. Most of the rebels, of course, had fallen into hell and become demons. But those with some redeeming features landed on earth where they became fairies: this origin story explains the capriciousness of Irish fairies, their occasional kindness and yet, their very great capacity for evil. Irish fairies settled within raths, the prehistoric ring forts that can be found all over the island. Here they lived a strange existence, mirroring those of human beings. They were born, they married, they feasted, and in some cases they died: Irish tradition is unclear as to whether the fairies were mortal or not.<sup>8</sup> The exuberant underground kingdoms of the Sidhe sometimes spilled out into the human world. Passers-by, especially at night, would hear music, dancing or even the phwack of the football as the fairies entertained themselves. Any human who approached the rath had to do so with a proper sense of decorum. Individuals who were foolish enough to fall asleep on their ramparts risked being kidnapped or being "blasted" or "shot" by irate fairies; fairies could maim humans with their missiles. Those, meanwhile, who in any way damaged the rath or cut down the fairy thorns that grew there would risk the Sidhe's extreme displeasure.

We have one telling mid-nineteenth century account of a hawthorn from a half destroyed rath in County Laois, recorded by a local historian who had carefully investigated the stories. In the very early nineteenth century a tenant farmer was foolish enough to cut down said hawthorn. The fairies killed his cattle, then his children, then had the now penniless farmer evicted from the land. The hawthorn stump began to sprout again, yet the

next family on the farm was no wiser than the first. One member chopped a single branch off the tree. The result? A case of insanity and a broken arm in the family, and they, too, moved on. The third family who took possession of the land, and was still there in 1850 when the account was written, accidentally knocked down the hawthorn while quarrying limestone. You can imagine their terror ... The fairies evidently decided that there were attenuating circumstances – there was an attempt to lift the thorn back up and the whole thing had, after all, been an accident. The Sidhe, therefore, limited themselves to killing two cows, crippling a newborn son and condemning the farmer to penury.<sup>9</sup> Even today the decision to cut down a fairy thorn often proves controversial in Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

The Sidhe's influence centred on Irish raths but their power extended well beyond to the countryside as a whole. In 1863 an Irish farmer in Co. Roscommon was ploughing in his field when he had a remarkable experience. A horse that he was driving suddenly disappeared into the ground in front of him. The farmer ran forward to find that a hole had opened in the ground and that his horse, now dead, lay some fifty feet below him, floating in a pool of water. This was, by any standards, an extraordinary event. However, for the crowds of about a hundred that gathered at the "Fairy Hole" there could only be one explanation as to what had caused it. The Sidhe had, for reasons best known to themselves, opened a portal into their world and dragged the horse down into it: Irish fairies have, as the description of the fairy thorn above suggests, "carnivorous" tendencies. This fact was quickly confirmed as there were glimpses of figures below. These were very possibly the reflections of those above, but they were interpreted by one man looking down as fairies mocking the surface dwellers.<sup>11</sup>

Unusual events in the Irish countryside were easily explained with reference to the fairies. Let us note some examples from the two decades before the Fairy Hole's unexpected appearance. In 1840 a house that was built in twenty four hours (as a legal stratagem) came to be known as "the house built by the fairies in one night".<sup>12</sup> In 1843 a huge hole appeared in a rath or fairy hill overnight: it was reckoned that twenty men had dug for hours in the dark. Some suggested that the fairies had been at work, others that hidden weapons had been removed for an armed nationalist rising.<sup>13</sup> In 1850, a sea wall being constructed near Youghal was constantly washed away by the sea: "This was of such frequent occurrence that the peasantry around believed it to have been the work of fairies, and many superstitious beings left the employment, not wishing, as they said, 'to be going against the *good people*'".<sup>14</sup> In 1852, also in County Cork, a Catholic church fell down three times as it was being constructed: "I hear the people are saying it is enchanted ground, and the abode of fairies, for various noises were heard in the air the night on which [the chapel] fell."<sup>15</sup>

Irish fairies were, in fact, connected with the very fertility of the land. The best proofs of this relate to the potato famine, which ravaged Ireland from 1845-1852 and which, through emigration and famine, halved the population of the island. There was the belief among some Irish potato growers that it was the fairies' disfavour that brought down the blight on the land.<sup>16</sup> Fairy battles in the sky – fairy tribes both fought and played hurling matches against each other – were interpreted as marking the onset of the famine: a victorious fairy army would curse the potatoes of the enemy's territory.<sup>17</sup> There is even one remarkable account where a visitor to County Mayo from Ulster wanted, in 1846, to examine the potato blight.

He dug and washed some of the spoilt crop and took them away, giving an Irish labourer a silver coin. It later emerged that the labourer believed that the outsider, a school inspector, was an agent of the blight-bringing Ulster fairies!<sup>18</sup> We have, meanwhile, a reference from 1854, after the worst years of famine were over, where an unusual wind storm and “meteors” were connected to the fairies and the blight.<sup>19</sup>

### **(iii) Fairy Travels**

The Sidhe lived in an aristocratic society where noble fairies visited other noble fairies and where fairy kings and queens moved from court to visit or fight each other: as elsewhere in Europe the fairies seem to be an echo of the past, in this case the last cattle lords of Gaelic Ireland. This socialising and warring involved a great deal of travelling, and humans often saw fairies as they moved from rath to rath. In 1838 one grandee from the County Limerick insisted on calling a number of witnesses into court, to the bemusement of his fellows on the bench, to testify that they had observed “the good people” on one such hosting. According to a man who was reluctantly sworn in:

“[I] [s]aw a great number on the hill of Knockagreana as they were like men and horses; they were moving along towards Pallas; [I] did not know whether they had arms; there were more than a thousand; [I do] not know whether they were living or dead; [I believe] they were not living beings; I can’t say what they were; [I] did not know any of them.”<sup>20</sup>

Some two hundred locals, including the parson’s daughters, were said to have watched this manifestation of the Munster Sidhe.

