

Storytelling, Spooks and the *Sidhe*

How the Irish Created Legends: Paganism, Christianity and Alcohol

by
Jerry James

“Storytelling is the only therapy Ireland believes in—it helps to deal with the demons.”

— Jim Norton, the original Jack in *The Weir*



Conor McPherson’s play, *The Weir*, takes place one night in a pub in “a rural part of Ireland, Northwest Leitrim or Sligo.” This part of Ireland—the Land of Heart’s Desire for William Butler Yeats—seems particularly amenable to tales of another world, whether those of the fairy folk or those of visitors from the world beyond.

There are no tales told in this pub of the heroes of Irish mythology so beloved by Yeats, no Queen Maeve or Finn McCool. But even so, the written versions of old Irish tales of spirit worlds often use a modern transliteration of Gaelic. In this way, the Irish revenge themselves on the English by making the names unpronounceable. Finn McCool, for example, becomes *Fionn mac Cumhail*. The fairy folk are known as the *Sidhe* (pronounced “shee”).

In this land where the past interpenetrates the present, Irish tales and legends are inevitably filtered through the mesh of Roman Catholicism, present in Ireland since the fifth century. It is this brew, more potent than Guinness or Bushmill’s, that combines with the eons-old condition of the rural Irish to produce their own particular form of relating a tale, the way they tell a story.

And so, we ask, what are the origins of these twin streams? How did they get to Ireland? How did they combine? And what was that about alcohol?

All in good time, as the Irish say. All in good time...

The Sidhe



Ben Bulbin

W. B. Yeats is buried in its shadow

They called themselves the *Tuatha Dé Daanan*, the People of the Goddess Danu. They came from Phoenicia originally, or perhaps Scythia. But they were long resident in Greece, where they learned much that was still unknown on the far fringes of the world, the land to which they eventually sailed, through the Pillars of Hercules, then north.

They were tall, with fair hair and fair skins, rather like J. R. R. Tolkien's elves. Their foe, when they landed on Ireland's northwest coast, was the opposite. The *Firbolg* were short and hairy, almost Neanderthal, with no way to match what they saw as the *Dé Daanan's* magic. Perhaps this legend is an attempt to describe the superiority of Iron Age weapons over those made of bronze. As Arthur C. Clarke wrote, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

But for all their beauty, skill and magic, the *Dé Daanan* would rule Ireland for only two hundred years. Their magic could not prevail against the Milesians, the first Celts, who defeated them. All three of their kings were slain, along with their queens. But one of those would give her name to the Republic of Ireland: Éire.



The survivors worked their magic and became invisible, although they retained the power to make themselves reappear in any disguise they wished. They hid away and became the *Sidhe*. It means “hill,” under which the *Sidhe*, the People of the Hill, lived, if one may call such as Ben Bulbin a hill.

The relationship of the *Sidhe* with the Milesians was much as it is with their descendants, the Irish of the present day. They share an uneasy truce, like that of first-century Jews with the Romans occupying their country. As epochs came and went, the *Sidhe* came to be more commonly called the fey, the fairies, the fairy folk.

The Irish landscape is marked by rings of rocks or earth. Archeologists may call them Neolithic ringforts, but to the Irish, these, with the ring of trees that often surrounds them, are fairy forts. And woe to the human who disturbs them.



Fairy Fort

The fairy fort is connected with other sites important to the fey by a fairy road, almost always a straight line. But while humans can see a fairy fort, they cannot always discern a fairy road. They must be told where it lies, at some times more firmly than others.

If your house has inadvertently been built on a fairy road, you may spare yourself the mischief you might be subject to by always leaving the front and back doors ajar when you go to bed. If you want to be even kinder, you can leave a pail of water out for the fairy folk to refresh themselves.

As for those who think this nonsense in modern times, Sam Fishkind writes:

One of the best examples of just how much fairy forts are still “in play” in today’s superstitions in Ireland is developer Sean Quinn’s run-in with financial difficulty in 1992 following a risk he made in moving forward with an excavation of a fairy fort in Western Ireland’s Cavan. People of the area blamed Mr. Quinn’s failures following this (and there

were a substantial amount, from bankruptcy to business loss) on his decision to touch said fort.

Even if you didn't end up with your crops blasted or your flock dead through some inadvertent offense you'd given to the fairy folk, you might still be bedeviled by the occasional cow gone dry or worse. Sometimes, much worse.

Children are a necessity in peasant culture. They must grow and thrive in order to take on their share of work for the family, to help it prosper. You can never have too many children, because too many of them die young. And some of those, it is said, are taken by the fey.

Do the fairy folk have even a harder time raising children than humans, that they find it necessary to leave a changeling in a child's bed? Or even to make off with a child without leaving anything behind except a grave?

One should take care in the northwest of Ireland always to refer to the fairy folk as "the Good People." Which means the exact opposite, but the buggers can't read your mind, can they? We are far away here from lovable leprechauns and their Lucky Charms.

Spooks



The Banshee

Christianity came to Ireland before the arrival of St. Patrick in 432, but he is popularly given credit for the conversion of the Celts.

Christianity is a syncretic religion. That is, it takes elements from whatever the old religion was and incorporates them, thereby making becoming a Christian easier for the old believers. The *Sidhe* became fallen angels. The ancient Celtic holidays were still observed in Ireland, but under new names. The best known of these is *Samhain*, now Halloween.