The Sidhe more typically moved around invisibly in “fairy winds”: if you saw a flurry of circling wind carrying dust and leaves then this was the Sidhe travelling to their next destination. Protocol demanded that humans bowed their head as the wind passed and wished the “Good People” a fine journey, or sensibly muttered a prayer for protection.<sup>21</sup> Human victims were sometimes seized by passing fairy winds.<sup>22</sup> However, there were other possible reactions. We know that dust from under your feet hurled into a fairy wind was supposed to release any human prisoners there. One delightful early nineteenth-century story has a woman tumble from out of the sky when a man throws some dust skywards.<sup>23</sup> We also know that there was a Wexford spell for forcing the fairies in the cloud to show themselves. We cannot give details as the writer who tells us about this, Patrick Kennedy, believed the magic necessary for this transformation was too dangerous to be written down. Unwise readers might come face to face with the fey ...<sup>24</sup>

Fairy winds were normally modest affairs, as suggested above, a few whirling leaves and twigs. But sometimes they could be more powerful. We have already mentioned the 1854 “land spout” connected with the devastation of the potato crop, which included “meteors”.<sup>25</sup> But there were many others recorded in the period. For example, the 1839 “Night of the Big Wind”, which caused so much damage in Ireland, was supposed by some to have been a fairy battle.<sup>26</sup> Other winds were more local. In 1849 a woman “coming to Nenagh from her residence at Ardcresey, encountered a gust of wind and was instantaneously deprived of

sight... She had no doubt but that the ‘good people’ or ‘fairies’ had struck her with a dust whirlwind”: was this perhaps a lightning bolt?<sup>27</sup> In 1853 “fairy blasts” destroyed a house at Kilkenny and injured a young woman.<sup>28</sup> Further to the west, around Cork, a “Shee Gheea” or fairy wind struck Ballinhassig in 1854.<sup>29</sup> In 1855, meanwhile, a “violent whirlwind” at Quin in Co. Clare was described by a correspondent as a “fairies’ frolic”: it carried one family out of their house and dumped them in the local cemetery.<sup>30</sup> In 1886 a “fairy blast” tore through Roscommon and “cannon balls could not have done greater damage”.<sup>31</sup> Fairies travelled, then, demurely or, when angered, they could rip up the surrounding countryside. The terms “fairy blasts” and “fairy strokes” are interesting here. Both can mean a fairy attack on a person or animal, but the first can also mean a fairy wind.

The Sidhe travelled between their raths along preordained roads. These were typically termed as “fairy paths”. In the same way that a human should never damage a rath or cut a fairy thorn it would also be reckless to build a house where a path passed: obstructing the fairies would, naturally, provoke their rage. Some house builders would ask local “fairy doctors”, humans with special knowledge of the fairies, for advice about where to build. There are many stories about house-builders who did not take this precaution and ended up losing much of their family, before either abandoning the house or knocking down the part that crossed the fairies’ route. A particularly striking example comes from Co. Derry in 1836. In that period Ordnance Survey workers were preparing maps of the area and as part of this work took down accounts of local traditions and local personalities. One of these surveyors stumbled on “Denis O’Haran of Bancran Glebe”, who had built his own house and cowshed and who seems to have done so on a local fairy highway. The surveyor took down a comically forensic “memorandum” of the O’Harans’ fairy experiences. They included: a strange white woman (the fairy queen?), who at one point lay herself down over the family’s children; fairies crowding the lane and the cowshed; phantom music; and a voice announcing that Denis would be dead in twelve months. O’Haran, to the astonishment of the surveyor, tore down the house he had himself built. His neighbours claimed, meanwhile, that the fairies had compensated O’Haran with “good British currency”. A raw personal paranormal experience had been quickly absorbed into local folklore.<sup>32</sup>

#### **(iv) Kidnapping Humans: Theory**

One of the most striking things about Sidhe-human relations is the way that both communities needed each other: they were, in modern biological terms, symbiotic.<sup>33</sup> The humans depended on the fairies for good crops, healing from illnesses (a question we will come to) and tranquil lives. The fairies, though, also needed their human neighbours. As we will see, they took supplies from humans. People were expected to leave occasional food and clean water (for washing) for the Sidhe, while keeping the house clean and leaving a fire burning should the fairies wish to make nocturnal visits. However, the fairies also needed humans to make their fairy societies tick over. Humans worked as midwives, musicians, wet nurses, servants, and warriors for the fairies. Much as most modern western societies could not get along without cheap immigrant labour, the fairies relied upon, while being contemptuous of, the humans among them. And how did the fairies get their human drones? Well, quite simply, the fairies stole them.

Fairy kidnapping is perhaps the most difficult part of fairy belief to come to grips with, so it will be as well to spend some paragraphs on the theory before getting to the practice. Fairies earmarked certain humans for capture. Typically these humans were attractive babies or infants (who would grow up to serve the fairy hosts); young women, particularly those who had just given birth (who would nurse fairy babies); and young men, particularly those who were good at playing the pipes. When the fairies had decided on a human victim they would launch an attack. The fairy hosts had to do two things. First, they had to kidnap their mark, getting around any protective objects that had been set against them. For example, fairies hate iron and the Bible: scissors or “the good book” on a baby’s crib would keep a child safe, then.<sup>34</sup> Second, they had to leave behind a false human so that the family would not realise their loss, or at least not immediately. For this false human they could either magic an elderly member of their own community into the shape of their victim (“a changeling”); or, they could transform a simple object, particularly a broom, into the shape of a human corpse (“a stock”).

Families would suspect that one of their own had been taken in two different circumstances. First, if a young member of the family died suddenly or “before their time”: at this point it was very possible that the body that was buried was not, in fact, “real”. This was certainly the belief of the Keating family, who memorably tried to rescue their son, as noted in the Introduction above, with 1,200 helpers. We even have one tragic case from Co. Tipperary where a paralysed man, “in the fairies”, was to be ritually buried alive, and his family would return home from the graveyard to find the patient sitting at home waiting for them: “and in the coffin there will be found only a broom instead of the fairy buried”.<sup>35</sup> The second clue to a fairy kidnapping was when a baby, a child, or a young adult suddenly changed physically or mentally: this was the proof that a changeling had taken their place. These changes were often connected to illness. Many descriptions of changelings seem actually to be descriptions of emerging chronic health conditions: the most common characteristic is that the “changeling” loses or, if very young, never gains the ability to walk.<sup>36</sup>

How do you get your loved ones back from the rath? Well, if your family member had “died” and his or her body had been replaced by a stock, you had to contact a “fairy doctor”. These “fairy doctors”, whom we will describe in more detail below, would then negotiate with the fairies for the return of the lost family member: inevitably without success. Sometimes consoling messages would be brought back from the fairies: for instance, in one case we read that a young man had married a fairy girl and wanted to stay with his love, a fact that helped his family come to terms with their loss.<sup>37</sup> In cases where there was, instead, a changeling, the family was advised by the fairy doctor to take brutal steps. Put crudely, if the changeling was mistreated enough, then the fairies, horrified that one of their own was suffering, would bring back the human and take the changeling away. There was, then, a rationale for physically and mentally abusing “changelings” (in many cases young children with severe health problems). Mistreating involved beating, blows, or cutting with iron, burning, dunking in cold water, exposure, and poisoning.

### **(v) Kidnapping Humans: Practice**

So much for the theory. How did this work in practice? Well, one striking example dates to 1864 and Carrick-on-Suir in County Tipperary. In that year, a fairy doctor, Mary Doherty, was brought to trial for her fairy activities. Mary had found two families in Carrick and convinced them that several departed relatives were not fully dead but were, rather, waiting with the fairies. She could slowly wean these undead relations back to life with food and tobacco donated by her clients. There is some important fairylore behind this idea: namely the notion that humans who eat fairy food are doomed to remain for ever with the fairies; the food and tobacco were also presumably recompense for her activities. The head of the family, Joseph Reeves, was a policeman, and Mary took Joseph and his son and – her chutzpah and showmanship are breathtaking – pointed out their dead relatives walking in a field. Joseph did not approach these fairy-zombies, who seem to have stood some thirty or forty feet away, but he was convinced and he henceforth enthusiastically backed up Mary in everything. Mary, in fact, retained his loyalty through the court case, where Reeves was humiliated and forced to retire. His consolation was that he had, under Mary’s tutelage, received several letters from the fairy rath and these promised him rewards of land in the near future.<sup>38</sup>

The one trick that is more impressive than telling a dupe that you can bring a dead family member back from the dead is, of course, to actually do so. We have several descriptions, from early and mid-nineteenth century Ireland, of men and women who managed to convince families that they were dead children or wives back from the fairies. As Richard Jenkins modestly notes:

“It is difficult to know what to make of the numerous cases reported in oral tradition [and we could add, the newspapers] of people being taken but returning many years later, to the dismay of their families who believed the individual to be dead and buried years before and had restructured their lives accordingly.”<sup>39</sup>

One of these cases dates to the early 1820s and involves a dead wife who “returned” to her home village only to discover that her husband had married again: she moved in with the new wife and an uneasy period of cohabitation began.<sup>40</sup> In 1848 in Westmeath a British soldier managed to persuade a family that he was a dead son, who had been “spirited away by the fairies”.<sup>41</sup> In 1849 an aged man arrived at a house in Longford and said instead that he was the “dead” father of a family: a “dead” nephew later joined the ménage and the family were terrified into silence, only two of the household really believing the story.<sup>42</sup> These are just three from several cases of fairy imposture. How was it that intelligent people fell for these swindles? As any good confidence trickster knows, you have to want to be tricked, and there are few things more desired than the return of a beloved but lost relative.<sup>43</sup> Differences in appearance (and accent in the case of the British soldier?) were explained by the passing of the years and the magical transforming power of the fairies.