At these times of the year, the veil between the spirit world and our own was thought to be particularly thin. In truth, the *Sidhe* and the Holy See had more in common than might be initially supposed. After all, Roman Catholicism professed an invisible deity in a land where the dispossessed former rulers were also thought to be invisible. Spirits in Ireland, therefore, were apt to appear any day of the year. Among them were the unquiet dead.

These were the souls that had passed from this life leaving something undone, something so important they could not rest until it had been set right. Tales were told of ghostly priests who required you to serve at the masses they had left unsaid. Or of seemingly unremarkable strangers met in a graveyard, unremarkable until they requested your aid in their being properly buried.

Some spirits were merely puckish, like the pooka. (Harvey, the six-foot-tall white rabbit created by Mary Chase, is a pooka.) But many were not, like the banshee (*bean sidhe*). Readers of a certain age may recall seeing the banshee in the Walt Disney movie, *Darby O’Gill and the Little People*.

Banshee means “Woman of the Hill People.” She appeared to mark the presence of death, wailing for the loss in the traditional manner called keening, from the Gaelic *caoineadh* (crying). But she might also be silent, appearing as just another old woman. Except for the death that followed her appearance.

Storytelling

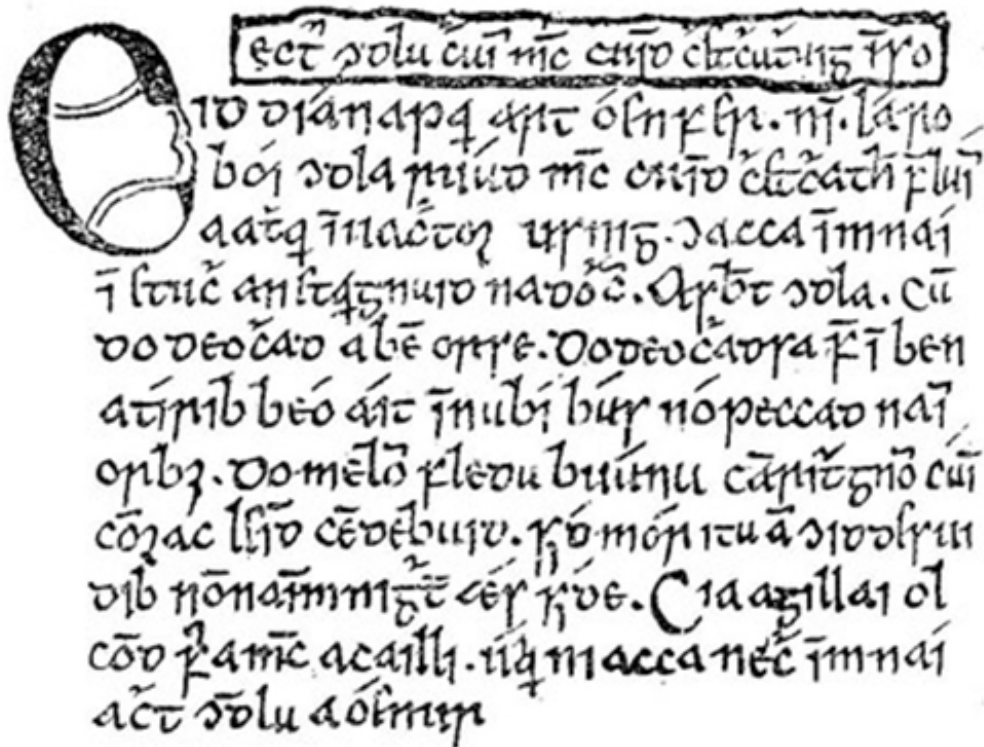


FIG. 60.

Page From “The Book of the Dun Cow,” c. 1100

Despite the beauty of the written Irish language, the brutal fact was the typical Irish peasant of the next thousand-plus years couldn't read it. In this illiterate culture, the ability to memorize and perform old tales became a talent highly valued among the poor, who could not afford to hire a bard to play and sing the old stories.

Even the penniless could sit near the fire at night and listen to what Dilek Inan calls, "...the realms of familiar and exotic folklore of *Gaeltacht* with tales featuring fairies and unhappy spirits." Said person might also be after having a cup of *uisce beatha*—the water of life. Whiskey. Perhaps more than one.

Conor McPherson blames Irish drinking on Catholicism: "What underlies the demon of alcoholism is the feeling of inadequacy, guilt and helplessness, feeling of doom, gloom, fear and paranoia."

Here, then, are the Storytelling Irish of legend, a lost and beaten (but unforgiving) race with the odds always stacked against them, their very voices a symbol of the resilience that tells them to never give up and only grudgingly give in. They inhabit a country where the simple, numbing pleasures of life are deplored by a religion whose solace is so chilly, it can only be alleviated by alcohol and tales of visitations from a world narrowly separated from this one—where things might be even worse.

Perhaps the Storytelling Irish are only a legend themselves, a comfortable story that isn't really true.

And yet, there are times when we all might long to sit quietly by the fire, a glass in our hand, listening to a story that begins with words like these, spoken by Jack in *The Weir*:

And there's no dark like a winter night in the country. And there was a wind like this one tonight, howling and whistling in off the sea. You hear it under the door, and it's like someone singing. Singing under the door at you. It was this type of night now...

Sláinte!

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