When children failed to thrive, or when adults fell suddenly ill, fairy doctors were often called in to determine whether they were, in fact, changelings. Once their changeling identity was established, the fairy doctor would abuse the changeling; sometimes this hard usage seems to have been ritualistic, sometimes it was brutal and dangerous. One case must

serve here for many. In 1834 a young girl called Brown, in Co. Kilkenny, apparently an adolescent, fell ill in the fields with “brain fever”. She was given over to the care of a physician, but with no good results. At this point the family called in a fairy doctor, Edward Daly, who doubled as a house painter and was famous for having lived many years with the fairies. Daly entered the sick room drunk (fairy doctors are often described as being tipsy on the job) and announced to the girl (or as he claimed, the fairy): “Ha, my old boy, it’s well I know you, and so I may for I was long enough with you ... and you know that well too, and many’s the time I whistled [a jig tune] for you when I was with you.” He had recognised the fairy lurking within the young woman.<sup>44</sup>

Daly “treated” his patient on several occasions. He dragged the half naked girl out of the bed by her hair, flogged her with a wet towel, punched her and stamped upon her. The girl died, possibly because of Daly’s ministrations, and a court case resulted. One of the fascinating things to come out of this case is the support given by the family to Daly throughout, while they were furious with the physician who had bled their girl: fairies hated blood.<sup>45</sup> The mother had physically interposed herself between her son and Daly when the boy wanted to rescue his sister from a beating. Then, even after the girl’s death, the family was reluctant to testify in court against Daly, partly, one suspects, from belief in his methods, partly from fear: though Daly had sensibly decamped before the trial began. One witness left the courtroom saying: “I did not tell the whole of it to [the jury] nor I wouldn’t for fear’d I’d be made a fairy of myself”.<sup>46</sup> We have from nineteenth century Ireland about thirty cases where “changelings” were mistreated.<sup>47</sup> These typically emerged into public record when a “changeling” was actually killed. We must ask ourselves on how many occasions the changeling survived the fairy doctor and no report was made to the authorities: or, as also happened, that a death was covered up or deliberately ignored by the authorities. We probably encounter, with these thirty or so cases, just the tip of a very unpleasant iceberg.

In some instances changelings were dealt with not by fairy doctors but by family members, often family members who, for whatever reasons, had been pushed by circumstances and perhaps by mental instability into violent behaviour. Take here Robert Sullivan who in 1848, in the County Cork, killed his son, believing him to be a fairy. Sullivan had lost his wife and had come to think, for reasons that do not emerge in the trial, that his younger son Johnny, his “pet”, was a fairy. After asking, one evening, several times, “Are you my Johnny?”, he dunked the child’s head into a pot of water. He then announced: “I’ll roast you and toast you in the name of the Father”, and pushed the child down onto a peat fire: the boy died of burns a day later. Sullivan tried to escape to America but was arrested on the boat in Liverpool and tried at the Cork Assizes. The jury “without leaving the bar, acquitted the prisoner on the grounds of insanity”, a decision that was encouraged by the judge. Was this a fair assessment of Sullivan’s state of mind at the time he murdered his son? Possibly. We can certainly say that fairies often feature in cases of insanity in Ireland in the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Dominant supernatural traditions typically leak into mental illness in a given locale.<sup>49</sup>



## (vi) The Fairy Doctor

In the previous sections I alluded to the fairy doctor, also known as “the fairy man” or “fairy woman”. These individuals are fundamental in understanding Irish fairy beliefs. They were the intermediaries between the fairy world and the human world: the bookends on the shelf of fairy belief. “[He or she has] intercourse with the good people, and possesses, of course, superhuman wisdom as well as a certain power of prophecy.”<sup>50</sup> If you had a problem with your fairy neighbours and you needed advice, you would talk to your local fairy doctor. Fairy doctors also dealt with non-fairy illnesses and tracked down stolen objects. They worked, too, against witches and stood in as veterinarians. The fairies, in fact, gave the fairy doctors the power to deal with many pedestrian human problems. How did the fairy doctor get this power? Well, almost always the fairy doctor claimed to have lived with the fairies for a period. Seven years was typical. For example, Charles Casey, “King of the Fairies”, “a man of very small stature, but great shrewdness and intelligence, supposed to see behind his back, a faculty which he obtained from having been ‘seven years in the Fairies’.”<sup>51</sup> Some claimed longer periods. Daly, who we saw above, beating up a young girl to drive out a changeling, had dwelt with the fairies, he said, for fourteen years. There the fairy men and fairy women had become acquainted with the fairies and their ways. They had learnt the secrets of scrying and also of herbs: fairy doctors were also called, in Ireland, “herb men” or “herb women”.

The fairy doctor was, in a sense, an Irish fairy shaman. I am using the word “shaman” here *very* loosely. But, like witch-doctors everywhere, they acted as bridges between humanity and the spirit world: they had continuous contact with the fairies and met them routinely in the lane and at the raths. Like shamans or medicine men elsewhere they combined certain spiritual, perhaps even “psychic” gifts with a nice line in confidence tricks and swindling; faith healing involves (necessarily?) a degree of misdirection and dishonesty.<sup>52</sup> Some fairy doctors seems to have been out-and-out shysters, bleeding vulnerable men and women of their limited resources in the most despicable fashion; see, for instance, the fairy imposters described above. Others had the best interests of those who asked for their help at heart: one fairy doctor mocked in court announced distraught that she had done much good with her herbal concoctions.<sup>53</sup> Most, probably, were, by turns, fairy doctors *and* fairy swindlers. They were, in any case, most commonly found in rural communities, where often they had long-running conflicts with the local Catholic Church. However, they could also be found in Irish towns and cities: “We have fortune-tellers within the Circular road of Dublin! and fairy doctors, of repute, living but a few miles from the metropolis.”<sup>54</sup> They were sometimes itinerant, not least because they so frequently got in trouble with magistrates and priests.

Take one fairy doctor, Mary Bourke, who worked in the 1820s and 1830s: she was a small, “unattractive” woman from County Clare who travelled with the spirit of her brother within her, and she had spent the requisite seven-year apprenticeship among the fairies.<sup>55</sup> “She used to fall into fits, and on recovery tell [her clients] the good people were giving her directions and power how to act”.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, she wrote messages to the Sidhe, literacy having potency in partly literate communities. She came to the attention of the courts when she arrived in a small village in County Mayo in 1830. Here she cured a bad-tempered mule

of its excesses and promised to bring a dead young man back from the fairies. She convinced the family of the dead man of her *bona fides* by answering some questions about the period immediately before their son's disappearance: had she an agent in the village feeding her information? She then prepared for the resurrection ceremony, putting the family on a special diet, and "hundreds of the peasantry, for ten miles round, flocked to witness this extraordinary event". On the day itself she took a black-handled knife and then walked around with a bodyguard of young women (virgins?), arming herself with a solution of water and blackberry juice to throw at any fairies she should happen upon. At this point she attempted to escape and was handed over to the authorities by disillusioned villagers.

The following is taken, instead, from a legal case dating to 1848, where a local known as "the Queen of the Fairies" is accused of stealing from a woman in Westmeath. Here the victim describes the Queen's words to her in open court. Note that Dick is the victim's husband and the Queen alleges that his first two wives (both now "dead") were brought to the fairies (i.e. killed) on her instructions.

"[The Queen] comes in and pulls out her dhudeen and puts some quare thing into it, and comminces smoken; she soon begins to puff, puff, like mad, jist as if she was goen to change hersilf into a steam-indian; her two liven eyes began to blaze, like two coals of red fire; up she starts, all iv a suddint, and places her arms a-kimbo, and spreaden herself out forninst me, like a frustrified turkey-cock; I'm yer mother, ses she; begor I got dam-founded with consternation, at the idaya of haven me mother afore me, who's dead and gone to glory long ago, the bed of heaven to her; haven recovered from exstonishment, I ses to her, you can't be mother, for the clear dacent woman is dead this long time, may God be marcifull to her sowl; oh, but I am yer mother, ses she, and I'm nayther dead nor alive, but I'm the Queen of the Fairies; cross of Christ about us, ses I, a cowld thrimblen creepen all over me, from head to foot; yis, I am the Queen of the Fairies, se she, and 'twas I that ordhered Dick's two other wives to me palace at Knockshegowna [famous fairy fort], there above near Birr, and if you don't be obajunt to me command, I'll sind you keep company with him."<sup>57</sup>

The English here will certainly owe something to journalistic licence, but it brings us as close as we are ever likely to get to the patter of a fairy doctor. The Queen, true to her profession and office, was evidently never at a loss for words. On being told by the judge, at the end of the case, that she would be sent to prison for four months, she did not miss a beat:

"... her Fairy Majesty seemed not at all disturbed; she assured his worship, that beyond any manner of doubt she was Queen of all the Fairies in the British dominions, and if he confined her under 365 bars, bolts, and locks, still she would be 'as free as the breeze that blows over the mountain.' It was true that she would leave a breathing, something in shape and form like herself, as a substitute during the eight months, but to think for a moment that they had her real, living, identical self in 'durance vile,' would be the most absurd of all the extraordinary absurdities of the day."<sup>58</sup>

## **(vii) Conclusion**

The previous pages offer the briefest of overviews of Irish fairy belief in the early to mid-nineteenth century. I will finish with three questions, which I have so far ignored. First, the reliability of these sources; second, the problem of how folklorists and historians can deal with beliefs that are so very alien to them; and third, the question of who and how many believed in fairies in nineteenth-century Ireland. As to the reliability of the sources used here, this, of course, depends on the individual source. But it is worth noting that there was not a culture of inventing stories in the Irish press in the nineteenth-century – something that *was* the case in the United States in the same period.<sup>59</sup> Journalists or newspaper “correspondents” will have exaggerated for the sake of a good story, certainly. For example, were there really 1,200 friends and neighbours at Glendalough in 1837, to help Mr. Keating retrieve his son? This is very possibly an inflation of a more modest number. (Though, even if Mr. Keating set out with just twelve companions, it remains a story worth putting down here.) Then, another question: how many went to get the Keatings’ boy and how many went just to have fun and perhaps, thinking of the whisky, get drunk? The legal proceedings, meanwhile, recorded in the Irish press, are unquestionably reliable. After all, here journalists were writing accounts of record about the doings of powerful local figures: they had very little space for exaggeration. The Irish court, meanwhile, was designed to bring out the truth from a given situation, something it frequently achieved in the nineteenth century, often in difficult circumstances. In fact, if anything, the natural biases of justice dampen down fairy evidence. The material that gets through provides excellent proofs for fairy belief, then.<sup>60</sup>

A second question is how scholars can deal with the kind of lived fairy beliefs described above: beliefs that are as distant to us as they were to those who read about them in newspapers in Dublin and London in the 1800s. It is relatively easy, of course, to rationalise belief:

“Fairy legends proper reflect the ordinary anxieties and wishful thinking of people wresting a difficult livelihood from field, moor and sea ... in the days before government intervention in the way of communications, grants, pensions and health services that made life less precarious.”<sup>61</sup>

But what about the experiences? A number of folklorists have pioneered the idea of ostension: “sometimes people actually enact the content of legends instead of merely narrating them as stories”.<sup>62</sup> By this logic the Keatings in Tipperary were “enacting” an Irish legend when they and their neighbours went to Glendalough to retrieve a lost family member from the fairies. There is also the regrettably small literature on memorates, a term pioneered by Swedish folklorist Carl von Sydow in the 1930s: “A personal-experience narrative about an encounter with the supranormal.”<sup>63</sup> Mr. Keating’s supernatural dream and much of what followed could, for example, be analysed in these terms. Historians (including the present author) have also tried to deal with lived folklore. An example is Edward Bever’s heroic efforts to absorb the apparently impossible experiences of those caught up in early modern witch trials.<sup>64</sup> Bever uses psychology to unpick paranormal reports, with impressive results. But the problem with “unpicking” is that we risk losing the shape of the historical object.

Historians have managed, against all odds, to empathise with Nazis, and with Vikings, with medieval saints, and with ancient mystics. However, early modern or contemporary westerners having supernatural experiences have proved among the most difficult to reach.<sup>65</sup> It goes without saying that the problem lies with scholars and their Enlightenment scowl, not with those that they study.

A final question is the distribution and extent of fairy belief in Ireland in the 1800s. As the reader will have seen, evidence has come, in these pages, from many parts of Ireland, from Co. Wexford to Co. Cork. It is very difficult to be precise about these matters, but just by totting up news stories or legal cases there is the impression that fairy belief was stronger the further west you went. There were Irish men and women who believed in fairies in Ulster, particularly Catholics and particularly those in Co. Donegal: but these beliefs seem to have been less strong than in Munster and Connaught. There is also evidence of fairy beliefs in Co. Dublin, but beliefs there were apparently more occasional than in western Ireland. Then, what percentage really believed in fairies even in a fairy stronghold in the west? Belief is always difficult to measure, particularly belief in supernatural entities. There are evangelists, believers, conformers, agnostics, and atheists. All have differently nuanced positions; all have evolving views; all have outlooks that change depending on whether the sun is shining and they are in company or the moon is out and they are alone. However, here a comment from County Kerry in 1894 is worth quoting.

“‘When I was a boy,’ said one Maurice Fitzgerald, a Gaelic-speaker, ‘nine men in ten believed in fairies, and said so; now only one man in ten will say that he believes in them. If one of the nine believes, he will not tell you; he will keep his mind to himself.’”<sup>66</sup>

We might doubt that ninety percent of the rural population of Kerry believed in fairies in the 1840s, as Fitzgerald suggests. But even if half or a quarter of that number did, then fairylore was a *fundamental* feature of the Irish countryside in the early and mid 1800s. “The fairies were a part of life”; and some men and women “did not just believe in fairies in a passive way, they also consummated this belief in action”.<sup>67</sup> Yet fairy belief barely features in most histories of nineteenth-century Ireland.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

1. See, for example, Elizabeth Andrews, *Ulster Folklore*, London, Elliot Stock, 1913, p. 26. Is the 1837 example the earliest recorded instance of the tale?
2. Anon, “A Fairy Tale”, *Kerry Evening Post*, July 1st, 1837, 4.
3. See, for example, Richard Dorson’s breathless description: *Folklore and Fakelore*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 183-184.
4. See also Motif F384.2(aa) “Black-handled knife powerful against fairies”.
5. Andrews, *op. cit.*; Thomas Crofton Croker, *Researches in the south of Ireland illustrative of the scenery, architectural remains, and the manners and superstitions of the peasantry with an appendix containing a private narrative of the rebellion of 1798*, London, John Murray, 1824; Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, 3 vols, London, John Murray, 1825-1828; (and often ignored) Thomas Crofton

Croker, *Killarney Legends*, London, Bohn, 1853; Jeremiah Curtin, *Tales of the Fairies and of the Ghost World Collected from Oral Tradition in South-West Munster*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1895; Sheridan Le Fanu, *Schalken, the Painter and Others: Ghost Stories, 1838-61*, Ashcroft, Ash-Tree Press, 2002; Sheridan Le Fanu, *The Haunted Baronet and Others: Ghost Stories, 1861-70*, Ashcroft, Ash-Tree Press, 2003; Sheridan Le Fanu, *Mr. Justice Harbottle and Others: Ghost Stories, 1870-73*, Ashcroft, Ash-Tree Press, 2005; Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, 2 vols, New York and London, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920; Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, London, Macmillan, 1866; W. Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1911; Mr. and Mrs S. C. Hall, *Ireland: its Scenery, Character and History*, vol. 3, London, Jeremiah How, 1846; Lady Wilde, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland with Sketches of the Irish Past*, London, Ward and Downey, 1888; W. R. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*. Dublin, James McGlashan, 1852; W. G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland: A Folklore Sketch*, 2 vols, London, Longmans, 1902; W. B. Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legends and Myths*, London, Penguin, 1993.

6. The phrase dates back into the nineteenth century. See, for example, Archibald Maclaren, *The fairy family*, Oxford, E. B. Gardner, 1874, p. 86 and an extraordinary frontispiece with the words “the Fairy Faith of Europe”. However, the phrase goes mainstream with Evans Wentz, *The Fairy Faith* in 1911. For criticisms see D. Ó Giolláin, “The Fairy Belief and the Official Religion in Ireland”, in Peter Narváez, ed., *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, New York, University of Kentucky Press, 1991, pp. 199-214 at p. 199; see also now Richard Green, “The ‘Fairy Faith’ in the Middle Ages”, *The Penn Press Log*, October 18th, 2016 [online]. For a recent examination of the uneasy coexistence of Christianity and fairy beliefs in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Nora Naughton, “God and the Good People: Folk Belief in a Traditional Community”, *Béaloideas*, 71 (2003), 13-53.

7. For the 1930s, see Marrie Walsh, *An Irish Country Childhood: Memoirs of a Bygone Age*, London, Orion, 1995, pp. 23, 74-75, 80-81, 99, 179-182. A much more substantial proof of the vitality of fairy belief in Ireland in 1938 is the school survey <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes>. For an example of the vitality of Irish fairy tradition as late as the 1970s and 1980s, see Linda-May Ballard, “Fairies and the Supernatural on Reachraí”, in Peter Narváez, ed., *The Good People*, New York, University of Kentucky Press, 1991, pp. 47-93.

8. Andrews, p. 56.

9. D. Byrne, “Folk-lore”, *Transactions of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society*, 1 (1850), 149-154.

10. Anon, “‘Fairy curse’ behind dips in Irish road – Danny Healy-Rae”, *BBC News* [online], August 8th, 2017.

11. A Traveller, “The Fairy Hole at Curraghagoil”, *Roscommon Journal* (April 18th, 1863), 1: compare with Yeats, pp. 177-178 and Andrews, p. 4.

12. Anon, “Record Court”, *Dublin Morning Register* (July 13th, 1840), 3.

13. Anon, “Singular Occurrence”, *Statesmen and Dublin Christian Record* (October 17th, 1843), 3.

14. Anon, “Reclamation of Land from the Sea”, *Cork Examiner* (September 30th, 1850), 4.

15. Thomas O’Grady, “Extraordinary Facts”, *Londonderry Sentinel* (April 16th, 1852), 4. The article cites a letter written by O’Grady “Castletown, Berehaven, Feb 14, 1852”.

16. Gregory, I, pp. 109-110, 118, 287, n. 33.

17. Evans Wentz, p. 43. For more on fairy battles, see Wood-Martin, I, pp. 21-22.

18. W. D. Killen, *Memoir of John Edgar, D.D., LL.D*, Belfast, William Mullan, 1869, pp. 201-202.

19. T. L. Cooke, “Land Spout: the Potato Blight”, *Limerick Reporter* (August 22nd, 1854), 3.

20. Anon, "Pallasgrea Petty Sessions", *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (January 4th, 1838), 4.
21. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, London, Johnson, 1801, pp. 199-200.
22. Described brilliantly in Le Fanu, 2005, pp. 3-10 at pp. 6-8 ["the Child that Went with the Fairies"].
23. William Neilson, *An Introduction to the Irish Language: In Three Parts*, Dublin, P. Wogan, 1808, Section III [separate pagination], pp. 71-74.
24. Kennedy, pp. 114-115.
25. Cooke.
26. Wood-Martin, II, p. 4.
27. Anon, "On Tuesday last...", *Clare Journal* (June 18th, 1849), 3.
28. Anon, "A Whirlwind", *Saunders' News-Letter* (December 1st, 1853), 2.
29. Anon, "Whirlwind", *Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser* (August 26th, 1854), 4.
30. Anon, "Hurricane at Quin", *Saunders' News-Letter* (July 21st, 1855), 3.
31. Anon, "A Whirlwind at Ballinasloe", *Dublin Daily Express* (October 25th, 1886), 3.
32. Angélique Day, and Patrick McWilliams, eds, *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland: Parishes of Co Londonderry XI, 1821, 1833, 1836-7*, vol. 31, 1995, p. 15.
33. Richard Suggett has an exceptional section on this in "Wales: the Fair Families and Enchanters", in Simon Young, and Ceri Houlbrook, eds, *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies 500 AD to the Present*, London, Gibson Square, 2017.
34. See, for example, Andrews, p. 55.
35. Anon, "Singular Case of Credulity", *Tipperary Free Press* (September 9th, 1843), 2.
36. S. Eberly, "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changeling, Hybrids, and the Solitary Fairy", in Peter Narváez, ed., *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, New York, University of Kentucky Press, 1991, pp. 227-250.
37. Wilde, 1888, p. 106.
38. Anon, "The Tipperary Witch", *The Spectator* (1864), 1067-1068; Anon, "Witchcraft in Carrick-on-Suir", *Waterford Mail* (September 12th, 1864), 2.
39. "Witches and Fairies: Supernatural Aggression and Deviance Among the Irish Peasantry", in Peter Narváez, ed., *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, New York, University of Kentucky Press, 1991, pp. 302-335 at p. 317.
40. Croker, 1824, pp. 87-88.
41. Simon Young, "Fairy Imposters in County Longford in the Great Famine", *Studia Hibernica*, 38 (2012), 181-199 at 182-185.
42. *Ibid.*, 185-186.
43. Some insight into this can be found in Jan Bondeson, *The great pretender: the true stories behind famous historical mysteries*, London, Norton, 2004.
44. Anon, "The 'March of Intellect': the Fairy Doctor", *Waterford Mail* (June 18th, 1834), 4.
45. Wilde, 1888, p. 209, perhaps because Irish fairies do not, according to some traditions, have blood? See Patricia Lysaght, "Fairylore from the Midlands of Ireland", in Peter Narváez, ed., *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, New York, University of Kentucky Press, 1991, pp. 22-46 at pp. 33-34.
46. Anon, "The 'March of Intellect': the Fairy Doctor".
47. Simon Young, "Some Notes on Irish Fairy Changelings in Nineteenth-Century Newspapers", *Béascna*, 8 (2013), 34-47, where I identify twenty one. I now have another dozen examples.
48. This deserves a longer study. See Pauline M. Prior, "Roasting a Man Alive: The Case of Mary Reilly, Criminal Lunatic", *Éire-Ireland*, 41 (2006), 169-191; Pauline M. Prior, *Madness and Murder: Gender, Crime and Mental Disorder in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*,

- Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2008, pp. 168-194, Brendan Kelly, “Folie à plusieurs: forensic cases from nineteenth-century Ireland”, *History of Psychiatry*, 20 (2009), 47-60.
49. Some aspects of witchcraft visions can perhaps be connected to madness, though this must be done with much care. See, for example, Lawrence B. Goodheart, “The Distinction between Witchcraft and madness in colonial Connecticut”, *History of Psychiatry*, 13 (2002), 433-444. Davide Ermacora expects to look at aspects of this for the bosom serpent in some forthcoming work: personal communication, September 2017.
50. Anon, “The Battle of the Cows”, *Dundalk Democrat* (August 16th, 1862), 6.
51. Anon, “To the Editor”, *Kerry Evening Post* (September 19th, 1860), 2: Casey lived in the late eighteenth century.
52. James McClenon, *Wondrous Events: Foundations of Religious Belief*, Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia, 1994, pp. 95-103; and, by the same author, *Wondrous Healing: Shamanism, Human Evolution and the Origin of Religion*, DeKalb, Illinois, Northern Illinois University Press, 2002, *passim*.
53. Anon, “Police Office”, *Cork Constitution* (August 8th, 1862), 2: “I do my best for the people with herbs, but with nothing else ... [Herbs produced by a constable] There is no harm in them herbs. Many a one they did good for.” At least here we hear the fairy doctor’s voice. Other times it is lost in legal proceedings: Anon, “The Fairy Woman”, *Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette*, (October 29th, 1859), 2: “The prisoner made a long and rambling statement – spoke of herbs and of fairies and other matters, which could not be understood.”
54. Wilde, 1852, p. 28.
55. Anon, “A Scrap for the Superstitious – Witchcraft”, *Mayo Constitution* (October 7th, 1830), 3; Anon, “Castlebar Petty Sessions”, *Mayo Constitution* (October 11th, 1830), 2; Anon, “Castlebar Sessions”, *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent* (October 16th, 1830), 3.
56. *Ibid*.
57. Anon, “Borris-in-Ossory Quarter Sessions”, *Westmeath Independent* (October 28th, 1848), 4.
58. *Ibid*.
59. Matthew Goodman, *The Sun and the Moon: The Remarkable True Account of Hoaxers, Showmen, Dueling Journalists and Lunar Man-Bats in Nineteenth-Century New York*, New York, Basic Books, 2008. A nice question is whether Irish journalists were more given to exaggeration than their British counterparts.
60. I am reminded of the inquisitor as anthropologist; see Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, Baltimore, Maryland, John Hopkins University, 2013, pp. 141-148.
61. Máire Macneill, “The Musician in the Cave”, *Béaloides*, 57 (1989), 109-132 at 126.
62. Jan Harold Brunvand, *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*, 2 vols, Oxford, ABC Clio, 2012, p. 468. Folklore ostension has been brought forward in this generation by Bill Ellis, “Death by Folklore: Ostension, Contemporary Legend, and Murder”, *Western Folklore* 48 (1989), 201-220; Bill Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts and Cults: Legends We Live*, Jackson, Mississippi, University of Mississippi Press, 2003, pp. 161-235.
63. Richard Sweterlitsch, “Memorates”, in Jan Harold Brunvand, ed., *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1996, pp. 990-992 at p. 990. See also Lauri Honko, “Memorate and the Study of Folk Belief”, *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 1 (1964), 5-19; Linda Dégh, and Andrew Vázsonyi, “The Memorates and Protomemorates”, *Journal of American Folklore*, 87 (1974), 225–239.
64. Edward Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 65-213.

65. For an interesting take on this, see Fiona Bowie, “Believing Impossible Things: Scepticism and Ethnographic Enquiry”, in Jack Hunter, and David Luke, eds, *Talking with Spirits: Ethnographies from Between the Worlds*, London, Daily Grail, 2014, pp. 1-19.
66. Curtin, 2. Of course, reports of the demise of fairies have always been greatly exaggerated: see Barbara Gaye Rieti, *Newfoundland Fairy Traditions: A Study in Narrative and Belief*, doctoral dissertation, Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1990, pp. 35-87 (a little known discussion of this problem, but by far the best). In the 1840s the Halls had written, when Maurice was likely a child (III, p. 31): “A belief in fairies is certainly on the decline throughout Ireland ... little growing-up urchins are found absolutely to laugh at the tiny beings about whom their fathers have so many stories to the truth of which they will swear ...”.
67. See Ó Giolláin, p. 201; Jenkins, p. 323, on the 1895 Cleary case.
68. S. J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2001, pp. 113-114, gives only two (admittedly very good) pages to fairylore.

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simonyoungfl@gmail.com